

THE EVOLUTION OF MEDIA LITERACY IN BULGARIA'S FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

Svetla Tsankova¹, Stella Angova², Maria Nikolova³, Ivan Valchanov⁴,
Iliya Valkov⁵, Georgi Minev⁶
*e-mail: s.tzankova@unwe.bg¹, e-mail: sangova@unwe.bg²,
e-mail: mnikolova@unwe.bg³, e-mail: valchanov@unwe.bg⁴,
e-mail: valkov@unwe.bg⁵, e-mail: gminev@unwe.bg⁶*

Abstract

The concept of media literacy has become more popular in formal and non-formal education in Bulgaria in recent years. The nongovernmental sector has been particularly active in developing course materials, conferences, seminars, and resources for teachers and instructors. Media literacy is slowly being integrated into school and university curricula. It is precisely these two aspects of the evolution of media literacy in Bulgaria that this study focuses on due to the fact that in all countries with high levels of media literacy an active collaboration between formal and non-formal educational institutions is present. We have analysed school and university-level initiatives in the years 2019-2022, major projects in the nongovernmental sector, and the experts' assessment of the level of media literacy in Bulgaria. We have also described the results of a survey that we conducted among 534 high-school teachers at the beginning of 2022.

Drawing on our analysis, we highlighted the thesis that the system of formal education needs to catch up with the non-formal education sector in relation to media literacy, the aim of which is not directed only towards students and teachers, but towards a range of age and societal groups.

¹ Assoc. Prof., PhD, Department of Media and Public Communications, University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria, ORCID: 0000-0002-1239-5308

² Assoc. Prof., PhD, Department of Media and Public Communications, University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria, ORCID: 0000-0003-4911-217X

³ Sr. Assist. Prof., PhD, Department of Media and Public Communications, University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria, ORCID: 0000-0003-2519-3008

⁴ Sr. Assist. Prof., PhD, Department of Media and Public Communications, University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria, ORCID: 0000-0003-1899-9003

⁵ Sr. Assist. Prof., PhD, Department of Media and Public Communications, University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria, ORCID: 0000-0002-2306-9225

⁶ PhD, Department of Media and Public Communications, University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria, ORCID: 0000-0002-6976-2578

Keywords: media literacy, digital literacy, formal education, non-formal education, school education, higher education, non-governmental organizations, media, media landscape, Bulgaria

JEL: L82, I21

Introduction

In recent years, a number of respected experts have pointed out in various publications that the level of media literacy in Bulgaria is low. Their assessments have pushed our team to conduct an in-depth study of the media literacy initiatives in formal and non-formal education in Bulgaria. They are at the core of our research, because we argue that media literacy needs to be developed from early age and to be upgraded during school and higher education as the work of all educational institutions needs to be aided by all resources developed by non-formal education. The part of informal education is a main one, but it is difficult to measure and depends entirely on one's personal strive for media literacy advancement. We identified a lot of deficits, mainly at the school level – examples include the lack of a separate subject devoted to media literacy and the partial experimental inclusion of media literacy topics in the curricula of other subjects, as well as the lack of courses and other opportunities for teachers training to teach media literacy. One of the most significant problems is the lack of a national strategy for the development of media literacy, which indicates that state institutions are not active enough in this direction. At the same time, the results of our research suggest that the nongovernmental sector has been working very hard, organizing trainings for teachers, creating course materials, presentations, video lessons for students, handbooks, and educational platforms, organizing conferences, seminars, contests, and media literacy days, and, more recently, working with a wider range of social and age groups and in different regions of the country. We conducted the first survey of media-literacy teaching practices in Bulgaria in an attempt to identify both the good practices and the deficits in media-literacy training in formal education. We also found out to what extent the teachers take advantage of the resources of the non-governmental organizations. The survey also enabled us to verify the conclusions during the process of analysis of formal and non-formal media literacy education. Based on the information we gathered, we identified the main problem areas but we also discovered that over the past few years, media literacy has become more and more important and that there have been greater and more effective efforts to improve the level of media literacy in the country.

The methods used are an overview of expert assessments, research, strategies of Bulgarian institutions, analysis of the results achieved in the field of formal and non-formal education in media literacy and a survey.

