



Strengthening Media and Information Literacy in the Context of Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism

A Focus on South-Eastern Europe

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Media Literacy Index,¹ compiled in 2023 by the Open Society Institute, suggests that South-Eastern Europe (SEE) is among the most vulnerable regions in Europe to potential online harms. Violent extremist and terrorist groups exploit the internet to spread violent content, gain support, and recruit members. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a proliferation of hostile, sexist and xenophobic conspiracy theories, as highlighted by the UN Secretary-General in August 2022.² Emerging studies find that media- and information literacy (MIL) can be useful for preventing the spread of mis- and disinformation and other harmful content online.³

OSCE Secretariat and field operations in the region have extensively worked on both preventing/countering violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism (P/CVERLT) and MIL. They have organized a number of activities, including workshops, training sessions, TV programmes and lectures for students – all designed in an effort to address the multi-faceted challenges posed by violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism (VERLT) in the region, in line with OSCE’s comprehensive security approach, as well as to forge close collaborations with state authorities and civil society, in addition to partnering with the private sector in SEE.

The first part of this report places the vulnerability to online harms in the context of broader MIL trends and challenges, with a particular focus on P/CVERLT. It highlights the multi-faceted challenges posed by disinformation – including polarization, radicalization to terrorist violence and threats to democracy – before outlining key technological and psychological challenges in addressing disinformation.

The second part of the report analyses how these challenges are impacting SEE. Violent extremist groups remain resilient and adaptable, maintaining their audience, size despite repeated removals of their channels and accounts from the most popular online platforms in SEE.⁴ It also explores why SEE governments are struggling to respond to the current violent extremism environment,

1 “Media Literacy Index 2023”, Open Society Institute Sofia, 24 June 2023, <https://osis.bg/?p=4450&lang=en>.

2 United Nations General Assembly: Report of the Secretary-General on Terrorist attacks on the basis of xenophobia, racism and other forms of Intolerance or in the Name of Religion or Belief, A/77/266 3 August, 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/450/52/PDF/N2245052.pdf?OpenElement=N2245052.pdf>.

3 Elise M. Roberts-Ingleson and Wesley S. McCann. “The Link between Misinformation and Radicalisation: Current Knowledge and Areas for Future Inquiry | Perspectives on Terrorism.” 2023. <https://pt.icct.nl/article/link-between-misinformation-and-radicalisation-current-knowledge-and-areas-future-inquiry>.

4 Milo Comerford and Simeon Dukic, “Online Extremism Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans”, Policy Note, July 2020, https://www.resolvenet.org/system/files/2020-07/RSVE_PolicyNote_WB_ComerfordDukic_July2020.pdf.

highlighting media issues (including challenges around transparency, regulation and threats to journalists), the lack of effective and sustainable digital and media literacy education, failures of political leadership, and poor co-ordination among relevant stakeholders.

The third part then examines the impact of existing media literacy campaigns, using the OSCE's research and engagement with experts to identify what works and why. Different approaches – including inoculation theory, counter-narratives and technological approaches – are explored, while also explaining how they can be used to address issues such as confirmation bias and how they can be integrated into age-sensitive MIL approaches.

The final part of the report provides substantive recommendations for all stakeholders on framing and communication. It also suggests content and format for a multi-stakeholder training curriculum, including methodology and design as well as strategies for avoiding backlash. The report concludes that, while there are numerous resources and initiatives on addressing the information disorder⁵ and aiming to foster medial literacy skills, there is a significant gap in connecting these efforts to projects focused on P/CVERLT.

This report represents the beginning of an initiative that seeks to raise awareness of critical thinking and analysis, and meaningful engagement in the digital space, in order to build resilience to VERLT. Its follow-up project 'INFORMED: Information and Media Literacy in Preventing Violent Extremism. Human rights and Gender-sensitive approaches to addressing the Digital Information Disorder' seeks to support the OSCE participating States in identifying opportunities for collaboration with non-government stakeholders, including the private sector and civil society.

⁵ See page 12 for details on the term "information disorder"

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

VERLT is a transnational, cross-border challenge that is often seen as a repudiation of essential human rights values of tolerance, respect, inclusion and diversity that underpin the work of the OSCE. Although the 57 participating States of the OSCE face different types and levels of threats associated with transnational terrorism, all have confirmed their commitment to work together to tackle VERLT in a human rights-compliant manner.

OSCE participating States have committed to countering the use of the internet for terrorist purposes as one of the strategic focus areas of the OSCE's counter-terrorism efforts.⁶ The Ministerial Declaration on P/CVERLT calls upon participating States to strengthen public-private partnerships "to foster communication efforts, including via social media, to counter violent extremist messaging, while fully respecting the right to freedom of opinion and expression."⁷ It further calls on participating States "to engage and empower youth, in preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism, *inter alia*, by: [...] Supporting youth-led and youth-focused awareness-raising initiatives, including through the Internet and social media, to prevent and counter their radicalization to terrorism, and to promote respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, tolerance and non-discrimination."⁸

The Transnational Threats Department/Action against Terrorism Unit (TNTD/ATU) of the OSCE Secretariat continues to be a resource hub for the OSCE's 57 participating States and Partners for Co-operation, as well as for field operations and institutions, helping them to support and implement the OSCE's counter-terrorism commitments. As part of the Organization's effort to prevent and counter the use of the internet for violent extremist and terrorist purposes, while ensuring the right to freedom of expression and other human rights standards, the OSCE launched an initiative that takes a MIL approach to P/CVERLT. The initiative aims to strengthen support for participating States and Partners for Co-operation in developing age- and gender-sensitive approaches in P/CVERLT that manifests in and stems from online environments, in a human rights-compliant manner.

6 See OSCE Ministerial Council, Decision No.7/06, "Countering the Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes", Brussels, 5 December 2006, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/3/23078.pdf>.

7 OSCE Ministerial Council, "Ministerial Declaration on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism", Belgrade, 4 December 2015, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/2/208216.pdf>.

8 Ibid.

The Media Literacy Index,⁹ compiled in 2023 by the Open Society Institute, suggests that SEE is among the most vulnerable regions in Europe to potential online harms. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, both the digital and offline space have seen an increase in hateful rhetoric, including narratives and conspiracy theories that combine xenophobic, anti-Semitic and misogynistic mindset. This was also noted by the United Nations Secretary-General in August 2022.¹⁰ Violent extremist and terrorist groups exploit the internet in order to spread violent content, gain support and recruit members.

Emerging studies find that MIL can be useful for preventing the spread of misinformation.¹¹ This report examines the nexus between these two areas and highlights the importance MIL and critical thinking skills in addressing these issues, which warrants attention by P/CVERLT stakeholders.

This report builds on the OSCE Secretariat's and field operations' previous efforts in SEE related to P/CVERLT and MIL, including extensive work on P/CVERLT, such as the OSCE's Leaders against Intolerance and Violent Extremism (LIVE) initiative. This initiative focused on strengthening the voices, knowledge and capacities of youth, women and community leaders to generate local initiatives against intolerance and violent extremism.¹² A range of initiatives on MIL have also been undertaken, such as workshops, lectures for students, TV programmes and publication of materials.¹³

Various international and civil society organizations (CSOs) initiated their own media literacy projects in recent years. However, research consistently shows that policymakers' involvement and action on this subject has been lagging behind in SEE. Building bridges and trust between policymakers, CSOs, and journalists active in the media literacy domain is a necessary step forward.

9 "Media Literacy Index 2023", Open Society Institute Sofia, 24 June 2023, <https://osis.bg/?p=4450&lang=en>.

10 United Nations General Assembly: Report of the Secretary-General on Terrorist attacks on the basis of xenophobia, racism and other forms of Intolerance or in the Name of Religion or Belief, A/77/266 3 August, 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/450/52/PDF/N2245052.pdf?OpenElement=N2245052.pdf>.

11 Roberts-Ingleson, Elise M. n.d. "The Link between Misinformation and Radicalisation: Current Knowledge and Areas for Future Inquiry | Perspectives on Terrorism." <https://pt.icct.nl/article/link-between-misinformation-and-radicalisation-current-knowledge-and-areas-future-inquiry>.

12 "Implementation of 'Leaders against Intolerance and Violent Extremism' (LIVE) Training Courses", OSCE, <https://www.osce.org/node/476476>.

13 *Media and Digital literacy*. (2022). OSCE Mission to Montenegro. <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-montenegro/529791>. OSCE concludes series of media literacy workshops for university students in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (2018). OSCE. <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/377965>. Media and Information Literacy initiatives; 2016-2022 Highlights. (2022). OSCE Mission in Kosovo. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/b/543345_0.pdf.

SCOPE

The objective of this initiative was to: 1) analyse current challenges in the region with regard to MIL in the context of P/CVERLT, 2) on the basis of this analysis, develop a gender-sensitive, human rights-based training curriculum on MIL tailored to the context of SEE. In addition to raising awareness of meaningful engagement in the digital space and the use of critical thinking when consuming media online, the proposed curriculum aims to engage the audience in reflecting on initiatives, with a special focus on local action that can be implemented by or in collaboration with government entities to build resilience to VERLT online. Furthermore, the curriculum is designed to raise awareness on the dangers of information disorders – especially disinformation – in radicalizing young people to violent extremism, and to underscore the importance of media literacy as a tool to prevent this and build resilience. It is also intended to empower policymakers and other relevant stakeholders in the process of designing and implementing frameworks and actions that address these harms while protecting and promoting human rights. Currently, there is no comprehensive national policy or framework on MIL training in SEE, leaving the majority of this work up to civil society and international organizations. The underlying aim of the initiative is to generate an understanding of the challenges involved in this field, along with what constitutes good practices, tools and instruments and how to adapt them to different local contexts. Finally, the curriculum is designed for a multi-stakeholder audience, in line with the OSCE’s whole-of-society approach to P/CVERLT.

METHODOLOGY

The work leading up to the production of this report, as well as the development of the training curriculum, has been largely based on desk review and analysis of openly available sources. Additionally, the drafting of the report, as well as the subsequent work on the curriculum, drew on insights from an expert working group composed of staff of OSCE field operations in SEE, as well as diverse professionals in the fields of media literacy and P/CVERLT.

The expert working group discussion took place online in October 2021, comprising two dozen experts on MIL and/or counter-terrorism from a variety of institutions, including OSCE field operations, universities and NGOs. The expert group was asked two questions:

- What is the importance of media literacy when empowering policymakers to design and implement frameworks and actions that address challenges related to the information disorder and VERLT online?
- What should form the core components of a training curriculum that is designed to raise awareness of the dangers of disinformation in radicalizing youth?

In response, the expert group provided valuable recommendations, including regarding possible backlashes and unintended consequences in the process, which are incorporated in the current report.

Following the analysis of the outcomes of the expert group meeting, the project team determined that the report needed to be further tailored to the SEE context. Therefore, a survey targeting OSCE field operations and additional experts on MIL and P/CVERLT was drafted and distributed in the spring of 2022. The analysis of the survey results has been integrated throughout this report.

3.

KEY CONCEPTS AND RELEVANCE TO P/CVERLT

The field of media literacy has attracted experts from a wide range of academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology, security studies and media studies. As a result, there is a general lack of consensus across the different disciplines regarding the associated definitions and concepts. However, the following definitions, which primarily stem from international organizations and experts in the field, provide an understanding of the key concepts explored in this report.

Bots: *Bots* are software that can execute commands, reply to messages, or perform routine tasks, such as online searches, either automatically or with minimal human intervention.¹⁴ Recent research indicates that terrorist groups have exploited bots to amplify and automate their propaganda.¹⁵

Cheap fakes / deepfakes: A cheap fake is an audio-visual manipulation created with cheap, easily accessible software (or none at all). Cheap fakes can be rendered through Photoshop, by using lookalikes or by re-contextualizing, speeding up or slowing down footage.¹⁶ Deepfakes can be defined as “manipulated or synthetic audio or visual media that seem authentic, and which feature people that appear to say or do something they have never said or done, produced using artificial intelligence techniques, including machine learning and deep learning”.¹⁷ Both forms of manipulation can be exploited by violent extremist groups in order to promote new narratives or strengthen existing ones.

Clickbait: *Clickbait* refers to a sensationalized headline that encourages a person to click on a link to an article, image or video. Instead of presenting facts, clickbait headlines often appeal to emotions and curiosity.¹⁸ These headlines can include references to conspiracy theories and disinformation that further the aims of violent extremist groups.

14 “Bot”, Dictionary.com, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/bot>.

15 Abdullah Alrhman, Charlie Winter and Janos Kertesz, “Automating Terror: The Role and Impact of Telegram Bots in the Islamic State’s Online Ecosystem”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, February 2023, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2023.2169141>.

16 See Britt Paris and Joan Donovan, “Deepfakes and Cheap Fakes: The Manipulation of Audio and Visual Evidence”, *Data & Society*, 18 September 2019, <https://datasociety.net/library/deepfakes-and-cheap-fakes>.

17 “Tackling Deepfakes in European Policy”, Panel for the Future of Science and Technology, European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/690039/EPRS_STU\(2021\)690039_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/690039/EPRS_STU(2021)690039_EN.pdf).

18 “What Is Clickbait?”, GCFGlobal, <https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/thenow/what-is-clickbait/1/>.

Digital literacy: Digital literacy is “the ability to define, access, manage, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies and networked devices for participation in economic and social life.”¹⁹ These skills will also help individuals to critically evaluate the arguments presented by violent extremist groups (both online and offline), becoming effective digital citizens who engage positively in the digital environment.

