

MEDIA LITERACY CHALLENGES TO DEBATES ON CIVIC RIGHTS

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Abstract The concept of media literacy addresses the potential of contemporary societies to resist the negative effects of such phenomena as diminishing public trust and severely polarized politics. Traditional and modern internet-based media affect citizens' daily lives, politics and society. Although social media encourage individuals to express their opinions, share content and communicate in a personalized way, these are often open to manipulation and hamper the public debates on substantial civic issues. Using PEST analysis that examines political (P), economic (E), social (S), and technological (T), practices, the text investigates these areas in the Bulgarian media ecosystem. Based on the indicators for media freedom, education and peoples' trust, the Media Literacy Index assesses the abilities of prosumers (i.e. individuals who both produce and consume content) in 35 European countries to resist fake news. Levels of integrity, as well as distrust in scientists and journalists are related to media literacy about connecting practices with concepts and arguments in media debates on civic rights and democracy in three interrelated case studies in Bulgaria: the social protests (2013-2020), the COVID-19 epidemic and the April 2021 Parliamentary pre-election campaign.

Keywords: media literacy, politics, civic rights, debates, audiences, PEST analysis

Резюме Концепцията за медийна грамотност разглежда потенциала на съвременните общества да се противопоставят на негативните ефекти от такива явления като намаляване на

общественото доверие и въздействието на силно поляризирани политики. Традиционните и съвременните интернет-базирани медии влияят на ежедневието на гражданите. Въпреки че социалните медии насърчават хората да изразяват мнението си, да споделят съдържание и да общуват по персонализиран начин, те често са отворени за манипулация и възпрепятстват обществените дебати по съществени граждански въпроси. Използвайки PEST анализ, текстът разглежда политически, икономически, социални и технологични практики в българската медийна екосистема. Въз основа на показателите за медийна свобода, образование и доверие в медиите, Индексът на медийна грамотност оценява способността на потребителите в 35 европейски държави да се противопоставят на фалшивите новини. Нивата на почтеност, както и недоверието към учени и журналисти са свързани с медийната грамотност относно свързването на практики с концепции и аргументи в медийните дебати за граждански права и демокрация в три взаимосвързани казуса в България: социалните протести (2013-2020 г.), епидемията от COVID-19 и предизборната кампания за парламент през април 2021 г.

Ключови думи: медийна грамотност, политика, граждански права, дебати, публика, PEST анализ

Introduction

Understanding media literacy in contemporary communication processes calls for a many-sided approach. Within a mere five decades the concept of the transition from an economy based on material goods to one based on knowledge (Drucker, 1969) intensified the knowledge divide (i.e. the gap between those who can find, create, manage, process and disseminate information and those who are disadvantaged in this process) (Rheingold, 2012). While in post modernity (Lyotard, 1984) diffusion between information and technology has been a prerequisite for blurring the lines between the physical, digital and

biological spheres, some 30 years later transmedia storytelling and participatory culture already represent a process where integral elements of a narrative are dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels to create a unified and coordinated entertainment experience (Jenkins, 2006). In today's flat globalized world "Never before in the history of the planet have so many people – on their own – had the ability to find so much information about so many things and about so many other people" (Friedman, 2007, p 177).

Thus, today's knowledge-based society upgrades the achievements of disseminating raw data by the information society to transforming this data into integrated resources allowing people to take effective action (UNESCO, 2005). Yet nowadays surveillance capitalism claims unilaterally human experience as free raw material to be translated into behavioural data, in order to be processed in 'machine intelligence'. The majority of this data is translated into advertising, i.e. into "prediction products" (Zuboff, 2019).

Information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning, enabling individuals of different educational backgrounds to find, critically and competently evaluate, accurately and creatively use, and responsibly communicate information in all its various formats efficiently and effectively, in regard to the acquisition of knowledge, as well as in situations requiring decision-making or problem-solving.

While information literacy lies closer to library science, media literacy lies closer to the social effects of content created by the media industry. In spite of much scholarly debate about whether information literacy and media literacy are subsets of each other or separate entities, the two fields have certain similarities. Both refer to the ability of people to make informed judgments as users of information and media, as well as to become

skillful creators and producers of information products and media messages (Livingstone, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005).