Expert assessments of the level of media literacy in Bulgaria

The level of media literacy in Bulgaria has, over the past few years, been studied by a number of Bulgarian experts. Every year since 2016, the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence conducts monitoring of the degree of media pluralism in the Member States of the European Union (EU). In their report, *Media Pluralism Monitor 2016. Country Report: Bulgaria*, the authors Orlin Spassov, Nelly Ognyanova, and Nikoleta Daskalova note that the level of media literacy in the country is the greatest source of risk (88%) to media pluralism in the 'Social inclusiveness' area, the country does not have media literacy policies, and state institutions do not work actively in this direction. Media literacy is not a compulsory subject in primary and high schools; instead, it is only an area of focus of individual initiatives and projects. There is greater effort in relation to media literacy development in non-formal education, mainly in the capital city of Sofia.

In 2017, the international research project covered the 28 EU Member States, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Turkey. In their report, *Media Pluralism Monitor 2017. Country Report: Bulgaria*, the same three authors write that media literacy has become an even greater source of risk to media pluralism (92%), ranking among the indicators posing the highest risk to media pluralism in the country. They once again emphasize that Bulgaria does not have a state policy or a national strategy for the development of media literacy, media literacy is not a compulsory part of the school curriculum, and teachers have no opportunities to participate in formal media-literacy training. Most of the activities in the area of media literacy operate on a project basis and are run mainly by nongovernmental organizations, with their efforts being fragmented and sporadic due to a lack of sustainable funding.

In 2020, the research project covered developments over the preceding two years in the EU Member States, Albania, and Turkey. In their report, *Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Country Report: Bulgaria*, the Bulgarian experts point out that media literacy now poses a medium risk to media pluralism (66%) and that there is some progress made in relation to the development of media literacy in the country. The reason for this is the National Strategy for Media Literacy, developed by the Ministry of Education and Science, along with the initiatives aimed at integrating digital media literacy in the education process. For the first time in 2018-2019, there were media literacy lessons but only in a

limited number of schools and as an experiment. Nongovernmental organizations continued to work on media-literacy projects.

In 2021, the research project covered developments over the previous year in the EU Member States, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey. In their report on Bulgaria, the authors Orlin Spassov, Nelly Ognyanova, and Nikoleta Daskalova write that media literacy is once again an indicator posing a high risk (67%) to media pluralism. State policy on media literacy is still underdeveloped despite some efforts to improve the situation, and at the end of 2020, media literacy is not a component of the compulsory school curriculum. While nongovernmental organizations actively promote media literacy education, their efforts cannot compensate the need for more systematic media literacy education, including capacity-building for teachers. The experts recommend, among other things, the ‘effective integration of media literacy education in the school curriculum on a national level’.

In 2017, the European Policies Institute (EuPI) of the Open Society Institute – Sofia published the Media Literacy Index, which assesses the level of media literacy in 35 European countries – the 27 EU Member States, the UK, Iceland, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Montenegro, and Turkey. It came in response to the problems caused by the dissemination of disinformation and the ‘post-truth’ phenomenon. The Index assesses the countries’ resilience to these phenomena and their capacity for limiting the damage they can cause, and it tries to contribute to the search for solutions. Bulgaria ranked 30th in 2017 and 2018, 29th in 2019, and 30th in 2021 (between Serbia and Turkey), which leaves the country in the fourth cluster of the five-cluster framework. According to the analysts, Bulgaria’s low ranking is the result of the low level of reading literacy (as indicated by the country’s PISA score in reading literacy), and the low level of media freedom (as gauged by international organizations such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders), as well as the low level of trust in others.

The expert assessments suggest that there is a great need in Bulgaria for an effective national strategy for media literacy, well-organized media literacy education at the high-school and university levels, and state support for civil society organizations working in this area.

Formal media literacy education

As of 2022, there is no national strategy for media literacy in Bulgaria. The Ministry of Education and Science has been working on such a document since 2020, but it is not available on the institution’s website. Strategic documents on media literacy topics have been developed by the Ministry of Education and Science, the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, the Ministry of

Transport and Communication's National Programme 'Digital Bulgaria 2025', the State Agency for Child Protection, etc. To summarize, the policy for the introduction and development of media literacy is not neglected in some of the strategic documents drafted by Bulgarian institutions, especially the Ministry of Education and Science, but in most cases, it is mentioned in a generic context. The Ministry of Education and Science acts as a partner institution in most initiatives promoting media literacy, but its collaboration with civil associations and nongovernmental organizations is not described in these documents.