Echo chambers / filter bubbles: The terms *echo chamber* and *filter bubble* both refer to phenomena whereby media users are exposed only to content that reinforces their existing social and political views, as well as the hyper-personalization of information.²⁰ Research suggests that people in morally homogenous environments are more likely to resort to radical means to defend themselves and their values.²¹

Information disorder: Information disorder encapsulates the concepts of disinformation, misinformation and malinformation. Presented by making false connections, misleading content, false context, imposter content, manipulated content and fabricated content, often packaged as satire or parody.²² The term refers to different harmful developments in the domain of mass media and information technology and the way they impact the world. UNESCO defines *disinformation* as information that is false or fake and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country; *misinformation* as information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm; and *malinformation* as information that is based on reality and used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organization or country.²³ Propaganda is conceptually close to disinformation but is frequently considered to more blatantly appeal to emotion.²⁴ These techniques are exploited by violent extremists to spread their narratives in an attempt to recruit individuals to their cause.

Media and information literacy: There are many components to MIL. According to UNESCO, “Media and information literacy is an interrelated set of competencies that help people to maximize advantages and minimize harm in the new information, digital and communication

19 UNESCO Information Paper No.51 ‘A Global Framework of Reference on Digital Literacy Skills for Indicator 4.4.2’, June 2018, <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/ip51-global-framework-reference-digital-literacy-skills-2018-en.pdf>.

20 Julian McDougall, Marketa Zezulova and Barry van Driel, *Teaching Media Literacy in Europe: Evidence of Effective School Practices in Primary and Secondary Education* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018), <https://nesetweb.eu/en/resources/library/teaching-media-literacy-in-europe-evidence-of-effective-school-practices-in-primary-and-secondary-education/>.

21 Mohammad Atari, Aida Mostafazadeh Davani and Morteza Dehgani, “Morally Homogenous Networks and Radicalism”, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, December 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/19485506211059329>.

22 TechSoup Europe, “Disinformation and 7 Common Forms of Information Disorder”, Hive Mind, 2 March 2022, <https://en.hive-mind.community/blog/169.disinformation-and-7-common-forms-of-information-disorder>.

23 UNESCO, “Journalism, ‘Fake News’ and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training”, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552>.

24 Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, “Module 2: Thinking about ‘Information Disorder’: Formats of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Mal-information”, in *Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation* (Paris: UNESCO, 2018), 43–54, https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/f_ifnd_handbook_module_2.pdf.

landscapes. Media and information literacy covers competencies that enable people to critically and effectively engage with information, other forms of content, the institutions that facilitate information and diverse types of content, and the discerning use of digital technologies.”²⁵ MIL skills can help individuals to critically evaluate the arguments of violent extremist groups, and to curate and moderate inclusive online spaces where alternatives to these narratives can flourish.

Memes: Memes are “a concept, belief, or practice conceived as a unit of cultural information that may be passed on from person to person.”²⁶ Typically humorous in nature, memes can spread quickly online, with individual users using (and re-using) a shared image, video or text to share different jokes or opinions. A variety of violent extremist groups have used memes to spread their message. Their ambiguity, including through the use of “in-jokes”, can result in memes evading existing content moderation guidelines.²⁷

25 “About Media and Information Literacy”, UNESCO, last modified 21 November 2022, <https://www.unesco.org/en/communication-information/media-information-literacy/about>.

26 “Meme”, yourdictionary.com, <https://www.yourdictionary.com/meme>.

27 “Use of Memes by Violent Extremists”, The US National Counter-Terrorism Center, July 2022, <https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/128S - First Responders Toolbox - Use of Memes by Violent Extremists.pdf>.



MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY IN THE CONTEXT OF P/CVERLT

BROAD TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

The use of modern multimedia applications has grown exponentially in the last two decades, profoundly changing how individuals interact with the world around them. In 2016, Eurostat data indicated that more than 90 per cent of 16-29-year-olds in the EU used computers or the internet on a daily basis. By 2019, 80 per cent of 16–24-year olds in the EU had basic or above basic digital skills, 24 percentage points higher than among individuals aged 16 to 74 (56 per cent).²⁸

The increasing volume of information that circulates daily represents vast opportunities for countries in the OSCE area, including SEE. Yet the amount of false information also poses significant challenges to their citizens, democratic processes, security and the ‘social fabric.’²⁹ Additionally, this represents a potential human rights problem and poses a potential human rights problem, not only in SEE but across the globe.³⁰ A recent empirical study has shown that false stories reach people six times faster than factual stories, with political stories being the most likely to go viral.³¹

The widespread use and circulation of disinformation “can undermine the public’s ability to identify desirable policies, their desire to engage in politics and their sense of the very legitimacy of democratic governance,”³² due to the difficulty of differentiating between fact and fiction.³³

28 “Do Young People in the EU Have Digital Skills?”, Eurostat, 15 July 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20200715-1>.

29 “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Digital Education Plan”, European Commission, 17 January 2018, COM(2018) 22 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0022&from=EN>.

30 See, for example, Carme Colomina, Héctor Sánchez Margalef and Richard Youngs, “The Impact of Disinformation on Democratic Processes and Human Rights in the World”, European Parliament, Policy Department for External Relations, April 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653635_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf).

31 Sourosh Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, “The spread of true and false news online”, Science, March 2018, <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aap9559>.

32 Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer, “Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age: Confronting the Challenges of Motivated Reasoning and Misinformation”, *American Educational Research Journal*, 54, No. 1 (February 2017), 4.

33 Ibid.

This can be exploited by actors who use disinformation to “compete with and ultimately crowd out rational, informed debate,”³⁴ through the “targeting of hyper-partisan views, which play to the fears and prejudices of people.”³⁵ This societal polarization, as well as the disinformation spread online can be used by violent extremist groups as “an exceptionally powerful recruitment tool” and to “promote hate speech and incite violence”.³⁶

Disinformation often targets certain communities and groups. It has been noted that women,³⁷ in particular female journalists and politicians, as well as certain other groups³⁸ have been disproportionately targeted and harassed through disinformation. In this regard, the non-profit organization EU DisinfoLab refers to the concept of gender-based disinformation. As a result, “women and marginalised groups are leaving online spaces, forgoing their fundamental right to participate in civil and political life and the full enjoyment of their freedom of expression and opinion.”³⁹

The potential of disinformation to disrupt election processes and contribute to further polarization in our societies and radicalization to violence elevates the importance of fostering resilience to disinformation.⁴⁰ This points to media literacy education’s central purpose, which should be to “help individuals of all ages develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression that they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today’s world.”⁴¹ The European Commission has pointed to the connections between digital learning, empowerment and an ‘inclusive’ future.⁴² Others have identified the role that media literacy can play in

34 Paul Butcher, “Disinformation and Democracy: The Home Front in the Information War”, European Policy Centre, European Politics and Institutions Programme, discussion paper, 30 January 2019, https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2019/190130_Disinformationdemocracy_PB.pdf.

35 Terry Lee, “The Global Rise of ‘Fake News’ and the Threat to Democratic Elections in the USA”, *Public Administration and Policy: An Asia-Pacific Journal* 22, No. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1108/PAP-04-2019-0008>.

36 Francesco Farinelli, “Disinformation as a Gateway to extremist agendas”, Conspiracy Theories and Disinformation, Radicalisation Awareness Network, December 2021, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-12/spotlight_on_conspiracy_narratives_disinformation_122021_en.pdf.

37 See, for instance, the situation in the United States: Lucina di Meco and Kristina Wilfore, “Gendered Disinformation Is a National Security Problem”, Teach Stream, 8 March 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/>.

38 EU DisinfoLab mentions gender-non-conforming people and marginalized groups in “Gender-Based Disinformation: Advancing Our Understanding and Response”, 20 October 2021, <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/gender-based-disinformation-advancing-our-understanding-and-response/>.

39 Ibid.

40 “The Impact of Disinformation on Democratic Processes and Human Rights in the World | Think Tank | European Parliament.” n.d. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653635](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2021)653635).

41 “Core Principles of Media Literacy Education”, Alliance for a Media Literate America, https://mediaeducationlab.com/sites/default/files/AMLA-Core-Princ-MLE_0.pdf.

42 “Digital Learning and ICT in Education”, European Commission, last modified 14 October 2022, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/policies/digital-learning-ict-education>.

developing critical thinking skills and providing opportunities for the social inclusion of youth, both of which are “practical forms of addressing the prevention of violent extremism.”⁴³

As a result, MIL, including in the context of P/CVERLT, has become an increasing policy priority, particularly across the EU and many other parts of the OSCE area. This is visible in a number of international and regional policy documents that emphasize the importance of developing higher levels of MIL, and the need to address the issue of disinformation (see Annex 2 for further information).

Internationally, UNESCO has noted that the internet is being increasingly used by violent extremist groups to recruit sympathizers, but it also “holds the greatest potential as a tool to contribute to the reduction of youth extremism and radicalism.”⁴⁴ In its mapping of media literacy practices and actions across Europe, the Council of Europe (CoE) notes that multiple projects focus on challenging radicalization and hate speech online.⁴⁵

In May 2019, the UN Secretary-General launched the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, identifying a “disturbing groundswell of xenophobia, racism and intolerance”, and warning that “social media and other forms of communication are being exploited as platforms for bigotry.” The document called for “a new generation of digital citizens, empowered to recognize, reject and stand up to hate speech.”⁴⁶

Finally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has emphasized the need for students to learn to identify ‘fake news’⁴⁷ and included an assessment of students’ ability to spot fake news in its 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).⁴⁸

43 “Media and Information Literacy as a Means of Preventing Violent Extremism”, United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, October 2017, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/media-and-information-literacy-means-preventing-violent-extremism>.

44 Alton Grizzle, “A Context: MIL as a Tool to Counter Hate, Radicalization and Violent Extremism”, in Jagtar Singh, Paulette Kerr and Esther Hamburger (eds.), *Media and Information Literacy: Reinforcing Human Rights, Countering Radicalization and Extremism* (Paris: UNESCO, 2016), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246371>, 14.

45 *Mapping of Media Literacy Practices and Actions in EU-28* (Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2016), <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680783500>.

46 “United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech”, May 2019, United Nations, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf.

47 Will Hazell, “Pisa Boss: Pupils ‘Should Be Taught to Recognise Fake News’”, *Tes Magazine*, 18 March 2017, <https://www.tes.com/news/pisa-boss-pupils-should-be-taught-recognise-fake-news>.

48 “Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe – 2022”, European Commission, https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/focus-spotting-fake-news-new-skills-or-old-competences_en.

The results of the 2018 PISA study show that, on average, only around 8.7 per cent of students across the OECD countries were skilled at distinguishing fact from opinion.⁴⁹

DISINFORMATION CHALLENGES⁵⁰

As these findings make clear, addressing disinformation is a multi-layered and ongoing task. Traditionally, people have used newspapers, magazines, radio and television as their key sources of information for learning about the world. These media sources have also helped people form opinions about past and contemporary events, and about the world both near and far from their doorsteps. Though these media sources can sometimes be biased and even incendiary, those working for them tend to have undergone some level of professional training, including in fact-checking.

The advent of the digital universe, and the anonymity it offers, has dramatically changed the playing field. Sources that have little, if any, accountability have rapidly replaced traditional sources of authority. The most effective communicators are now often not those who have authority and status based on knowledge or experience, but the “first, fastest, and most findable on social media, using personalized messages to connect to audiences.”⁵¹

The opportunities to espouse one’s views are essentially unlimited in the present-day media landscape. There is also easy and pervasive access (at all ages) to, and proliferation of, information that is based on ideology, deception and propaganda, rather than facts or evidence. Although presented as ‘the truth’, information can instead be based on rumours, use clickbait headlines, and include images or videos of events that are staged to promote a cause. This is a particular challenge across the European Union, for instance, with some 15 per cent of young people deemed to have insufficient digital skills.⁵² As many as 42 per cent of young people think that skills around critical thinking, media and democracy are not taught sufficiently.⁵³

49 “New PISA Results Show the Challenges of Teaching Reading in a Digital World”, European Trade Union Committee for Education, 16 December 2019, <https://www.csee-etu.org/en/news/education-policy/3482-new-pisa-results-show-the-challenges-of-teaching-reading-in-a-digital-world>.

50 Much of the information in this section is based on McDougall, Zezulcova and van Driel, *Teaching Media Literacy in Europe*.

51 Renee Hobbs, “Teach the Conspiracies”, *Beyond the Horizon* 46, No. 1 (September/October 2017), <https://mediaeducationlab.com/sites/default/files/Hobbs%20Teach%20the%20Conspiracies%202017.pdf>.

52 “Education and Training: Basic Training: Basic and Digital Skills Essential Digital Skills Essential for Education, Work Education, Work and Life”, Life”, European Commission, press release, 12 November 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_2050.

53 “Flash Eurobarometer 478: How Do We Build a Stronger, More United Europe? The Views of Young People”, European Commission, 29 April 2019, https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/s2224_478_eng?locale=en.