Unifying information literacy and media literacy as a composite concept considering the right to freedom of expression and access to information through ICTs has been tackled by UNESCO in an unprecedented and significant publication. *Media and Information Literacy. Policy & Strategy Guidelines* offers a multifaceted approach to developing national policies, legal frameworks and regulatory mechanisms for a better media and information environment. These guidelines are a part of a comprehensive media and information educational toolkit, including: Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Curriculum for Teachers; Global MIL Assessment Framework; Guidelines for Broadcasters to Promote MIL; online multimedia MIL teaching resources tool; and a model for online MIL and intercultural dialogue courses (UNESCO, 2013). A UNESCO handbook *Journalism, “Fake News” & Disinformation* provides an internationally relevant open model curriculum, responding to the emerging global problem of disinformation that confronts societies in general, and journalism in particular (Ireton & Posetti, 2020).

Digitalization has led to significant proliferation of information spread by the Internet. Nowadays people all over the world can connect via mobile devices with unprecedented speed, scope, processing power, storage capacity and access to knowledge virtually without limitation. In 1997 the citizens of the Net representing the new globalized way of communication were named netizens. (Hauben, 1997). Later, other terms were introduced for internet users, such as digital natives, digital immigrants, smart mobs (Prensky, 2001; Rheingold, 2002). However, many users lack awareness of the mechanisms that frame their digital engagement with information online and offline. Moreover, content personalization and private moderation may have various

positive or negative effects and also pose serious threats to access to information and freedom of expression (Spitzer, 2012). Age-based inequalities and socio-economic disparities may deepen the digital divide, thus inhibiting citizens' informed participation in democratic processes. Hence the ability of digital literacy to find, organize, evaluate, create, and disseminate information in various platforms using digital technology supplements the managerial particularities of information literacy and the communication specifics of media literacy, thereby contributing to knowledge development.

Given the radically transforming media economy due to mobility, user-generated communication, Internet and the burgeoning availability of digital products, in 2007 the Commission launched the Communication *A European Approach to Media Literacy in the Digital Environment*. This defines media literacy as “the ability to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contents and to create communications in a variety of contexts” (European Commission, 2007, p 3). Recital 59 of the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive states that:

[I]n order to enable citizens to access information and to use, critically assess and create media content responsibly and safely, citizens need to possess advanced media literacy skills. Media literacy should not be limited to learning about tools and technologies, but should aim to equip citizens with the critical thinking skills required to exercise judgment, analyse complex realities and recognise the difference between opinion and fact. It is therefore necessary that both media service providers and video-sharing platforms providers, in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, promote the development of media literacy in all

sections of society, for citizens of all ages.
(European Parliament, 2018, pp 77-78)

Media literacy has for more than two decades been a focus of research and discussion by the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities (EPRA). Recommendations for the improvement of the campaigns on disinformation carried out in compliance with the provisions of the Code of Practice have been issued in the *Improving Media Literacy Campaigns on Disinformation* Report, published by the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA, 2020).

Media literacy is a complex issue. Nowadays it comprises the functioning of all factors shaping the media ecosystem – political, economic, social and technological. It is therefore important to study the extent of the audience's awareness regarding distributed media content in order to support meaningful deliberative debates on civic rights.

Methods

This study aims to provide an overview of research on media literacy in Bulgaria. Using PEST analysis, focusing on the macro-environmental factors of the political (P), economic (E), social (S) and technological (T), practices in the Bulgarian media ecosystem are analysed. The research presents three interrelated case studies on the potential to withstand the negative impact of fake news and misinformation due to the quality of education, free media and high level of trust among people based on the European media literacy index, notable for the sustaining of democracy: the social protests, the COVID-19 epidemic and the parliamentary pre-election campaign of April 2021.

The PEST Approach to Media Literacy Concept Developments

Usually PEST analysis concentrates on the political and regulatory commitment to the fundamental values when developing new trajectories in the domains of technology, business and governance; the transformation of business models for meeting customers' expectations for personalized interaction at all points of their consumer experience; the scaling up of citizen-centred technologies as phenomenal opportunities for human progress that also pose serious societal challenges (Aguilar, 1967).