As to higher education, it is clear that media literacy is not effectively present, although the development of digital skills and competences is one of the priorities outlined in the new strategy for higher education. The first lecture on media pedagogy (the term used in Bulgaria at that time) was read in May 2002 by Prof. Bernd Schorb at the Sofia University's Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication (FJMC). Today, 'Media and Information Literacy' is a compulsory course in the curriculum of the Communication Management major in the FJMC (this major was introduced in 2018). Not many universities in Bulgaria have included media literacy as a discipline in their curricula. Such a discipline is included in the curriculum of the Journalism major at the New Bulgarian University (NBU), and its purpose is to familiarize the students with the essence of media literacy and its application across different media, as well as various techniques for the construction of media messages. The Department of Media and Public Communications at the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) has also included media literacy as a discipline in the curriculum of the Media and Journalism major. In other public and private universities in Bulgaria, the curricula include disciplines that do not focus specifically on media literacy but cover digital competences, information literacy, digital content creation, etc.

State institutions' efforts to promote media literacy are primarily concentrated on the school level. During the 2017/2018 school year, media literacy education was introduced for the first time in several pilot schools, and during the 2018/2019 school year, the Ministry of Education and Science included media literacy in the school curriculum for the first time. We see several problematic areas in this regard, including a combination of insufficient preparation and qualification of teachers, and an inadequate provision of resources. Since 2019 the students in the 11th and 12th grade study the subject "Civil society", part of which is the topic of media literacy as part of complex social and civil competencies. It is primarily embedded in the lesson on civil society and publicity, but the description of its content shows that the conceptual orientations are limited to recognizing the technology of manipulation and the practices of disinformation. It makes a good impression that the teacher's books outline guidelines for struc-

turing media literacy lessons and develop a critical evaluation of media content, and that attention is paid to the role of the media in the functioning of democracy.

Extracurricular activities that cover issues related to the media and their use are most visibly present in the so-called innovative schools. During the 2021/2022 school year, there are 510 innovative schools across Bulgaria. In some schools, there are groups specializing in media and communications – examples of such profiles include reporting and media, photography and journalism, commercial design, media communications, journalism and public relations; in other schools, there are journalistic clubs, as well as school newspapers and radio and TV stations, which allow students to acquire skills in relation to professional media and journalistic practices, communication, digital content creation, and the production of new media formats, such as videos and podcasts. Some schools have their own studios where students can practise creating media and information products. Our team sees good opportunities for collaboration between universities offering media-related programmes and the schools that try to develop the students' media literacy at the different levels of education.

Non-formal media literacy education

The nongovernmental sector in Bulgaria began to address media literacy issues long before state institutions and the system of formal education started paying attention to them. The first organizations were registered in 1991 and 1998. Later, they developed a number of media and information literacy initiatives. A few more organizations were created in the years 2000-2010. The number of these organizations has been growing since 2010, and they all work far more actively on delivering projects and trainings for elementary and high-school teachers, providing resources, and directing the public's attention towards this topic. The Media Literacy Coalition, which was founded in September 2017, brings together different organizations with expertise in education, journalism, and civil participation and relies on the support of scholars and media literacy experts. Its management board includes representatives of organizations such as the Safe Internet Centre, the Media Democracy Foundation, the Teach for Bulgaria Foundation, the Centre for Inclusive Education, the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria, the Media Development Centre, the online platforms Znam.be and Knigovishte, and the Regional and Global Development Research Centre. The Coalition's strategic goal is to work for the overall integration of media literacy in education and the improvement of media literacy within the society. In addition, it strives to build partnerships with representatives of the nongovernmental sector and official institutions with a vested interest in education and media literacy in Bulgaria.

Since 2018, the Coalition has been organizing Media Literacy Days on an annual basis. The first edition of the initiative included student contents, demonstrations of presentations of interactive classes, capacity-building activities for teachers focused on media literacy teaching methodologies, and discussions on online safety with parents and students.