Initiatives to counter disinformation have both general and situation-specific dimensions. The following section presents some key research findings relating to the mechanisms that make countering disinformation uniquely challenging.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Technology platforms are not neutral communication pipelines.⁵⁴ There is evidence that some of the most popular social media platforms have amplified extreme and fringe content through their algorithms, often at the expense of more moderate voices.⁵⁵ According to experts, “algorithmic amplification is the root cause of the unprecedented dissemination of hate speech, misinformation, conspiracy theories, and harmful content online. Platforms have learned that divisive content attracts the highest number of users and as such, the real power lies with these recommendation algorithms.”⁵⁶ Recent research has also highlighted the use of gaming platforms (including gaming chat rooms) by violent extremists, including the use of memes to spread misogynistic ideology.⁵⁷

There has been a profound increase in the sophistication of false information being conveyed in the digital universe, including through the use of new technologies such as bots and deep-fakes.⁵⁸ These advancements, make it “exceptionally difficult to distinguish between what is fact and what is fake, even for the well-trained eye, especially when the false information is guised in scientific vocabulary.”⁵⁹ A recent report for the European Parliament⁶⁰ notes that deepfake technology is increasingly a part of digital disinformation, concluding that deepfakes “may also have a malicious, deceitful and even destructive potential at an individual, organisational and societal level.”⁶¹ Recent research, for instance, indicates that political deepfakes can discredit politicians and

54 See, for instance, Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2017), <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77>.

55 Joe Whittaker, Seán Looney, Alastair Reed, Fabio Votta, “Recommender Systems and the Amplification of Extremist Content”, *Internet Policy Review* 10, No. 2 (2021), <https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/recommender-systems-and-amplification-extremist-content>.

56 See Dr. Hany Farid, a University of California (Berkeley) professor and senior advisor for the Counter Extremism Project in: “New Study Confirms YouTube Algorithm Promotes Misinformation, Conspiracies, Extremism”, Counter Extremism Project, 8 July 2021, <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/new-study-confirms-youtube-algorithm-promotes-misinformation-conspiracies-extremism>.

57 “Extremism Finds Fertile Ground in Chat Rooms for Gamers,” Steven Lee Myers and Kellen Browning, *New York Times*, 18 May 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/18/technology/video-games-extremism.html>.

58 See “Fact or Fake? Tackling Science Disinformation”, ALLEA Discussion Paper No. 5, May 2021, <https://allea.org/fact-or-fake/>.

59 Ibid.

60 “Tackling Deepfakes in European Policy”, Panel for the Future of Science and Technology, European Parliamentary Research Service, III.

61 “Tackling Deepfakes in European Policy”, Panel for the Future of Science and Technology, European Parliamentary Research Service.

affect citizens' attitudes towards politicians and their parties.⁶² One of the concerns is that, in the future, violent extremists could use this technology to alter existing videos in order to strengthen their narratives.⁶³ With the advent of artificial intelligence-powered large language models (LLM) becoming available to the public in 2023, some users have already exploited the technology to spread hate speech and misinformation, as well as to generate violent extremist content.⁶⁴

Another issue is that self-regulation of content providers, including media agencies, remains fairly underdeveloped and it is still in its early stages within the digital domain. In June 2020, the European Federation of Journalists, the European Publishers Council and the Association of Commercial Television in Europe called for stronger measures to tackle the dissemination of COVID-19-related fake news and disinformation online.⁶⁵ In a joint declaration, the group criticised the existing, self-regulatory Code of Practice on Disinformation, that was adopted in 2018 by a number of large online platforms and leading tech companies, as inadequate and called for the urgent introduction of “effective instruments to better assess and successfully tackle the issue.”⁶⁶

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

At the psychological level, disinformation can be appealing as a way to promote individual well-being and in-group cohesiveness and belonging. A recent international report describes the attraction to disinformation as follows:

- Disinformation usually offers a comprehensible story with a clear and easy distinction of good and evil — providing sense and simple, plausible answers. Conspiracy theories, for example, share the premise that there is a secret collaboration of a small group of conspirators, whose goals (e.g., world domination) and destructive plans (e.g., anarchy) are aimed at manipulating events in their own favour. One objective among other disinformation efforts is to elicit fear among citizens of threats and crimes by clearly defined malevolent outgroups (e.g., ethnic or sexual minorities), favouring a homogeneous, virtuous in-group at the same time. With that said, disinformation for many people ‘satisfies the need to see the world as structured’. As a

62 Tom Dobber et al., “Do (Microtargeted) Deepfakes Have Real Effects on Political Attitudes?”, *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26, No. 1 (2020), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1940161220944364#page=181> (2020), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1940161220944364#page=18>.

63 “What’s Going on Online? Dealing with (Potential) use of Deepfake Technology by Extremists”, Radicalisation Awareness Network, Conclusion Paper, March 2023, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/ran_cn_dealing_with_use_deepfakes_technology_by_extremism_10-11112022_en.pdf.

64 Daniel Siegel, “‘RedPilled AI’: A New Weapon for Online Radicalisation on 4chan”, Global Network on Extremism & Technology, June 7 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/06/07/redpilled-ai-a-new-weapon-for-online-radicalisation-on-4chan/>.

65 Elena Sánchez Nicolás, “‘Self-Regulation Not Working’ on Fake News, EU Warned”, EUobserver, 16 June 2020, <https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/148648>.

66 “The EFJ calls for stronger measures to tackle online platforms’ disinformation”, European Federation of Journalists, June 2020, <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2020/06/15/the-efj-calls-for-stronger-measures-to-tackle-disinformation-on-online-platforms/>.

result, disinformation often crosses the line between facts and fiction, leading to stories which may seem irrational or even surreal. These aspects make disinformation appealing for many people in this fast-paced period of high complexity and potential perceived loss of control.⁶⁷

A 2018 report for the European Commission notes that some key psychological challenges when attempting to counter disinformation relate to basic and seemingly innocuous phenomena.⁶⁸ This includes the tendency to overestimate how common one's own opinion is (the 'false consensus effect'), which gives a person more assurance and confidence in their beliefs. This in turn makes it more difficult to combat disinformation.⁶⁹ The report also points to the challenges posed by 'confirmation bias' and 'disconfirmation bias.' Although it might be expected that new evidence challenging our opinions should provide motivation for us to re-examine our views, this is not always the case, with counter-evidence sometimes causing individuals to hold onto erroneous beliefs or misconceptions.⁷⁰

Research suggests that people rarely search for additional information when they encounter disinformation.⁷¹ When they do, they have a psychological desire to look for confirmation of their existing beliefs, rather than information contradicting or complicating their beliefs (confirmation bias).⁷² Disconfirmation bias is the tendency to ignore or reject information that challenge one's beliefs, even when they are demonstrably true.⁷³ Both phenomena help protect our self-worth, but can also lead to the purveyors of this challenging information (often the media) being perceived as dishonest or biased.⁷⁴

Psychology also helps explain why some common approaches to countering disinformation seem to be less effective than originally thought. Simply presenting facts is often not effective.⁷⁵

67 Judit Bayer et al., "Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law and Democratic Processes in the EU and Its Member States—2021 Update", European Parliament, Policy Department, April 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653633/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653633_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653633/EXPO_STU(2021)653633_EN.pdf), 99.

68 McDougall, Zezulakova and van Driel, *Teaching Media Literacy in Europe*.

69 Ibid, 44.

70 Ibid, 43.

71 Andrew M. Guess, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifer, "Exposure to Untrustworthy Websites in the 2016 U.S. Election", <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.dartmouth.edu/dist/5/2293/files/2021/03/fake-news-2016.pdf>.

72 McDougall, Zezulakova and van Driel, *Teaching Media Literacy in Europe*, 43.

73 Ibid, 43.

74 Ibid, 43.

75 Rainer Greifeneder, Mariela E. Jaffé, Eryn J. Newman and Norbert Schwarz, (eds.) *The Psychology of Fake News: Accepting, Sharing, and Correcting Misinformation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021) <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/ed611675-458b-458c-ab02-368579ffff86/9781000179033.pdf>. There is also research that shows that fact-checkers' personal biases can influence both their choice of which statements to analyse and their determination of accuracy. See Stephen J. Ceci and Wendy M. Williams, "The Psychology of Fact-Checking", *Scientific American*, 25 October 2020, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-psychology-of-fact-checking1/>.

It is the personal meaning of information, rather than the objective details, that has the greatest impact on beliefs and decision-making. For instance, one study found that verifiably false information spread during elections included inaccurate and misleading claims about the number of men compared with the number of women among refugee populations and about unemployment statistics for migrants.⁷⁶ The authors of the study found that fact-checking helped correct knowledge of the relevant statistics, but that it did not necessarily change people's minds about the arguments of the party. It was also shown that the effectiveness of publishing fact-checked information diminishes in polarized contexts (such as during election campaigns) and among certain audiences (particularly partisans with deeply held beliefs).

Individuals may sometimes acknowledge the validity of corrections if these corrections do not challenge the core tenets of their worldview or identity. However, they often continue to rely on information they know to be false, a phenomenon known as the 'continued-influence effect.'⁷⁷ The evidence shows that, in some circumstances, one's belief in the false information even increases after being confronted with evidence that runs contrary to one's worldview which is also referred to as backfire effect.⁷⁸ Backfiring can take place in part because confrontation with corrective information can evoke strong negative and defensive emotions, especially when ideological and identity issues are at stake. Emotion has been connected with media behaviours in another way. Internet content that evokes anxiety or anger has been found to be shared more widely with others and often represents part of the business model of many platforms and tech companies.⁷⁹

In general, discussions and deliberations about disinformation or 'fake' or 'false news' trigger emotions that hamper efforts to counter disinformation.⁸⁰ As soon as emotions come into play, rational thought takes a back seat. Initiatives that combine retraction of disinformation with an alternative explanation as an approach, and those that explain why disinformation was disseminated (motives) are reported to be more effective than fact-checking and appeals to credibility alone.⁸¹ In a study citing decades of communication research, it was found that corrections are

76 Tompkins, Andrew. "Is Fact-Checking Effective? A Critical Review of What Works – and What Doesn't." *DW.COM*, October 15, 2020, <https://akademie.dw.com/en/is-fact-checking-effective-a-critical-review-of-what-works-and-what-doesnt/a-55248257>.

77 Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker and John Cook, "Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the "Post-Truth" Era", *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 6, No. 4 (2017), 353–369.

78 Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions", *Political Behavior* 32 (2010), 303–330.

79 See for example, Jonah Berger and Katherine L. Milkman, "What Makes Online Content Viral", *Journal of Marketing Research* 49, No. 2 (2012).

80 Adam Rozenzweig, "Understanding and Undermining Fake News from the Classroom", *Berkeley Review of Education* 7, No. 1 (2017), 105—112, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7rk9w7tm>.

81 Nathan Walter and Sheila T. Murphy, "How to Unring the Bell: A Meta-Analytic Approach: A Meta-Analytic Approach to Correction of Misinformation", *Communication Monographs* 85, No. 3 (2018), 423–441, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2018.1467564>.

generally only effective when at least two conditions are met.⁸² First, corrections must not directly challenge people’s worldviews, as this evokes a defensive emotional reaction. Challenging a person’s belief system can backfire and lead to people reaffirming their belief systems when faced with evidence that counters their views. Affirming the self-worth of recipients can therefore be an important step. Second, either corrective evidence should be provided to explain why the disinformation was disseminated in the first place (i.e., the motivations of the disinformation actor), or an alternative explanation of the relevant event should be offered.

In contrast to the challenges of correcting inaccurate information, several studies have shown that mere exposure to conspiratorial discourse makes people less likely to accept more accurate information, even when conspiratorial claims are debunked.⁸³ Disproving conspiracy theories is challenging because since they reduce highly complex issues to simplistic explanations and causes, and they tend to be particularly prevalent in times of socio-economic and political crises. Recent research suggests that the most effective approaches to conspiracy theories are teaching critical thinking skills and how best to recognize unreliable information.⁸⁴

82 Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, “Beyond Misinformation”.

83 Ibid.

84 Stephanie Pappas, “Conspiracy Theories can be Undermined with These Three Strategies, new Analysis Shows,” *Scientific American*, April 2023, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-can-you-fight-conspiracy-theories/>.



5.

MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY IN THE CONTEXT OF P/CVERLT:

SELECTED DEVELOPMENTS IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

This section provides insights into the current state of affairs in the region by exploring emerging trends in information disorder, identifying key pressing issues, and summarizing experts' views on the main challenges that need to be addressed.⁸⁵ It also outlines the primary obstacles and difficulties associated with launching initiatives in this domain.

THE VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND INFORMATION DISORDER ENVIRONMENT IN SEE

As in other parts of the world, terrorist, violent extremist, and organized criminal groups in SEE countries have successfully exploited vulnerabilities in social media and online messaging apps to manipulate people and disseminate conspiracy theories.⁸⁶ This material spreads widely and rapidly, often with the intention of recruiting young people, who spend a significant amount of their time online.

Disinformation within SEE has served to fuel polarization and division within society, with some content being openly nationalistic, xenophobic, hateful and hostile in nature, instigating

85 Survey of OSCE staff and subject matter experts on media literacy and P/CVERLT in South-Eastern Europe carried out in the spring of 2022.

86 Conspiracy theories, according to UNESCO, refer to beliefs that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intentions. They cause real harm to people, their health and their physical safety. They amplify and legitimize misconceptions and reinforce stereotypes, which can fuel violence and violent extremist ideologies. See "Conspiracy Theories: What Are They? Why Do They Flourish?" UNESCO, <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco-conspiracy-english-0.jpg>. See also Risteska, Marija, Metodij Hadji-Janev, and Samet Shabani. 2021. "Response to Online Radicalization: Towards On-Line Safety Education Policy." *Passage4prevent*. http://www.crpm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Policy-Paper-Education_eng-B5-ver-2.pdf.

ethnic hatred, denying genocide and spreading divisive and potentially violent narratives.⁸⁷ The region has relatively recent history of conflict, coupled with unresolved historical grievances and emerging historical revisionism from the World War II period. This situation has served as fertile ground for disinformation that can foster violent extremism and radicalization to violence.