Rapid progress in ICTs stimulates the diversity of platforms through which audio-visual content is disseminated. Of particular importance is the consideration whether the European democratic model will retain its resilience in the highly competitive communication markets. No matter how positive the impact of ICT applications and media developments on progress in all areas of life may be, it is nevertheless true that they pose challenges concerning the social stratification of society (Castells, 2004).

Political Aspects

For the contemporary media ecosystem to function properly, several political issues are important, among them freedom of expression and access to information; plurality of opinion and variety of content; professional standards and journalistic ethics; transparency of ownership and accountability to the audience; protection of underaged and vulnerable social groups; cooperation between regulation, self-regulation and co-regulation; and the expansion of social media. The sustainability of these principles is decisive for the democratic functioning of these human-centred societal developments.

Based on assessing the above principles, the political aspect of the PEST analysis focuses on the effects of legislation and regulation in which government policies affect the media environment. Despite the rapid development of ICT and online services, television continues to be the most preferred source of information and entertainment for most European households (European Commission, 2021). The current media legislation in Bulgaria has been closely aligned with the EU regulations. The two national institutions that regulate the electronic media are the Council for Electronic Media (CEM) and the Communications Regulation Commission (CRC). CEM is the regulatory body that monitors compliance with the Radio and Television Act (CEM, 1998). The CRC enforces the Electronic Communications Act and manages the radio frequency spectrum (MTITC, 2007). Self-regulation is managed by the Ethical Code of the Bulgarian Media (UBJ, 2007).

Nowadays, according to data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI), 209 newspapers (33 dailies) with annual circulation of 123,287,000 and 519 magazines and bulletins with annual circulation of 8,416,000 are available. In 2020, 77 radio stations and 120 television stations were listed, operating on national, regional and local level terrestrially, via cable or via satellite (NSI, 2021).

In addition to traditional media and online-only news sites, the use of other social media platforms and of networking and microblogging services such as Facebook, Google Plus, Instagram, Twitter and hashtags is becoming increasingly popular. Use of online social networks every day or almost every day is 56% (in the EU it ranges from 46% in Germany and France, to 77% in Lithuania) (European Commission, 2021). The dynamics of the developments in communication is so intense that it is difficult to determine whether due to technological and economic convergence it will evolve in the context of ever-increasing deregulation in favour of the market or in the

process of co-regulation serving the public interest.

Economic Aspects

The economic approach of the PEST analysis targets the key factors of the media industry developments. The internationalization of the economy and convergence of modern communications currently favour the prevalence of multi-sector and multinational corporations. At the same time, the globality and uniformity of the Information Society are merging into the separatism of glocality (Blatter, 2013). The media and telecommunications sectors remain among the industries that have felt the strongest impact due to digital transformation (Raycheva, 2018).

Media pluralism in the contemporary e-communication environment can be assessed through the number and type of media outlets, the number and structure of their owners, the editorial content and the access in different societal groups to media channels. The World Economic Forum (WEF), in its White Paper on *Digital Transformation of Industries: Media, Entertainment and Information* (MEI), points out the widespread recognition among different stakeholders that the role of digital technology is rapidly shifting from being a driver of marginal efficiency to an enabler of fundamental innovation and disruption. Thus, some basic challenges occur, among them customer expectations; demographic and cultural attitudes; and media and communication literacy skills (WEF, 2016).

The trend towards media concentration in Bulgaria resulted from the process of media market build-up and structuring after the political and economic changes of 1989. It was characterized by an inflow of foreign capital and players, especially after the country's accession to the European Union in 2007. This facilitated the establishment of some successful business models across

the entire range of media production, but it depersonalized media diversity in the more sparsely populated places.

In an open and liberalized market, consumers are among the factors ultimately determining the speed of penetration and dissemination of digital services. Hence pan-European and national measures stimulating the further efficient use of the radio frequency spectrum are of great economic, social and cultural importance (Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008).

Social Aspects

The social factors in the PEST analysis include demographics and trends in media consumption. In the information age (Castells, 2004) telecommunications networks are defined as the digital nervous system of modern economic and social life (Gates, 1999). Since the beginning of the 21st century, alongside the intensive social, economic and technological developments, the very paradigm of the media has also been changing. Situated in the context of globalization processes, they are undergoing multi-layered transformations with the dynamic advances of technologies, business models, regulatory policies, professional practices and the behaviour of the audiences. Media are becoming convergent phenomena with respect to content production and the dissemination of audiovisual products. The rapid development of ICTs has transformed the media communication process – from linear to non-linear services – and the public – from passive consumers to active prosumers, individuals who both produce and consume content. (Toffler, 1980). The inclusion of audiences in the process of content creation, regulation, distribution and perception conditions the remodeling of the media ecosystem (Council of Europe, 2011).

Converged communication reality and the use of hybrid products prompt energetic moves towards the

personalization, contextualization and fragmentation of content. These moves are pivotal to understanding such phenomena as the information overload and digital fatigue that consumers are facing. In addition, the artificial intelligence of the future will significantly affect the creative process among the media and challenge its human-centred design of communication.

The creative potentials of the new information and communication environment appear to be a key factor in the development of the media reality in the country. More than 76% of the Bulgarians use Facebook for any purpose and 64% for news; 70% use YouTube for any purpose and 64% for news; 54% use Facebook Messenger for any purpose and 17% for news; 61% use Viber for any purpose and 16% for news; 36% use Instagram for any purpose and 12% for news; and 13% use Twitter for any purpose and only 8% for news. Thirty-eight per cent share news via social media, messaging or e-mail (Reuters, 2021). After the massive civil protests of 2013 fomented by the widespread involvement of social networks, the influence of various communication channels was acknowledged by the Bulgarian citizens.

Technological Aspects

The technological part of the PEST analysis considers the specific role and development of technologies within the media and communication sector. Of all the factors affecting the construction rate of the new global information society, technology is undoubtedly the most dynamic. Santiago Lorente identified two stages in technological development: convergence between telecommunications and informatics (telematics) and convergence between telematics and audio-vision (mediamatics) (Lorente, 1996). The notions of 'total technocracy' (Postman, 1992) and the 'technetronic' (Brzezinski, 1982) internationalization of communication

processes imply the maximum involvement of the whole of humanity in the construction of the Global Information Society. Thus the 'network of networks' forms the 'networked society' (Wellman, 2001). In order to measure the impact of the internet on the traditional media one should seek interlinked processes between them: in the mediatization of the net, both fixed (computer/internet) and mobile (internet/mobile phone) and in the 'internetization' of the classic mass media (Fortunati, 2005). Therefore, media and information literacy skills acquire additional importance in today's intercultural dialogue in the communication environment.

Bulgaria is a country with some of the fastest Internet connections in the world (Akamai, 2017). According to the 2021 ranking among 91 countries worldwide, Bulgaria ranks sixth (after South Korea, Lithuania, Norway, Austria and the Netherlands) with a median mobile (cellular only) download internet connection speed of 27.985Mbit/s. Regarding open data access, Bulgaria ranks among the ten countries setting the new trends in the EU (Internet Speed Check, 2021). Today, transformations in the communication environment are catalysed by the capacity of the blogosphere and social networks, and of mobile communications, which have also led to a paradigm shift in the media – from mass media means to individual media services (Council of Europe, 2011).

Bulgaria: Three Case Studies on Media Literacy

Valuable contributions to the topic of media literacy have been made by the European Media Literacy Expert Group (set up in 2011 and composed of members from academia, consumer and business associations, government ministries and public authorities); the European Media Literacy Education Study (EMEDUS), which initiated the proposal for the creation in 2014 of a *European Media Literacy Observatory*; the Media Literacy Task Force,

established in 2011 in the COST Action IS0906 *Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies*, etc.

A noteworthy report entitled *Mapping of Media Literacy Practices and Actions in EU-28* by the European Audiovisual Observatory was published in 2017. Over two thirds of the 939 main media literacy stakeholders identified (categorized as 305 in “civil society”, 175 among “public authorities”, and 161 in “academia”) had no statutory responsibilities in this area. Out of the 547 projects identified, the most common project type was “resources” (173), followed by “end-user engagement” (107). Regarding media literacy skills, the majority of the respondents linked them to the topic “critical thinking” (403), followed by “media use” (385). For the top 145 projects the most common audience group consisted of “teens and older students”, and only seven projects had as their target group “older people” (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2017).