DISINFORMATION AND COVID-19

These trends have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and increased conflict in the OSCE area and beyond. The “disinfodemic”⁸⁸ that emerged following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the outdated nature of disinformation-related legislation and regulation across the region. In an effort to counter the spread of COVID-19 pandemic-related disinformation and mitigate potential risks to public health and order during the health crisis, authorities have attempted to impose limitations on the fundamental right to freedom of expression and access to information by resorting to existing libel laws or old laws from the time of the former Yugoslavia or by formulating new governmental decrees and other measures.⁸⁹ This example is a good demonstration how sensitive regulation covering disinformation is, as it directly touches upon freedom of speech and expression.⁹⁰

87 Buljubašić, Mirza. 2022. “Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An Overview of Country-Specific Challenges for P/CVE.” *Radicalisation Awareness Network*. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran_vrwe_in_western_balkans_overview_072022_en.pdf

88 In the words of UNESCO and UNITAR, “COVID-19 has led to a parallel pandemic of disinformation that directly impacts lives and livelihoods around the world. Falsehoods and misinformation have proven deadly and sowed confusion about life-saving personal and policy choices. We are in the midst of a disinfodemic.” See their online learning course dedicated to addressing the proliferation of disinformation, falsehoods and misinformation: “UNESCO and UNITAR Launch ‘Combating the Disinfodemic’ Mobile E-Learning Course”, UNITAR, 3 November 2020, <https://unitar.org/about/news-stories/press/unesco-and-unitar-launch-combating-disinfodemic-mobile-e-learning-course>. Also see, “Disinformation in the Western Balkans”, Daniel Sunter, NATO Review, December 2020, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html>.

89 For example, in Croatia, by June 2020, some 32 cases of coronavirus-related fake news had led to minor offense charges in local courts for misdemeanours, which also exposed the fact that Croatia does not have a modern law against creating or spreading fake news. Police, in this case, resorted to an old law from the time of the former Yugoslavia, instituted in 1977, that states that “those who invent or spread fake news that disturbs the peace and order of citizens will be punished by a fine of 50—200 Deutschmarkss or a prison sentence of up to 30 days.” See Jagoda Marić, “Podnesene 32 prijave za širenje lažnih vijesti o koroni u Hrvatskoj. Sudit će im se po zakonu iz bivše Juge”, *Juge*, *Novi List*, 11 June 2020, <https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/32-prijave-za-sirenje-laznih-vijesti-o-koroni-u-hrvatskoj>. Also see, “Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them”, Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman and Borjan Gjuzelov, Directorate General for External Policies of the Union, February 2021 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf).

90 An interesting overview of different national approaches to regulation can be found in OSCE Representative on the Freedom of the Media, “International Standards and Comparative National Approaches to Countering Disinformation in the Context of Freedom of the Media”, March 2019, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/1/424451.pdf>.

Various reports have pointed out that the region is also subject to external intentional disinformation/malinformation campaigns.⁹¹ However, a 2021 European Parliament-issued mapping report concluded that while foreign actors feature prominently as sources of disinformation (campaigns), “the bulk of disinformation in the region was produced domestically, for domestic purposes.”⁹² The dynamic nature of the online environment makes it difficult to keep pace with new developments, especially for underfunded and overstretched NGOs.⁹³

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Media organizations across SEE face significant challenges and obstacles to their work, while operating in a highly polarized and fragmented media environment.

Public mistrust in the media and anti-media sentiment are on the rise – a trend largely driven by populist politicians and authorities, and exacerbated by disinformation. This trend is mirrored in the growing abuse of independent and critical journalists and media outlets – ranging from verbal to physical attacks and threats, stigmatization, misogyny and smear campaigns, specifically in the online sphere, as well as legal harassment. Instances of criminal acts against journalists have experienced a sharp increase in recent years, with female journalists and those investigating corruption allegations and other sensitive issues of public interest being particularly targeted.⁹⁴ For example, there were at least 151 attacks on journalists in Serbia in 2021, the second highest number recorded since 2008.⁹⁵ There has also been an increase in political pressure on independent media, while some media outlets have been used as political tools to propagate hateful, intolerant, and xenophobic narratives and disinformation as well as to discredit independent and critical voices, minority communities and protests. The trustworthiness and accountability of media outlets are further jeopardized by the limited transparency in media ownership, especially of online media outlets, which allows for possible influences and abuse by vested political and business interests.

91 Themayor. 2023. “Report: South Eastern Europe Is Uniquely Vulnerable to Propaganda.” *TheMayor.EU*, May 11, 2023. <https://www.themayor.eu/en/a/view/report-south-eastern-europe-is-uniquely-vulnerable-to-propaganda-11797>.

92 Ibid.

93 Survey of OSCE staff and subject matter experts on media literacy and P/CVERLT in South-Eastern Europe carried out in the spring of 2022.

94 Klingová, Katarína, Dominika Hajdu, and GLOBSEC. 2018. “PROGRESSIVE VOICES? Attitudes and Perceptions of Civil Society Organisations and Young People in Central and South-Eastern Europe.” *Strategic Communication Programme*. https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/GLOBSEC_brozura_Progressive_voices_1218_A5_n.pdf.

95 Nations in Transit 2022, Nikola Burazer, Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2022>.

According to a 2019 report, up to two-thirds of disinformation in South-Eastern Europe is sourced from media channels lacking transparency with respect to ownership information.⁹⁶

Other challenges include regulating new media and different forms of online content, as well as addressing platforms hosted outside the country (including those with unknown or unco-operative hosts). A concerted multilateral effort from multiple stakeholders is needed to address these issues in SEE.⁹⁷

DIGITAL AND MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

Individuals in SEE are vulnerable to disinformation, which can influence radicalization, due to low levels of media literacy. The Open Society Institute's 2023 Media Literacy Index, which ranks 35 European countries, placed North Macedonia (39th), Albania (38th), Bosnia and Herzegovina (37th), Montenegro (33rd), and Serbia (31st) near the bottom of the list. The Index attributes this low performance to "underperformance in media freedom and education," reflecting a regional decline compared to the 2021 Index.⁹⁸

Educational systems across SEE continue to be marked by outdated teaching methods and techniques based on instructor-centric, ex cathedra lectures favouring memorization of facts, which leads to a lack of critical and analytical skills.⁹⁹ This has resulted in low levels of digital literacy among all age groups. Parents and teachers are also ill-informed about both the online habits of young people and how these online environments operate. Media literacy is either not part of the curriculum, or schools and teachers are ill-equipped to teach it. Institutional capacities to address disinformation are lacking, as are associated levels of expertise.¹⁰⁰

96 Tijana Cvjetičanin, Emir Zulejhić, Darko Brkan and Biljana Livančić-Milić, "Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of BiH", *Zašto ne*, April 2019, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf. Also see, Overview of OSCE's annual South-Eastern Europe media conference (2021), <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/499017>.

97 Survey of OSCE staff and subject matter experts on media literacy and P/CVERLT in South-Eastern Europe carried out in the spring of 2022.

98 The Media Literacy Index is produced by the European Policies Initiative of the Open Society Institute Sofia. The Index assesses the resilience potential to fake news in 35 European countries, using indicators for media freedom, education and trust in people. See "Media Literacy Index 2021", <https://osis.bg/?p=3750&lang=en>, and "Media Literacy Index 2023", Open Society Institute Sofia, 24 June 2023, <https://osis.bg/?p=4450&lang=en>.

99 Predrag Petrović and Florian Qehaja, "Violent Extremism: Beyond Foreign Fighters and Behind Numbers", in Sabina Lange, Zoran Nechev and Florian Trauner (eds.), *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, Report No. 36 (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2017), 94–95, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/cf735c9f-a7e6-11e7-837e-01aa75ed71a1>.

100 Ibid.

Additionally, some young people view spreading disinformation as a profitable grey zone, i.e., generating income by creating fake websites designed to generate clicks and ad revenue.¹⁰¹

Several authors have suggested that these deficiencies in the educational system are contributing to the alienation and radicalization of young people, making them more receptive and vulnerable to harmful online messages.¹⁰²

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGY

Policymakers and decision-makers have often been perceived as lacking a long-term vision, favoring over-securitized (e.g., content takedown) and short-term solutions.¹⁰³ They are sometimes seen as too focused on short-term programmes with short-term funding schemes, often driven by new phenomena or buzz words (e.g., ‘deepfakes’ or ‘fake news’). This has resulted in a lack of long-term investments in media education programmes and digital literacy, including investment in teacher training, educational resources in national languages, support for existing programmes and investment in research to evaluate the impact of media literacy programmes. A sustained approach to addressing the longer-term challenges of citizenship, social cohesion, diversity and tolerance is required.¹⁰⁴ Governments need to enhance their understanding of vulnerabilities and to build resilience to external pressures. Strengthening civic education, critical thinking, and media literacy should be central to these efforts.¹⁰⁵

CO-ORDINATION

These challenges demand a cross-sectoral approach that fosters co-operation between educational institutions (at all levels) and other relevant stakeholders. Important stakeholders include media regulatory agencies, media outlets, NGOs, online and physical security-related actors, researchers (international, regional and local), legal, prosecutorial and law enforcement professionals and online platforms/tech companies. However, as experiences with multi-stakeholder approaches

101 “Fake News: How This Teenager in Macedonia Is Striking It Rich.” 2016. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/fake-news-how-partying-macedonian-teen-earns-thousands-publishing-lies-n692451>.

102 Ibid. Also see Valery Perry, “Countering the Cultivation of Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Case for Comprehensive Education Reform”, Democratization Policy Council report, September 2015. Also see Zvijerac, Predrag. 2020. “Medijska nepismenost na Zapadnom Balkanu.” Radio Slobodna Evropa, February 11, 2020. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zasto-medijska-pismenost-vezovic/30427144.html>.

103 Tijana Cvjetičanin, Emir Zulejhić, Darko Brkan and Biljana Livančić-Milić, “Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of BiH”, *Zašto ne*, page 88, April 2019, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf.

104 See for example, *Understanding Referral Mechanisms in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe* (Vienna: OSCE, 2019) <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/418274>.

105 Tijana Cvjetičanin, Emir Zulejhić, Darko Brkan and Biljana Livančić-Milić. “Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of BiH”

to P/CVERLT demonstrate, approaches of different institutions and entities need to be carefully coordinated and mutually aligned and reinforcing.¹⁰⁶ It is challenging to dismantle existing silos and to promote coherent, proactive, and strategic approaches, particularly when resources are limited.¹⁰⁷

PROGRAMME DESIGN

Most existing programmes target high school students and teachers, meaning that other age demographics with digital literacy gaps miss out.¹⁰⁸ Adults and seniors, including informal community leaders, have an important role to play in preventing violent extremism, yet they are often less digitally savvy than younger generations. The development of such initiatives can be traced back to the early 2000s, with civil society organizations spearheading and initiating research, publications and projects in this domain.¹⁰⁹ Programming should avoid a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach and self-selection bias, training only those interested in these topics and missing those most vulnerable and exposed to violent extremist narratives (e.g., those outside the educational systems). Another challenge in the MIL programming is the rapid evolution of the disinformation threat environment and the technology used. This dynamic nature makes programme design difficult, as training materials can quickly become outdated.

CHALLENGES OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

The evaluation of MIL programmes is underdeveloped.¹¹⁰ More investment is needed to place resources in programmes that have demonstrated impact and concrete results across various contexts. Evaluation efforts must be more intentional and robust. In some cases, such as with counter-narrative-based campaigns, evaluation is very difficult, as one needs to prove the existence of a non-event, (i.e., non-radicalization) and evaluate whether that can be attributed to the campaign.¹¹¹

106 *Understanding Referral Mechanisms in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe* (Vienna: OSCE, 2019)

107 Ibid.

108 See, for example, the report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on the digital gender gap: *Bridging the Digital Gender Gap: Include, Upskill, Innovate* (Paris: OECD, 2018), <https://www.oecd.org/digital/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>.

109 Sanela Hodžić, Brankica Petković and Sandra Bašić Hrvatín, *Medijska i informacijska pismenost u Bosni i Hercegovini: brojne inicijative civilnog sektora i nedostatak javnih politika* (Sarajevo: Fondacija za razvoj medija i civilnog društva “Mediacentar”, 2019), www.media.ba/sites/default/files/medijska_i_informacijska_pismenost_u_bosni_i_hercegovini_final.pdf.

110 OSCE facilitated expert discussion, Oct. 2021. Also see School of Transitional Governance, *Evaluating the impact of media literacy initiatives*, <https://www.eui.eu/apply?id=evaluating-the-impact-of-media-literacy-initiatives>.

111 See Linda Schlegel, “The Ongoing Trouble with Counter-Narratives: Why Evaluation May Not Be Everything”, Regional Cooperation Council, 12 August 2020, www.rcc.int/swp/news/289/the-ongoing-trouble-with-counter-narratives-why-evaluation-may-not-be-everything.

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society organizations are at the forefront of efforts to counter disinformation through various means, one of which is implementing media education initiatives.¹¹² Civil society organizations, including media organizations, journalists, journalists' associations and media rights organizations, have an important role to play in developing critical thinking skills. Several of the practices mentioned in the report, as well as the inspiring practices mentioned in Annex 1, rely on the important role of civil society in driving this work forward.

112 E.g. "Struggle against disinformation narratives and mapping conspiracy theories: the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina", Amar Karadžuz, Tijana Cvjetičanin, Marija Ćosić, Semir Džebo, Rašid Krupalija, Maida Salkanović and Nerma Šehović, Why Not NGO, April 2022, <https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2022/04/Borba-protiv-dezinformacijskih-narativa-i-mapiranje-teorija-zavjere-Slucaj-BIH.pdf>.