Created in 2017, the Media Literacy Index aims to measure the potential for resilience to ‘post-truth’, ‘fake news’ and their consequences and to contribute to finding solutions. Its most recent report of 2021 scores and ranks 35 European countries, using indicators for media freedom, quality of education, interpersonal trust and e-participation that can serve as predictors of the level of resilience of a society to misinformation. The media freedom indicators carry the most weight (Freedom House and Reporters without Borders) along with the education indicators (PISA). The e-participation indicator (UN) and trust in people (Eurostat) carry less weight relative to the other indicators. The main aim is to measure the potential for resilience to the negative effects of diminishing public trust, severely polarized politics and fragmented media. Only Turkey, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Macedonia are behind Bulgaria (30), which ranks last in the European Union in terms of imperviousness to the spread of fake news (OSIS, 2021).

Thus, according to the *World Press Freedom Index 2021*, Bulgaria is ranked 112th (out of 180 countries), which shows that there is considerable room for improvement in freedom of speech and independent journalism for most of the media outlets and for many non-government organizations disbursing the funds of European and Transatlantic institutions (Reporters without Borders, 2021). The 2021 annual *Nations in Transit Report of Freedom House* ranks Bulgaria ninth out of 29 countries from Central Europe to Central Asia in terms of the level of democratic governance, measuring the national and local governance, the electoral process, independent media, civil society, corruption, judicial framework and independence (Freedom House, 2021). In the OECD, the PISA 2018 Report *21st Century Readers. Developing Literacy Status in a Digital World*, exploring how 15-year-old students in 69 countries are developing reading skills to navigate the technology-rich world of information, Bulgaria scores below the OECD average of 47% with regard to ability to distinguish between fact and opinion and access to training in detecting biased information (OECD, 2021). According to open data on trade and competitiveness *TCdata 360* of the World Bank for 2020, Bulgaria ranks 35th among 130 countries in online e-participation (The World Bank, 2020). With regard to these disturbing rankings, media debates on civic rights and democracy were examined in three interrelated case studies in Bulgaria: the social protests (2013-2020), the COVID-19 epidemic and the April 2021 parliamentary pre-election campaign.

Social Protests: Faking the Debates over Civil Rights

The social protests in Bulgaria are a telling sign of the activities of civil society mainly against the monopoly of the oligarchic corporate structures and for the integrity of the political parties and the state institutions. Usually,

frustrated people, who have been forced into living conditions without security or predictability, thus gaining the identity of 'precariat', go out into the streets to defend the limitations on their social existence. The main grievances and causes of outrage are connected to the deficiency of real democracy in the political system, including economic injustice; corporate influence; corruption; lack of transparency and accountability of the government; insufficient surveillance of citizens, etc.

All the protests were extensively covered and commented by the mainstream media, and also via social networks. In most cases the social discontent in Bulgaria was leaderless. People gathered horizontally through decentralized social networks and acted in a direct, participatory democracy of equals, which managed to simultaneously mobilise citizens from different age groups, educational backgrounds and social status. They were united by the desire to freely express their previously unrecognized and neglected identities.

Over the last decade there have been significant changes in the dynamics of the protest culture in Bulgaria and in the communication between protesters and rulers. Noticeable maturation of civil society and its struggle for better functioning of democracy has been observed. Thus the social protests at the beginning of 2013 were more violent (self-immolations, bloody clashes, street blockades with trashcans, park benches, paving stones, etc.) than those in the middle of 2013 and in 2018 (theatrical performances, children present at the protest marches, music concerts, etc.). In the long-term these large-scale protests resulted in public awareness, which had to be prioritized by the ruling powers, which in some cases even led to the resignation of the government or dismissal of high-ranking officials). In recent years, however, this democratic tool of the social networks to fuel protests as a corrective to socially unacceptable problems and government actions has been distorted by the increasing

use of fake news and hate speech in the interests of certain business and political circles paying protesters to take to the streets.

The mass protests spontaneously organized via the social networks have managed to redefine the communication discourse. In the new media ecosystem, combining traditional offline and new online media, people could join in an unmediated, direct dialogue. However, while the traditional media could rely on codes of ethics, self-regulation and co-regulation in compliance with professional standards, the content in the online environment could hardly be regulated and it is difficult to organize public rectification of the messages delivered. Hence such phenomena as dissemination of alternative facts and fake news disrupt professional journalism and can have long-term negative impacts on society causing audiences to mistrust media content.

The public concern that the digital interface of information and communication technologies could threaten the professional standards of journalism stresses the need to strengthen regulatory actions and self-regulatory awareness. The globalisation processes continuously erode the professional norms of the traditional media, thus putting journalism practitioners at greater risk. The awareness of the new vulnerabilities of the media ecology is of major importance to the whole array of stakeholders: media institutions, content producers and providers, advertisers, regulators, academia, civil society, prosumers, etc. (European Commission, 2007).

The Council of Europe therefore adopted a special recommendation, CM/Rec (2011)7, which explains not only the concept of the media ecosystem, but also emphasizes the trends in its development. The Member States are encouraged to adopt a new, broad notion of media, encompassing all actors involved in the production and dissemination – to potentially large numbers of people

– of content and applications (Council of Europe, 2013). The main purpose of social media literacy is to assist the general public to become more proficient at reading and understanding the nature and function of social movements by developing such skills as reading the conditions, communication, frames, tactics, perspectives and debates necessary to understand social movement activity (Del Gandio, 2017). The civil society structures and the non-governmental organizations in the country have not so far succeeded in raising public media literacy awareness about the social movements, thus mocking up the meaningful debates about the protection of civil rights for sustaining the fundamentals of democracy.

The COVID-19 Epidemic: the “Infodemia” Challenge

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused drastic changes in people’s lifestyles worldwide. It has exposed people to psychological distress, fatigue, occupational burnout, fear, economic insecurity and forced social isolation. The purpose of the public debate in the media about the corona virus was not so much to challenge the constitutional right of governments to impose vital measures during a pandemic, nor to instruct people on how and whether to comply with the measures taken. The main purpose was to protect people against "infodemia", i.e., from the curtailment of their access to other important information, and also from the risk to fall prey to unreliable messages and rumors on the adequacy of these measures and the accompanying sanctions spread mostly through social networks.

Thus, the programme broadcasting regulator, the Council for Electronic Media (CEM), issued a *Position* with a call for media service providers to inform citizens responsibly, timely and accurately, avoiding sensationalism in presenting information, not disseminating unverified facts, and to adhere to high

professional standards and ethical standards. In line with ERGA's initiative that the role of the media in critical and complex situations is to contribute to citizens' awareness of public health, the CEM prepared a report on the behaviour of national radio and TV broadcasters during the pandemic (CEM, 2020).

The Association of European Journalists in Bulgaria (AEJ) was particularly active in defending professional standards. It published *COVID-19: Guidelines for Responsible Reporting*, addressing various aspects of the pandemic coverage - from ethics and journalistic responsibility to countering misinformation and protecting personal safety - physical and mental, with an emphasis on expertise and compliance with professional standards. The AEJ also supported the *Appeal to the Presidents of the EC, the Council of the EU and the EP for Europe to preserve journalism and the free flow of information in dealing with COVID-19*. In order to assist journalists in covering COVID-19, AEJ organized various training initiatives for journalists and media professionals (Cheresheva, 2020). The Union of Bulgarian Journalists (UBJ), an organization taking a firm position against fake news, has joined the expert proposal for the development of a special European programme for the support and protection, including financial protection, of media independence and the social and professional rights of journalists (UBJ, 2020).

Despite these efforts, however, the media in the country and society have not succeeded in responding effectively to the initiatives of renowned international organizations on media and social media platforms. They have scarcely publicized researchers, technologists, civil society leaders, and influencers to further strengthen their actions to disseminate accurate information and prevent the spread of mis- and disinformation (WHO, 2020). Thus, at the end of 2021, the level of vaccination in the country was low, and among the reasons for this are the

mixed messages in the media about its effectiveness and the inadequate professional media competencies and public media literacy.