6.

THE IMPACT OF MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY CAMPAIGNS:

WHAT WORKS AND WHY

A key conclusion from research on MIL is that effective media literacy programs can produce positive outcomes. In a study¹¹³ conducted to assess to what extent exposure to media literacy made people better at assessing the accuracy of information they encountered in the media, the results conclusively showed that, in general, people who reported limited media literacy education were less able to recognize biased information.¹¹⁴ Those who reported the most media literacy learning experience were more successful in distinguishing between factual/ evidence-based posts and fabricated posts with disinformation, even when both posts aligned with their prior policy perspectives.”¹¹⁵ Given this evidence base, it is probable that MIL education could also contribute to tackling online radicalization to violence, as well as being an effective intervention strategy to prevent both online and offline violence. However, further research on this issue is required.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Although MIL is a relatively new concept, earlier forms of media literacy education to combat propaganda were developed in the 1930s.¹¹⁶ While the digital universe is becoming all-pervasive, the communication and education tools needed to promote media literacy are largely the same. The focus on personal reflection, critical thinking and the examination of how an individual's

113 Kahne and Bowyer, “Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age”.

114 Those individuals who reported having the most media literacy learning experiences appear to make a clear distinction between evidence-based posts and posts with misinformation. Slightly more than 60 per cent of individuals with little media learning experience thought that comments with misinformation were accurate. Among those with a lot of media learning experience, this figure was less than 50 per cent. Perhaps more striking is that less than 50 per cent of individuals with little media learning experience thought that evidence-based comments were accurate. Among those with a high degree of media learning experience, this figure was close to 80 per cent.

115 Kahne and Bowyer, “Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age”, 27.

116 Renee Hobbs and Sandra McGee, “Teaching about Propaganda: An Examination of the Historical Roots of Media Literacy”, *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 6, No. 2 (2014), 56—67.

social cultural history and economic status can shape message interpretation remain relevant in today's context, as do the ABCs of propaganda analysis.¹¹⁷

One conceptual framework identifies five essential competencies for the development of media literacy: access, analyse and evaluate, create, reflect and act.¹¹⁸ Its author argues that these competencies “work together in a spiral of empowerment, supporting people's active participation in lifelong learning.”¹¹⁹ Others have suggested that the volume of digital information available to students necessitates the development of new competencies, in order to become “proficient at accessing, analysing, evaluating as well as creating and distributing information.”¹²⁰

INOCULATION THEORY

One effective approach in MIL development builds on inoculation theory.¹²¹ Rooted in critical thinking, approaches based on this theory seek to prepare students for exposure to potential disinformation by introducing them to the logical fallacies that are commonplace in disinformation. The aim is to get young people to engage in a more critical, deeper analysis of the information they encounter online. Inoculation theory operates on the premise that people can be ‘inoculated’ against different types of false information by being exposed to a refuted version of the message *beforehand*. Inoculation programmes usually contain two main elements: “(1) an explicit warning of an impending threat, and (2) a refutation of an anticipated argument that exposes the imminent fallacy.”¹²² In sum, like an inoculation for a virus, students are exposed to a ‘weakened’ form of the disinformation. When exposed to actual disinformation at a later date, the inoculation will provide them with the necessary counter-arguments to dismiss the disinformation.

117 Created in the late 1930s by the New York Institute for Propaganda Analysis, the ABCs asks individuals to ASCERTAIN the conflict element in the propaganda you are analyzing; BEHOLD your own reaction to this conflict element; CONCERN yourself with today's' propagandas associated with today's' conflicts; DOUBT that your opinions are “your very own”; EVALUATE, therefore, with the greatest care, your own propagandas; FIND THE FACTS before you come to any conclusion; and GUARD always, finally, against omnibus words. See “The ABCs of Propaganda Analysis”, NAAB Research Center Online Exhibits, Accessed 16 April 2023, <https://libapps.salisbury.edu/nabb-online/exhibits/show/propaganda/what-is-propaganda-/the-abcs-of-propaganda-analysi>.

118 Renee Hobbs, *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action* (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 2010), https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Digital_and_Media_Literacy.pdf.

119 Ibid,18.

120 Shannon Carlin-Menter, “Exploring the Effectiveness of an Online Writing Workspace to Support Literacy in a Social Studies Classroom”, *E-Learning and Digital Media* 10, No. 4 (2013), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.2304/elea.2013.10.4.407>.

121 Josh Compton, “Inoculation Theory”, in James Price Dillard and Lijiang Shen (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Persuasion: Developments in Theory and Practice* (London: Sage Publications, 2012), 220–236.

122 John Cook, Stephan Lewandowsky and Ullrich K. H. Ecker, “Neutralizing Misinformation through Inoculation: Exposing Misleading Argumentation Techniques Reduces Their Influence”, *PLoS ONE* 12, No. 5 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0175799>.

A meta-analysis of 43 inoculation studies shows that inoculation approaches consistently build resistance to persuasive messages, and generating counter-arguments increases resistance (referred to as 'active inoculation').¹²³ Other studies have explored inoculation theory in the context of P/CVERLT, including a 2021 project focused on countering white supremacist and male supremacist propaganda. The study showed reduced willingness to support violent extremists and a shift in perceptions of credibility of propaganda sources.¹²⁴

When educating about conspiracy theories, it has been argued that the first step is for training and education to encourage people to become more sceptical readers and thinkers, for them to learn the skills of argumentative and persuasive rhetoric, and to strengthen their ability to evaluate sources more accurately.¹²⁵

CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

More concretely, when it comes to educating for digital literacy, educators can take advantage of the fact that many (young) people have become active media creators themselves,¹²⁶ a trend that is only likely to continue. Although digitally proficient, some young people are not always aware of the repercussions of contributing to information disorder through gossip, creating or spreading false information etc. Critical self-reflection is an effective tool in programmes designed to promote MIL and to raise awareness of the mechanisms and potential consequences of spreading disinformation.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES

It is noteworthy that the use of counter-narratives to address disinformation has shown mixed results.¹²⁷ Such narratives can be defined as messages that offer a positive alternative to violent extremist propaganda (sometimes referred to as alternative narratives) or aim to deconstruct or

123 John A. Banas and Stephen A. Rains, "A Meta-Analysis Research on Inoculation Theory", *Communication Monographs* 77, No. 3 (2010), 281–311.

124 Beth Goldberg, "Psychological Inoculation: New Techniques for Fighting Online Extremism", Jigsaw, June 2021, <https://medium.com/jigsaw/psychological-inoculation-new-techniques-for-fighting-online-extremism-b156e439af23>.

125 Hobbs, "Teach the Conspiracies"; Rozenzweig, "Understanding and Undermining Fake News From the Classroom".

126 Hobbs and McGee, "Teaching about Propaganda: An Examination of the Historical Roots of Media Literacy", *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 6, No. 2 (2014), 64.

127 See, for example, Eric Rosand and Emily Winterbotham, "Do Counter-Narratives Actually Reduce Violent Extremism?", Brookings, 20 March 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/20/do-counter-narratives-actually-reduce-violent-extremism/>.

delegitimize violent extremist narratives.¹²⁸ This encompasses variety of strategies, including offering positive and inclusive stories, exposing the negative impacts of violent extremism, demonstrating hypocrisy or factual inaccuracies, or even satirizing violent extremist propaganda.¹²⁹

Regional and local civil society actors have produced tailored narratives to counter violent ones that are propagated by violent extremist groups and to tackle online radicalization.¹³⁰ Some studies suggest that these counter-narratives can have a positive impact. One such study concluded that, “exposure to alternative viewpoints can potentially foster critical thinking or plant a ‘seed of doubt’ that later matures into a change in attitudes and behaviours.”¹³¹ Furthermore, there is some evidence that the use of alternative narratives can especially impact those in the “movable middle” (i.e., without views on either extreme of a particular argument) about a particular issue.¹³²

There is, however, some evidence that counter-narratives can be counterproductive for certain target audiences. For example, a 2020 study found that, although the use of counter-narratives to address support for ISIL/Daesh had a small overall positive effect, there was also evidence that it produced greater support for ISIL/Daesh in individuals at greater risk of radicalization to violence.¹³³ The study’s authors concluded that due to the risk of counter-narratives unintentionally strengthening ideological positions, they should only be used after careful consideration.¹³⁴ Counter-narratives have also been “criticised as being too removed from the everyday lives and experiences of those targeted.”¹³⁵

128 Henry Tuck and Tanya Silverman, *The Counter-Narrative Handbook* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Counter-narrative-Handbook_1.pdf.

129 Ibid, 4.

130 OSCE. 2018. “The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism A Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe.” https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/2/400241_1.pdf. See Rosand and Winterbotham, “Do Counter-Narratives Actually Reduce Violent Extremism?”.

131 Tanya Silverman, Christopher J. Stewart, Zahed Amanullah and Jonathan Birdwell, *The Impact of Counter-Narratives: Insights from a Year-Long Cross-Platform Pilot Study of Counter-Narrative Curation, Targeting, Evaluation and Impact* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016), https://www.jugendundmedien.ch/fileadmin/PDFs/anderes/schwerpunkt_Radikalisierung/Impact-of-Counter-Narratives_ONLINE_1.pdf.

132 Vlad Maksimov, “Policy-makers Should Develop ‘Vaccine’ against Disinformation about Migrants”, Euractiv, 27 November 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/news/policy-makers-should-develop-vaccine-against-disinformation-about-migrants/>.

133 Jocelyn J. Bélanger et al., “Do Counter-Narratives Reduce Support for ISIS? Yes, but Not Their Target Audience”, *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01059/full>.

134 Ibid.

135 “Counter-Narratives to Terrorism”, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 2221 (2018), 1 June 2018, <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=24810&lang=en>.

CONFIRMATION BIAS

Academic work on confirmation bias and the role of emotions in distorting our ability to think rationally – particularly in the immediate aftermath of a major event – is also of relevance to SEE, which has experienced multiple violent conflicts. One line of argument is that the first step to countering confirmation bias is to help people gain insight into how their own biases impact the way they seek, accept, share and act on information.¹³⁶ Another critical ability in addressing confirmation bias is the ability to withhold judgement when first learning about an event. Since emotions are involved, and in-group and out-group mechanisms are easily triggered, this is a skill that demands significant attention.

AGE-SENSITIVE APPROACHES TO MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

One relevant issue to consider in education and training is at what age initiatives to combat disinformation and promote MIL should start. A 2012 meta-analysis of 51 different studies examining the impact of media literacy interventions confirmed that media literacy education should ideally start at a young age, and also that education provided by experts and peers is more effective than education provided by non-experts and non-peers.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, interventions at a younger age should not necessarily be the same as for those who have, in terms of their cognitive and emotional development, reached a more mature age (e.g. above the age of 13).

Additionally, it has been argued that the development of MIL is becoming one of the most valuable tools for lifelong learning, given the impact of new technologies and the digital universe on our everyday lives, and the speed with which these are developing.¹³⁸ This also means that adults across the life spectrum need to remain aware of how newer forms of disinformation operate in the digitalsphere, long after they have left school, and that MIL strategies, as well as artificial intelligence-awareness should also consider older adults. For example, a 2021 study of beliefs regarding COVID-19 showed that the backfire effect (the re-affirming of views based on incorrect information when these views are challenged) was stronger among older adults than among younger adults.¹³⁹ Additionally, studies indicate that the sharing of fake news across digital platforms is

136 Alan C. Miller, "Confronting Confirmation Bias: Giving Truth a Fighting Chance in the Information Age", *Social Education* 80, No. 5 (2016), 276–279.

137 Se-Hoon Jeong, Hyunyi Cho and Yoori Hwang, "Media Literacy Interventions: A Meta-Analytic Review", *Journal of Communication* 62, No. 3 (2012), 454–472, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228071617_Media_Literacy_Interventions_A_Meta-Analytic_Review.

138 Matthew Lynch, "Digital Literacy Is the Most Important Lifelong Learning Tool", *The Tech Edvocate*, 30 December 2017, <https://www.thetechedvocate.org/digital-literacy-important-lifelong-learning-tool/>.

139 See Santosh Vijaykumar et al., "How Shades of Truth and Age Affect Responses to COVID-19 (Mis)information: Randomized Survey Experiment among WhatsApp Users in UK and Brazil", *Humanities and Social Communications* 8 (2021), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-021-00752-7>.

more prevalent among the over-65 age bracket.¹⁴⁰ The vast majority are newcomers to the internet, and have less awareness of issues such as clickbaiting and the advanced technologies used to manipulate images, for example.¹⁴¹

Many MIL approaches (see the inspiring examples in Annex 1) build upon the digital competencies that young people have already gained. Young people tend to be much more digitally literate than older generations. Therefore, efforts to counter disinformation among young people should ideally build on these existing competencies. Research points to the role that memes could play in digital literacy education, taking a grassroots-led approach that integrates familiar, emotionally and culturally powerful images in a controlled discussion environment.¹⁴² Actively engaging young people in the co-creation of resources and tools for their generation and involving them in the education and training of their peers (peer education) is ideal. Since young people increasingly interact with the world, including the political world, through new media, developing internet youth activism around dis/mis/mal-information can be an effective educational tool. Some authors refer to internet activism as a way for young people to become positively engaged in transforming the world around them, including the new media world.¹⁴³ Examples of online activism include the use of online petitions, fundraising campaigns, the creation and sharing of social media hashtags, and more disruptive actions such as virtual sit-ins or ‘email bombs.’¹⁴⁴

TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS TO P/CVERLT ONLINE

DEPLATFORMING

In terms of technological solutions, deplatforming is an attempt to ban content from the internet or make it hard to access. This brings up human rights concerns pertaining to freedom of information, freedom of opinion and freedom of speech.¹⁴⁵ Implementing bans and censorship can also threaten key democratic values and run afoul of ‘do no harm’ principles, which focus on avoiding harming individuals or groups as a result of interventions, initiatives or projects.