The April 2021 Parliamentary Pre-election Campaign: Mediatization of Politics and Politicization of Media

The pre-election campaigns in Bulgaria during the period of democratization since 1989 have developed alongside two interrelated processes – politicization of media and mediatization of politics (Raycheva et al., 2021). Nowadays the political environment is characterized by a permanent merging of political entities, which gradually escalates the usage of populist approaches, styles and rhetoric by all political parties. Traditional mainstream media, especially radio and press, are lagging dramatically behind the high-speed spread of the social networks for prosumers' attention.

The parliamentary elections in April 2021 were conducted in the anti-epidemic restrictions of COVID-19. In the summer of 2020, street protests broke out mainly against corruption and in favour of judicial reform, calling for the immediate resignation of the government in office and the Prosecutor General. Although the protests were mostly rhisomatic, at a certain point they were backed by an oligarch facing a number of legal allegations, who has fled from the country. The tense relationship between the Prime Minister and the President further polarized the political environment.

Candidates from 67 political parties stood for election to 240 seats in the national parliament. Voter turnout was 50.61%. Two political parties and four coalitions, representing 20 political entities were elected. However, they could not form a government. A caretaker government assumed power until the new by-elections on 11 July 2021.

The results from various studies showed that during the pre-election campaign, the Bulgarians preferred to be informed first by television and thereafter by online platforms and especially by Facebook (Exacta, 2021). However, the number of posts, the frequency of Facebook usage, as well as the funds invested did not prove directly proportional to the success achieved. Judging by the quality of the content of the posts, counting on populism in various dimensions proved the most successful strategy. For some of the new political formations aggressive rhetoric also proved productive. Of the Facebook profiles studied belonging to eventually elected political leaders, only few presented their intentions in such a way that voters could make an informed choice.

The findings of the study showed that funding invested in political advertising, scope of media activity, populism, hate speech, and Facebook communication were not sufficient for electoral success. It also became evident that the risks in the communicative competencies of political and media entities in the country are related to insufficient level of media literacy among media users, who, lost in a plethora of contradictory information, could not impartially exercise their informed election vote. Deficits in purposeful political messages and in clear party programmes were the more serious challenges to the development of deliberative democracy.

Conclusion

The rapid advance of ICTs has outstripped the theoretical rationalization, regulatory framework, business models, professional practices and audience participation in contemporary democratic processes. This new 'mosaic culture' is characterized by the breaking of the 'mass' into separate units, or the 'demassification' of media and of society itself (Toffler, 1980). A virtual online culture has

been created which, due to its interactive nature, serves to integrate elements of society while having an alienating and restrictive impact on people in the sense of destroying 'live' communication.

The media and information literacy (MIL) concept has been used to explore the effects of media and audience awareness on the information content distributed. The purpose of assessing these effects is not only to learn about the tools and technologies used to disseminate media products but also to provide media users with the critical thinking skills needed to analyse complex realities and to distinguish between fact and opinion. Although the Media Literacy Index provides indicators to measure the potential of societies for resilience to misinformation (including 'post-truth' and 'fake news'), it is still challenging to cope with the negative effects of diminishing public trust, severely polarized politics and fragmented media.

Thus, for the successful participation of citizens in public debates on protecting, sustaining and developing civic rights and democracy, a serious awareness of the risks and opportunities of the deliberative communication process needs to be enhanced. A complex approach to the efficient engagement of all stakeholders participating in this process (legislators, regulators, media services and mobile communications providers, content producers, professionals, researchers, educators and users) for upgrading the training competences, tools and skills in media, information and digital literacy may yield effective results.

The analysis of the media practices in the three interrelated case studies highlights important shortcomings in the contemporary Bulgarian media environment in terms of covering significant social issues. The problems arising as a result of insufficient media literacy mechanisms for the informed involvement of people in comprehending social processes are also

outlined. The results of studying these shortcomings are indicative for media researchers and professionals to engage in further research on media literacy.

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