140 Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler and Joshua Tucker, “Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook”, *Science Advances*, 9 January 2019. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.aau4586>.

141 Nadia M. Brashier and Daniel L. Schacter “Aging in an Era of Fake News”, *Curr Dir Psychol Sci*. 2020 June ; 29(3): 316–323, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7505057/pdf/nihms-1628117.pdf>.

142 Inés Bolaños Somoano, “The Right-Leaning be Memeing: Extremist Uses of Internet Memes and Insights for CVE Design”, *VOX Pol*, May 2022, <https://www.voxpol.eu/the-right-leaning-be-memeing-extremist-uses-of-internet-memes-and-insights-for-cve-design/>.

143 See for example, Martha McCaughey and Michael Ayers (eds.), (eds.), *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (Chicago: Routledge, 2003).

144 Marcela A. Fuentes, “digital activism”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/digital-activism>.

145 See “Report on Disinformation”, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, 13 April 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomOpinion/Pages/Report-on-disinformation.aspx>.

Efforts to de-platform individuals or content types from larger social media platforms also results in the migration of violent extremist actors to “smaller platforms with less resource and oversight.”¹⁴⁶ For example, following a crackdown on pro-ISIL/Daesh communities on Telegram in 2019, research showed that these communities switched to a more decentralized structure spanning over a larger number of platforms.¹⁴⁷

REDIRECT METHOD

In terms of technical solutions, the redirect method,¹⁴⁸ developed by Moonshot CVE in partnership with Google, is worth mentioning. This method targets individuals who search for, or engage with violent extremist content, redirecting them to compelling and credible counter-narratives and alternative messages, specially curated video playlists, relevant web content and/or access to intervention services.

COUNTER-DISINFORMATION EFFORTS

Some technology companies, which have been criticized for contributing to the spread of disinformation, have established so-called “war rooms”, where company specialists get together to develop ways to address the disinformation being spread through their platforms. These include Facebook, Google and X. Google, for instance, has developed plans to crack down on bogus videos on YouTube.¹⁴⁹ However, these efforts have had limited success, and typically been disproportionately focused on the United States and English-language material, resulting in hate speech and disinformation continuing to proliferate across these major platforms.¹⁵⁰

146 Erin Saltman, “Identifying and Removing Terrorist Content Online: Cross-Platform Solutions,” Observer Research Foundation, April 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/identifying-and-removing-terrorist-content-online/>.

147 Meili Criezis, “Remaining and Expanding, or Surviving and Adapting? Extremist Platform Migration and Adaptation Strategies,” Global Network on Extremism & Technology, November 2021, <https://gnet-research.org/2021/11/12/remaining-and-expanding-or-surviving-and-adapting-extremist-platform-migration-and-adaptation-strategies/>.

148 The Redirect Method (TRM)”, European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, 2020, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices/redirect-method-trm_en.

149 See David Klepper and Danica Kirka, “Tech Companies Rush to Fight Misinformation ahead of UK Vote”, Associated Press, 8 November 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/general-elections-social-media-brex-it-us-news-boris-johnson-03a97d44af714d3dba36b64cd5b5cc15>.

150 See “Report on Disinformation”, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, 13 April 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomOpinion/Pages/Report-on-disinformation.aspx>.



7.

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

This section outlines several recommendations relating to the design and implementation of MIL initiatives in the context of P/CVERLT in SEE. They are based on the research and good practices presented above; regional contextual elements and constraints, recommendations of the online expert working group on MIL and/or counter-terrorism; and the 2022 survey of MIL and P/CVERLT experts.

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

FRAMING AND COMMUNICATION

It is important to avoid framing the problem exclusively through a security lens or focusing too heavily on the negative or reactive aspects of disinformation threats. Instead, MIL should be placed within a wider framework of preserving and protecting democratic values and freedoms, including media freedom, promoting democracy, diversity and tolerance. Authorities should be encouraged to focus on prevention, build resilience to disinformation and emphasize the need for long-term, sustainable solutions. Given the multiplicity of opportunities to connect across borders, a clear narrative is needed about the values one is seeking to protect and promote. A careful approach is needed that avoids us-versus-them language, and explains and frames the threat and its nature or sources. When communicating with policymakers, organizations should avoid oversimplifying both the threats and the solutions (e.g., overpromising results). Any curriculum developed should be tailored to a particular group and avoid an overly broad focus.

In today's increasingly saturated and invasive information ecosystem, there is a growing need for the people in our societies to grasp certain competencies – the knowledge and skills to understand and deal with media, information and news in a digital world. These competences are essential to exercise our human rights to freedom of expression and access to information both on- and offline.

CURRICULUM CONTENT

The overall focus of the curriculum ought to be on prevention and building resilience. It must be framed within a broader human rights approach, be gender-sensitive and include elements on gender mainstreaming and countering gender stereotypes, adopting the language of empowerment of women and communities. It should also seek to incorporate elements on media freedom

so that individuals are able to understand and value the democratic functions of media and other information providers, online and offline, and the importance of information pluralism. It should include critical evaluation and ethical production of information and media content. The curriculum should also draw on examples of cultural and religious diversity, promote intercultural dialogue, and highlight related success stories to inspire action and optimism.

The curriculum should address gaps identified in existing MIL curricula, avoiding duplication or ‘reinventing the wheel.’ It should favour inoculation theory over counter-narrative approaches. However, if a narrative approach was adopted, alternative narratives should be prioritized, address inconvenient truths and allow for genuine and honest discourse.¹⁵¹ Counter-narratives that focus on ideology run the risk of contributing to polarization and causing further tension in communities.¹⁵² Participants should be informed about risks of radicalization to violence, and the long-term and lingering effects of disinformation (including its roots in past propaganda practices), while ensuring that all terminology is well explained, including references to any theoretical frameworks. Curriculum organizers should also seek to foster critical thinking, the development of communication and co-operation skills for all age groups – including intergenerational training sessions (youth and parents or grandparents) – and be easily digestible for a non-expert audience.

CURRICULUM FORMAT, METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The curriculum should be designed with flexibility in mind, allowing for adjustment and updating over time, and tailored according to the needs of a particular training and age group. It should have clearly stated learning goals and objectives, meaning that future trainers and facilitators can prepare adequately for the curriculum implementation. The course design should encourage interactive and engaging methodologies, including storytelling, psychodrama,¹⁵³ co-operative learning and investigative research, with a significant focus on dialogue as both a process and a tool. The curriculum should include the results of MIL programmes, so that participants could understand how they work, what their potential positive impacts are, and draw on practical examples and experiences from other countries. The curriculum should also encourage policymakers to actively participate and make an explicit call to action to those who can initiate or support change.

151 CTED. 2020. “CTED Analytical Brief: Countering Terrorist Narratives Online and Offline.” https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/files/documents/2021/Jan/cted_analytical_brief_countering_terrorist_narratives_online_and_offline.pdf.

152 Reed, Alastair, Haroro J. Ingram, Joe Whittaker, and European Parliament [EU Parliament]. 2017. “Countering Terrorist Narratives.” *Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs*. pg.35. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596829/IPOL_STU\(2017\)596829_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596829/IPOL_STU(2017)596829_EN.pdf). Also see, “Youth, Media and Problematic Content”, Sanela Hodžić i Anida Sokol, Media Centar Sarajevo, 2019. https://media.ba/sites/default/files/mladi_mediji_problematični_medijski_sadržaji_web.pdf.

153 See “OSCE Presents Wining Theatrical Performances on Countering Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” OSCE. 2018. <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/375262>.

STAKEHOLDERS

Firstly, all relevant stakeholders need to be identified, along with their competencies and jurisdictions, where relevant. Particular attention should be given to ministries that govern telecommunications/information, the educational sector, civil society, tech companies and youth. A multi-stakeholder approach should be taken, with governments taking the role of coordinator, encouraging joint strategizing, planning and inter- and cross-sectoral co-operation, ideally involving both national and local levels. Gender issues and gender gaps need to be taken into consideration when designing interventions, as well as age-appropriate approaches. The curriculum should cater to employees of state institutions, human rights organizations, media and youth representatives. A separate curriculum could be designed that strengthens the digital and technological insights and skills of policymakers, and focuses on the need to harmonize legislation with both international conventions, social changes and increasingly rapid technological developments.

AVOIDING A BACKLASH

To mitigate potential negative reaction during the development and implementation of the curriculum, policymakers should recognize that the policies they adopt may have unintended negative consequences. It is important to ensure that measures associated with the curriculum do not inadvertently impact citizens' rights and freedoms. Adhering to the principle of "do no harm" is essential to avoid any unintended effects on freedom of expression or the operational space for civil society and media. Transparency should be promoted throughout the curriculum's implementation with an open communication strategy.

CONCLUSION

This report brings attention to some of the challenges identified in the nexus between MIL and P/CVERLT. Information disorder, as discussed in this report, can have a detrimental effect on social cohesion. It divides people and facilitates the spread of a violent extremist mindset. A fragmented information landscape with polarized views fuelled by disinformation, can undermine trust in democratic institutions and processes.

Studies indicate that SEE faces notable risks related to online harms, including violent extremist and terrorist messaging, which can impact communities and individuals. Disinformation campaigns often exploit digital technologies to foster distrust, amplify uncertainties, and spread misleading information, sometimes leveraging real or perceived grievances.

Ensuring freedom of expression while addressing the spread of the information disorder is imperative, as overly broad deplatforming and content removal can have a counterproductive effect. Addressing disinformation requires a comprehensive approach that involves collaboration

between multiple stakeholders working to contextualize solutions to the local area, guided by human rights, gender sensitivity, age, and 'do no harm' principle.

This report has illustrated that, while there is cause for concern, there are also many available resources to address the information disorder, especially disinformation. In the nexus between P/CVERLT and MIL, multiple stakeholders from across sectors need to work together. International organizations, civil society, media representatives and regulatory authorities, along with educational institutions and teachers, have been active in offering responses to violent extremism and information disorder, ranging from P/CVERLT-specific efforts and others that build resilience to disinformation, such as critical thinking, analytical skills and media literacy. By raising awareness of the importance of debunking, fact-checking and analysis as well as addressing the legal challenges around disinformation, experts from across sectors must work together in order to strengthen local responses to information manipulation and the spread of violent extremism online.

Ongoing research is necessary to address emerging threats, such as deepfakes and gender-specific disinformation targeting women and minorities.

As the report has illustrated, existing co-operation initiatives on P/CVERLT and MIL are limited, as different organizations and agencies involved often focus on only one part of the problem. An effective response will require the facilitation of platforms where stakeholders come together to form joint, contextual solutions. The OSCE is well-positioned to facilitate these platforms, building on this report to guide capacity-building and policy dialogue.

The next critical step is to design joint human rights-based and gender-sensitive initiatives, actions, policies and strategies to prevent violent extremism, strengthen critical thinking and build resilience to the information disorder, with the ultimate goal of safeguarding our societies.

ANNEX 1

INITIATIVES PROMOTING MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY IN SEE

The following section provides an overview of initiatives in SEE identified through desk research and a survey conducted with an expert group on MIL, established by the OSCE in mid-2021. While this list is not exhaustive, it highlights a selection of notable initiatives currently underway within the OSCE area.

ALBANIA

- Albania fact-checking portal <https://faktoje.al/>
- Albanian Media Institute: media literacy project www.institutemedia.org/category/media-literacy
- “Manual for Reporting Violent Extremism and Terrorism”, Albanian Media Institute, 2021. <http://www.institutemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2-Terrorism-english.pdf>
- “Hate and disinformation narratives in Albanian online media”, Ida Londo, SEEN PM, <http://www.institutemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Resilience-research-publication-2-Albania-English.pdf>

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

- Sarajevo Canton Strategy for the development of Media and Information Literacy in Education Sector.¹⁵⁴
- The Media Centar, together with six other regional organizations, is implementing the EU-funded programme “Media for Citizens, Citizens for Media”. Its activities focus on strengthening the capacity of NGOs for the development of MIL in Western Balkans.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ See here: <https://mon.ks.gov.ba/sites/mon.ks.gov.ba/files/2022-06/Strategija%20razvoja%20medijske%20i%20informacijske%20pismenosti.pdf>.

¹⁵⁵ See The Media Centar website: <https://www.media.ba/en/project/advancing-media-information-literacy-western-balkans>.

- The Institute for Social Research of the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Sarajevo,¹⁵⁶ together with the Chair for Information Science of the Faculty of Philosophy, has implemented numerous activities to integrate MIL into educational systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina with a pilot in the canton of Sarajevo.
This programme developed the first open online course for university students in Bosnia and Herzegovina on media literacy and has also collected multiple resources for learning more about MIL.¹⁵⁷
- Bosnia and Herzegovina fact-checking portal <https://istinomjer.ba/>
- Bosnia and Herzegovina fact-checking portal <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/>
- Press and Online Council Guidelines for journalists on reporting on terrorism and violent extremism
- Introduction to Media Literacy: YouTube videos
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Afv-UPXv6vc&ab_channel=Krataksadr%C5%BEaj
- Media Literacy Portal <https://medijskapismenost.ba>
- Media literacy training courses for imams
(e.g. see www.islamskazajednica.ba/index.php/vijesti/rijaset/29778-završena-prva-faza-projekta-edukacija-edukatora-u-oblasti-medijske-pismenosti-za-nastavno-osoblje-medresa-u-bosni-i-hercegovini)
- Regulatory Agency for Communication: MIL activities
<https://www.rak.ba/hr/brdcst-media-literacy>
- University of Sarajevo and UNESCO: MIL project
<https://fpn.unsa.ba/b/medijska-i-informacijska-pismenost/>

CROATIA

- Croatia fact-checking portal <https://faktograf.hr/>
- Fake news: reasons and feelings (interactive content for students)
https://edutorij.e-skole.hr/share/proxy/alfresco-noauth/edutorij/api/proxy-guest/388a7ec0-406d-47cf-b978-1e3ebfe10920/html/6303_sints_Lazne_vijesti_razum_i_osjecaji.html
- ‘How to spot fake news’ infographic
https://repository.ifla.org/bitstream/123456789/167/2/how_to_spot_fake_news.pdf

156 Medijska i informacijska pismenost", University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Political Science,
<https://fpn.unsa.ba/b/medijska-i-informacijska-pismenost/>.

157 Ibid. Also see "Disinformation in the online sphere – the case of BiH", Tijana Cvjetičanin, Emir Zulejhić, Darko Brkan, Biljana Livančić-Milić, April 2019,
https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf.

- ‘How to recognize fake news’ infographic [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/599386/EPRS_ATA\(2017\)599386_HR.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/599386/EPRS_ATA(2017)599386_HR.pdf)
- Media literacy initiative in Croatia <https://www.medijiskapismenost.hr/>

KOSOVO¹⁵⁸

- In 2020, the Institute for Development Policy and the Department of Journalism at Pristina University, in a project supported by UNESCO, published *Intro*, an Albanian-language magazine focused on media literacy and aimed at sharing knowledge and information on MIL.¹⁵⁹
- Professors from the Department of Journalism, in co-operation with the Union of Education, Culture and Science, have been organizing training courses for teachers on media literacy since October 2019. By now, more than one thousand teachers from all over Kosovo have been certified after completing a training course called “Media Education and Its Role in Social and Democratic Development.”¹⁶⁰
- In 2022, the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AJK) produced the documentary “Think Like a Fact-Checker”, with the support of the U.S. Embassy in Kosovo, as part of the Media TV Co-op programme. The documentary focuses on media literacy, disinformation, and the importance of regulating reader education. The documentary aims to combat disinformation through media education and stimulate discussion about the spread of false information among Albanian-speaking audiences in Kosovo and Albania. The AJK is monitoring the implementation of the documentary’s recommendations and will follow up on its progress. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQccXULS8Ds>
- Kosovo fact-checking portal <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/>
- Kosovo fact-checking portal <https://hibrid.info/>
- Klan Kosova videos and articles on the topic of media education <https://klankosova.tv/katemisionet/edumedia/>
- OSCE media literacy campaign <https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/489394>

158 All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text should be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

159 Kosovo Gets Its First Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Magazine”, Coalition of Information and Media Users in South East Europe, 17 March 2020, <http://www.cimusee.org/mil-news-see/kosovo-gets-its-first-media-and-information-literacy-mil-magazine/>; ““Revista e Studentëve të Gazetarisë në UP, pjesë e platformës më të madhe të Evropës Juglindore për edukim mbi medien dhe informacionin”,”, University of Hasan Pristina, 21 April 2020, https://uni-pr.edu/page.aspx?id=1%2C4%2C1080&fbclid=IwAR0LI0xn-Zqz3orgUcBnSbOPOsCKCVJfq_BaAM39ZPk3Lw7j0W6a_Jz9nJA.

160 “Global Media and Information Literacy Week: Education Nurtures Informed, Engaged and Empowered Citizens”, Education International, 24 October 2019, <https://www.ei-ie.org/index.php/en/item/23104:global-media-and-information-literacy-week-education-nurtures-informed-engaged-and-empowered-citizens>.

- OSCE Media and Information Literacy Leaflet: This document highlights how creative MIL initiatives contribute to comprehensive security through building a new generation of critical thinkers (available in Albanian, English, and Serbian). <https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/543345>
- OSCE’s “Guide for Reporting on Violent Extremism” (available in English, Albanian and Serbian) www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/375436
- UNICEF’s PONDER media literacy campaign <http://kosovoinnovations.org/youth-empowerment-pillar/>

MONTENEGRO

- The Montenegro Media Institute has developed a policy document on MIL, based on its engagement with civil society, educators and relevant government authorities. The project, supported by UNESCO, aims to enhance advocacy efforts towards the development of a national MIL strategy.¹⁶¹
- Students at the University of Montenegro have prepared a media literacy publication that will form part of the European Wergeland Centre’s ‘Preparing Future Teachers in the Western Balkans’ project. The publication includes lesson preparation, focused on the design and implementation of classes dedicated to media literacy.¹⁶²
- “Čitaj između redova” project <https://citajizmedjuredova.me/>
- “Digitalizuj“ media literacy articles <https://digitalizuj.me/category/medijska-pismenost/>
- Montenegro fact-checking portal <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/>
- Manual on journalism, fake news and disinformation <https://www.mminstitute.org/blog/2021/10/07/prirucnik-novinarstvo-lazne-vijesti-i-dezinformacije/>
- Media literacy platform <https://www.medijskapismenost.me/>
- Regional initiative seeking to oppose media manipulation, improve the quality of media content and media literacy of readers www.raskrinkavanje.me
- The Agency for Electronic Media (<https://aemcg.org/en/>) implements and promotes media literacy initiatives in Montenegro. A booklet on media and digital literacy for parents, educators and students was published with the support of the OSCE Mission to Montenegro. (<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/5/529791.pdf>) Based on this publication, a [video](#) was produced to raise awareness of media literacy and protect children from harmful media content.

161 UNESCO Supports Advocacy Efforts Towards Adoption of a Media and Information Literacy National Strategy in Montenegro, 25 May 2021, UNESCO, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-supports-advocacy-efforts-towards-adoption-media-and-information-literacy-national-strategy>.

162 Medijska Pismenost, “The European Wergeland Centre, 2022, <https://theewc.org/resources/medijska-pismenost/>.

- The Montenegro Media Institute has resources on media literacy, media and human rights, and journalist training (www.mminstitute.org/en/)

NORTH MACEDONIA

- The Media Literacy Network was created in 2017 by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services to facilitate communication among different stakeholders in the country. It now has 70 members (public institutions and ministries, CSOs, educational institutions and broadcasters).¹⁶³
- The Macedonian Institute for Media, in partnership with the Institute for Communication Studies, Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers and Media Diversity Institute in London, is implementing the EU-funded project “News and Digital Literacy – Where Fake News Fails”. The project aims to improve the effectiveness, responsibility and ethics of civil society and journalists, and encourages the use of the right of freedom of opinion and expression through the promotion of news and digital literacy.¹⁶⁴
- USAID’s “YouThink” media literacy project works with youth to help them navigate and shape an information ecosystem that informs and engages rather than divides and polarizes. The project is implemented by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), Macedonian Institute for Media, Institute of Communication Studies and Youth Educational Forum in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Science, and the Bureau for Development of Education.¹⁶⁵
- North Macedonia’s fact-checking portal <https://vistinomer.mk/>
- Metamorphosis (<https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/>) is an NGO countering disinformation and promoting media literacy, including through their Truthmeter fact-checking tool: <https://truthmeter.mk/about-truthmeter/>
- The Macedonia Media Institute (<https://mim.org.mk/en/>) is also active in the field of media education
- The Media Literacy Network (<https://mediumskapismenost.mk/?lang=en>) facilitates consultation between entities working on media literacy.
- YouThink is a five-year program that helps youth in North Macedonia navigate and shape an information ecosystem that informs and engages rather than divides and polarizes. (www.irex.org/project/youthink-media-literacy-north-macedonia)

¹⁶³ For more information, see the website of the Media Literacy Network: <https://mediumskapismenost.mk/?lang=en>.

¹⁶⁴ “News and Digital Literacy Project – Where Fake News Fails”, Media Diversity Institute, 11 May 2018, <https://www.media-diversity.org/projects/news-and-digital-literacy-project-where-fake-news-fails/>.

¹⁶⁵ See “North Macedonia”, IREX, <https://www.irex.org/region/europe-eurasia/north-macedonia>.

SERBIA

- The Government of Serbia, through its Ministry of Culture, Information and Information Society, adopted a Serbian Media Strategy in 2020, which was supported by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM).¹⁶⁶
- The “Support to Media Reforms” project of USAID,¹⁶⁷ in co-operation with the Ministry of Culture and Information, has released a series of handbooks for pre-school to high school levels.¹⁶⁸ It contains a handbook for teachers, sources for every grade level, video content and, most importantly, an Android-based mobile support application called LUEDU.
- Serbia was recently a co-host for UNESCO’s promotion of the launch of its updated MIL curriculum, titled *Think Critically, Click Wisely: Media and Information Literate Citizens*.¹⁶⁹
- In 2018, Serbia introduced a course on information technologies and computing in primary schools, and another course on language and the media in secondary schools. In 2020, a course on the digital world was introduced for primary school pupils. Around 130 study programmes at various universities include courses on media education.¹⁷⁰
- The Serbian Government published a guide on teaching media literacy for educators and provided schools with the required infrastructure and equipment.¹⁷¹
- “Biblioteka Plus” have collated various educational materials on their website (www.bibliotekaplus.rs/obrazovni-materijali/#slider-pro-2/6) and YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/channel/UC4ckoy_A7XREcT4BdDzitGQ).
- Serbia fact-checking portal <https://www.istinomer.rs/>
- Serbia disinformation debunking initiative <https://fakenews.rs/>

166 “OSCE Media Freedom Representative and OSCE Head of Mission to Serbia welcome adoption of Serbian Media Strategy, <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/445246>.”

167 “Support to Media Reforms Project,” USAID web archive, <https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/serbia/news-information/fact-sheets/support-media-reforms-project>.

168 See the Medijska Pismenost website: <https://medijskapismenost.com>. Also see, “Media and Information Literacy in the Western Balkans: Unrealized Emancipatory Potential”, Brankica Petković, Sandra Bašić Hvratin, Ilda Londo, Sanela Hodžić, Vesna Nikodinoska, Slavčo Milenkovski, Bojan Georgievski, Pavle Pavlović, Dubravka Valić Nedeljković and Milica Janjatović Jovanović, 2019, https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/media_and_information_literacy_in_the_western_balkans_unrealized_emancipatory_potential_final.pdf.

169 “UNESCO to Launch Updated MediaLaunch Updated Media and Information Literacy Curriculum with the Support of Republic of Serbia during Online Event Starting 23 April”, UNESCO, 20 April 2021, last modified 21 April 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-launch-updated-media-and-information-literacy-curriculum-support-republic-serbia-during>.

170 Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. 2020. “Report on the Realization of the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy for the Development of Education in Serbia until 2020.” https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Report-on-the-Realization-of-the-Action-Plan-for-the-Implementation-of-the-Strategy-for-the-Development-of-Education-in-Serbia-Until-2020-for-2019_.pdf.

171 “Strategija Razvoja Digitalnih Veština u Republici Srbiji Za Period Od 2020. Do 2024. Godine: 21/2020-72, 8/2023-12.” n.d. <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2020/21/2/reg>.

- Media literacy initiatives <https://medijskapismenost.com/> (including news, multiple manuals and tools on various)
- Media literacy platform <http://www.medijskapismenost.net/>
- Media literacy manual for teachers, published by the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia. (www.medijskapismenost.net/dokument/Osnove-medijske-pismenosti--prirucnik-za-nastavnike)
- Media literacy manual for parents published by the Propulsion Fund in co-operation with the Ministry of Culture and Information (https://medijskapismenost.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Priruc%CC%8Cnik-za-roditelje_260-x-171-mm_web.pdf)
- The New Literacy Program, which gathers news, manuals and toolkits on media literacy education in Serbia: <https://novapismenost.rs/>
- Novi Sad Journalism School’s website includes a range of projects and resources, such as an introduction to media literacy (<https://novinarska-skola.org.rs/en/introduction-to-media-literacy/>)

REGIONAL MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY INITIATIVES IN SEE

- The EU-UNESCO project “Building Trust in Media in South East Europe and Turkey” aims to strengthen MIL, freedom of expression, access to information and free, independent and pluralistic media. It hopes to ensure that journalists and media organizations in the beneficiary countries are key drivers for democratic, sustainable and peaceful development.¹⁷²
- Regional co-operation on fact-checking takes place through the Action SEE network and the global International Fact-Checking Network.¹⁷³
- Local versions of the Very Verified online course, developed by IREX, are being prepared by local experts from Albania, Kosovo¹⁷⁴ and Serbia.¹⁷⁵
- Accountability, Technology and Institutional Openness Network in the South East Europe region (ACTION SEE) <https://actionsee.org/>

172 The project focuses on the five countries of SEE, Kosovo and Turkiye. See “Strong Commitment for Media and Information Literacy Development in Kosovo”, UNESCO, 3 May 2018, last modified 21 April 2022, <https://en.unesco.org/news/strong-commitment-media-and-information-literacy-development-kosovo>.

173 See the Action SEE website: <https://actionsee.org/>.

174 All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text should be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

175 More information about the Very Verified online course is available at <https://verified.ed-era.com/>.

- Center for Media Literacy <https://www.medialit.org/>
- Coalition of Information and Media Users in South East Europe <https://www.facebook.com/CIMUSEE/>
- “Media for Citizens, Citizens for Media” project <https://seenpm.org/about-mccm/>
- Open your eyes: Fake news for dummies <https://www.disinfo.eu/projects/open-your-eyes-fake-news-for-dummies/>
- South East European Network for Professionalization of Media project <https://seenpm.org/>

The initiatives below are characterized by a diversity of approaches and cover multiple geographical areas within the OSCE area, with a special focus on practices that have also been implemented in SEE. They stem primarily from international organizations and NGOs. The list below is not exhaustive.

SELECTED INITIATIVES ACROSS THE GLOBE

PREVENTION OF YOUTH RADICALIZATION THROUGH SELF-AWARENESS ON COGNITIVE BIASES (PRECObIAS)

PRECObIAS seeks to enhance digital resilience and critical thinking, focusing on the mental processes and biases at stake when youth are faced with violent extremist discourse online. The project website,¹⁷⁶ hosts an online course teaching about cognitive biases and radicalization online, a toolkit for teachers, and one for social workers. They teach about content developed by extremists and ways to prevent the radicalization of vulnerable youth.

MIND OVER MEDIA

Mind over Media connects media literacy to education about propaganda. Launched in January 2018, the project aimed to develop a European network of educators and professionals, and create a crowd-sourced online platform where users can upload, share and explore examples of propaganda from their communities. The website, in 11 languages, including in languages spoken in the SEE region, also contains multiple lesson plans and a comprehensive curriculum for educators focused on propaganda, seeking to improve interpretation and critical analysis skills, and creating critically engaged participants in global public discourse.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ PRECObIAS website, <https://www.precobias.eu/>.

Also see, Resources from the annual regional Brave New Media Forum about youth media, <https://bnmf.online/>.

¹⁷⁷ Propaganda Is All around Us”, Mind over Media, <https://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/node/1>.

SAFER INTERNET DAY

Safer Internet Day started as an initiative of the EU Safe Borders project in 2004 and has spread to some 140 countries worldwide, including in SEE.¹⁷⁸ Under the overarching slogan of “Together for a better internet”, each country identifies its own theme and develops related programmes to mark the day. For example, in 2022, Croatia focused on presenting the results of a survey of high school students and their exposure to harmful content and sexual harassment in the online environment.¹⁷⁹

EUROPEAN DIGITAL MEDIA OBSERVATORY

The European Digital Media Observatory is a hub where fact-checkers, academics and other stakeholders can collaborate.¹⁸⁰ It encourages them to actively link with media organizations and media literacy experts, and to provide support to policymakers, improving co-ordination in the fight against disinformation.

COLLABORATION WITH JOURNALISTS

In another approach, multiple educational programmes across Europe involve professional and well-trained journalists, often supported by ministries of education and/or professional journalist associations. These journalists become educators who help young people understand the difference between professional journalism and the information provided by, for instance, bloggers. Such initiatives often focus on the strengthening of critical thinking skills among youth. Some examples are listed below:

ENTRE LES LIGNES

“Entre Les Lignes” organizes workshops throughout France, mainly in schools but also with migrant youth being integrated into society, those who have dropped out of school, and also with adult audiences in media libraries. Since 2018, Entre Les Lignes has also offered training courses for all professionals in the field of education, conducted by a network of more than 200 volunteer journalists from the editorial staff of a range of French newspapers and magazines.¹⁸¹

178 “Together for a Better Internet”, Safer Internet Day, <https://www.saferinternetday.org/>.

179 “Safer Internet Day 2022: Public report on campaign activities and successes”, Safer Internet Day, <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/documents/167024/6918750/Safer+Internet+Day+2022+-+campaign+report+-+FINAL+-+public+version.pdf/dbe2fbd-2027-34b4-b86d-c4fd3d3c1992?t=1650360076726>.

180 “European Digital Media Observatory”, European Commission, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-digital-media-observatory>.

181 “Apprendre à lire entre les lignes : Éducation aux médias et à l’information”, Entre les Lignes, <https://entreleslignes.media/>.

FAKTANA, KIITOS (FACTS PLEASE)

The Finnish project “Faktana, kiitos!” was launched in 2017 by Finnish journalists concerned about media disinformation and growing sentiment against journalists in society. In this programme, journalists discuss with school students how news reporting takes place, why certain stories are produced, what deceptive information looks like, and how to critically look at information and professional ethics.¹⁸²

LIE DETECTORS

“Lie Detectors is an independent, journalist-led media literacy organization that seeks to empower schoolchildren and their teachers in Europe to act as lie detectors and critical thinkers.”¹⁸³ The organization helps prepare school communities to fact-check online content, understand news media, make informed choices and resist peer pressure as young people develop their worldview.

BAD NEWS GAME

Bad News is a game that aims to build psychological resistance against online misinformation. Developed in collaboration with the Dutch media collective DROG and the graphic design agency Gusmanson, the theory-driven, social impact game intends to build understanding of the techniques involved in the dissemination of disinformation. Players are a ‘news baron’ for fake news and win by publishing headlines that attract the most followers. The game is available in multiple languages (including Bosnian and Serbian).¹⁸⁴

EXTREMELY EUNITED

Extremely EUnited is a European Commission-funded project that “aims to prevent the spread of radicalization among youth in Europe.”¹⁸⁵ The project, which is mirrored across Europe (including Kosovo), uses videos, podcasts, drawings and other tools, empowering young people to play an active role in promoting peace and tolerance.

PEER EDUCATION AND GAMIFICATION AGAINST POLARISATION (PEGAP)

Consisting of organizations from four countries, the PEGAP consortium has developed and tested the Under Pressure methodology, which seeks to increase young people’s resilience to disinformation. The methodology combines DROG’s Bad News game (see above) with Diversion’s peer

182 Henri Mikael Koponen, “New Finnish Project Brings Journalists to Schools to Teach Media Literacy”, International Press Institute, 24 January 2018, <https://ipi.media/new-finnish-project-brings-journalists-to-schools-to-teach-media-literacy/>.

183 Lie Detectors website, <https://lie-detectors.org/>; see also “Building Resilience to Disinformation in a Digital Media Age”, Lie Detectors, 8 July 2021, <https://lie-detectors.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/LD-Building-Resilience-presentation-public.pdf>.

184 Bad News website, <https://www.getbadnews.com/#intro><https://www.getbadnews.com/#intro>.

185 Extremely EUnited website, <https://www.extremelyeunited.eu/>.

education methodology, using young role models to talk to young people about their media usage, values and role in the media landscape.¹⁸⁶

DIGITOL

DIGITOL is a European project funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission which seeks to promote values such as solidarity and diversity. DIGITOL aims to combat hate speech and misinformation through digital literacy and intergenerational contacts between younger, more proficient users and less digitally literate older users. So-called DIGITOL festivals combine traditional activities (art/museum exhibitions, workshops in schools) with innovative actions (street performances, viral communication campaigns on social media, crowdfunding campaigns).¹⁸⁷

HIVE MIND

Hive Mind is a group of organizations and activists from across Europe working towards helping civil society adapt to new challenges in the digital world. Hive Mind offers a safe and secure environment for training, sharing and learning that focuses on building media literacy and countering disinformation throughout communities. Hive Mind's website, available in nine languages (including some of those used in SEE), includes examples of cheap fakes.¹⁸⁸

COUNTERING ONLINE MISINFORMATION RESOURCE PACK, UNICEF REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

This 2020 resource pack aims to collate resources that can help develop tactics and plans to counter misinformation. It includes a list of evidence-based recommendations based on an extensive literature review, and resources on addressing misinformation, disinformation and infodemics.¹⁸⁹

REUTERS COURSE "IDENTIFYING AND TACKLING MANIPULATED MEDIA"

This course was produced by the Reuters news agency. Featuring both real examples and hypothetical cases, it includes insights into how new technology (including deepfakes) can be used to create and detect manipulations. The course covers (1) how can media be manipulated? (2) the new threat of deepfake/synthetic media and (3) what newsrooms can do to tackle manipulated media.¹⁹⁰

186 "Peer Education and Gamification against Polarisation (PEGAP)", Diversion website, <https://www.diversion.nl/cases/pegap/>.

187 DIGITOL website, <https://digitol.eu/>.

188 Hive Mind website, <https://en.hive-mind.community/>. See also Dren Gerguri, "Cheapfakes as a Form of Video Manipulation: How They Can Be Made in a Few Minutes", Hive Mind, 6 September 2021, <https://en.hive-mind.community/blog/98.cheapfakes-as-a-form-of-video-manipulation-how-they-can-be-made-in-a-few-minutes>.

189 UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, *Countering Online Misinformation Resource Pack* (UNICEF, 2020), <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/13636/file>.

190 "Identifying and Tackling Manipulated Media", a course by Reuters News Agency, <https://www.reuters.com/manipulatedmedia/en/>.

NEWSEUMED

Originally a physical museum based in Washington, D.C., Newseum has lived on as a website offering free resources to cultivate the media literacy skills essential to civic life. This includes insights into authenticating, analyzing and evaluating information from a variety of sources, and putting current events in historical context through lesson plans, videos, primary sources, virtual classes and programmes. Aimed primarily at schools, a noteworthy feature is that people can interact with experts online in live events. The expert videos focus on themes such as confirmation bias and religious freedom issues.¹⁹¹

POYNTER INTERNATIONAL FACT-CHECKING NETWORK

Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) was launched in 2015 to bring together the growing community of factual information advocates and fact-checkers around the world (though most of the focus is on the United States). The IFCN promotes fact-checking among more than 100 organizations worldwide through advocacy, training and global events, and encourages networking, capacity-building and collaboration. Poynter's MediaWise project empowers people of all ages to become more critical consumers of content online by teaching digital media literacy and fact-checking skills. The IFCN also provides grants to fact-checkers around the world.¹⁹²

Directory of additional organizations and initiatives on MIL:

<https://thetrustedweb.org/organizations-leading-the-fight-against-fake-news/>

191 "Media Literacy Resources", NewseumED, <https://newseumed.org/medialiteracy>.

192 International Fact-Checking Network website, <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>.

ANNEX 2

RELEVANT EU AND INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTS

In March 2015, following terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen, the Paris Declaration¹⁹³ called for action to “[strengthen] children’s and young people’s ability to think critically and exercise judgement so that, particularly in the context of the internet and social media, they are able to grasp realities, to distinguish fact from opinion, to recognise propaganda and to resist all forms of indoctrination and hate speech.”

The EU Council Recommendation of May 2018 on Common Values, Inclusive Education, and the European Dimension of Teaching called on Member States to strengthen social cohesion in order to fight the rise of populism, xenophobia, radicalization, divisive nationalism and the spread of fake news, notably by continuing to implement the commitments of the Paris Declaration as regards the enhancement of critical thinking and media literacy.¹⁹⁴

In December 2018, an Action Plan against Disinformation was published in the form of a Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Economic Council, the Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.¹⁹⁵ The document notes that “continuous and sustained efforts to support education and media literacy, journalism, fact-checkers, researchers and the civil society as a whole” are required for the European Union and its neighbourhood to become more resilient against disinformation.¹⁹⁶

Council Conclusions from November 2019 recognized that “digital literacy and other 21st-century skills play a crucial role in young people’s independence, social inclusion, employability and daily lives.”¹⁹⁷ The Conclusions further highlight youth work as a solution, as it “empowers

193 Informal Meeting of European Union Education Ministers, “Declaration on Promoting Citizenship and the Common Values of Freedom, Tolerance, and Non-discrimination through Education” Paris, 17 March 2015, https://eu.daad.de/medien/eu.daad.de/2016/dokumente/service/auswertung-und-statistik/paris_declaration_2015_en.pdf.

194 “Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Promoting Common Values, Inclusive Education, and the European Dimension of Teaching”, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32018H0607%2801%29>

195 “Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan against Disinformation”, European Commission, Brussels, 5 December 2018, JOIN(2018) 36 final, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/action-plan-against-disinformation>.

196 Ibid, 12.

197 Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Digital Youth Work”, Council of the European Union, Brussels, 27 November 2019, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13935-2019-INIT/en/pdf>, 2.

young people to be active and creative in digital society,”¹⁹⁸ and helps them to face online risks, “including hate speech, cyberbullying, disinformation and propaganda.”¹⁹⁹

More recently, the Commission’s updated Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) emphasizes how digital literacy is essential for life in a digitalized world. The Plan also states that “it is important to educate people at all ages about the impact of digital technology on well-being and the way that technology systems work.”²⁰⁰ Regarding disinformation, the updated Plan further notes how learners need to develop the ability to “critically approach, filter and assess information, notably to identify disinformation and to manage an overload of information.”²⁰¹

In August 2022, the UN Secretary-General published a report on ‘Terrorist attacks on the basis of xenophobia, racism, and other forms of intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief.’²⁰² The report emphasized that the activities of terrorist or violent extremist groups increasingly operate online, using social media and online gaming platforms to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, and for recruitment. A range of techniques have been used to target young audiences, including gamification, modified video game content, and the use of memes. However, their use of ambivalent or coded language and conscious efforts to circumvent online terms of services, means that they continue to evade detection. Additionally, lone actors conducting successful attacks have also shared online manifestoes and live-streamed their actions online.²⁰³

198 Ibid, 3.

199 Ibid.

200 “Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)”, European Commission, 30 September 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0624&from=EN>, 9.

201 Ibid, 13.

202 “United Nations General Assembly: Report of the Secretary General on Terrorist attacks on the basis of xenophobia, racism and other forms of Intolerance or in the Name of Religion or Belief,” A/77/266 3 August 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/450/52/PDF/N2245052.pdf?OpenElement>.

203 Ibid