In 2019, the emphasis was on working with and verifying the credibility of information sources, fake news in different media formats, creating video lessons on media literacy, and holding discussions with children, parents, and teachers. The Coalition also developed plans and presentations on topics such as online safety, netiquette for students from 1st to 4th grade, cyberbullying for students from 5th to 7th grade, and digital skills for students from 1st to 4th, 5th to 7th, and 8th to 12th grade.

In 2020, the Coalition focused on raising awareness about the need for the inclusion of media literacy in formal education. The programme included trainings on safe content creation in an online environment for children and support for teachers in relation to the teaching of media literacy. In addition, the Coalition continued to produce video lessons on various topics and organize contests.

In 2021, the emphasis was on the ethical reporting on children in the media, online media literacy for mentors, webinars, and the presentation of an international project with the participation of university instructors aimed at developing a comprehensive media literacy training programme.

In 2022, the Coalition already works with more target groups (older people in smaller towns) and offers opportunities for a far more active involvement in its initiatives of teachers and students, who can suggest ideas and topics for the Media Literacy Days. The Coalition also conducted the first national testing of the digital and media literacy skills of students in the 10th grade.

The Coalition's partners include, among others, the State Agency for Child Protection, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Culture, the Sofia Inspectorate of Education, public and private media, UNICEF, the General Directorate Combating Organized Crime, IT companies, embassies, and nongovernmental organizations.

Media literacy resources in Bulgaria

The provision of the necessary resources, which were in short supply in Bulgaria for many years, is particularly important for media literacy education. In our research, we found that these resources have, to a large degree, emerged as a result of the nongovernmental sector's active engagement and thanks to the financial support coming from European programmes and foreign foundations.

One of the first sources of information is *COMPASS*, a manual first published by the Council of Europe (CoE) in 2002. It focuses on human rights

education for young people and their civic engagement, but it touches on the media as well – some of the topics related to media literacy cover the media's role in democratic governance, human rights seen through the prism of media participation, the opportunities, and dangers online, the media's functions and responsibilities, freedom of speech and the right to information, the media environment, media ownership, and media pluralism.

We have observed active creation of resources over the past eight years, especially in 2021, which saw the creation of many manuals, handbooks, video lessons, presentations, and methodological guidelines.

In 2016, the manual *How to Develop 21st Century Skills in Class* was published by the Teach for Bulgaria Foundation as part of the project Functional Literacy for the 21st Century. The manual presents 13 key skills for the 21st century, along with ideas for the development of each of skill in class regardless of the subject. Among these skills are reading literacy, scientific literacy, communication skills, digital literacy, etc. In the beginning of 2017, the Ministry of Education and Science distributed the manual in schools throughout the country, and its digital version is freely accessible on the website *prepodavame.bg*, along with additional resources on the topic.

In 2017, the Applied Research and Communications Foundation and the Faculty of Pre-School and Primary School Pedagogy at Sofia University created the methodological manual *From Digital Competence towards Digital Citizenship*. It is aimed at improving the pedagogy students' capacity for teaching early digital and media literacy and includes various lessons for different subjects for primary-school students based on role playing and team tasks, as well as information about the schools in which the methodology has been tested.

In 2018, the Safe Internet Centre and the Applied Research and Communications Foundation published a manual on the types of cyberbullying. It covers topics such as stolen accounts, false identities, online participants, group harassment, and so on. In addition, the Applied Research and Communications Foundation, in collaboration with a few other organizations, published a brochure on social media for parents, which presents the main social media and applications used by children, key words, advice, and information about potential dangers.

In 2019, the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria published *Media Literacy in the Classroom*, a manual for teachers who want to help their students develop their critical thinking skills and navigate the surrounding media environment. It is aimed at allowing students to get a good understanding of what quality journalism looks like and helping them become more aware and critical consumers of media content by familiarizing themselves with concepts such as media and free press, the media's main public roles, the essence of journalism, the difference between fact and opinion, the main journalistic genres, fake news

and disinformation, working with sources of information, the right to privacy, personal data, identity theft, etc.

My Right to an Opinion! Creating Content for Social Media is a guide for high-school students developed by UNICEF in partnership with the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria in 2019. It is aimed at teenagers who want to improve their knowledge in relation to the creation of media content for social media and covers topics such as media content creation, hate speech, how to share information in the case of incidents, copyright, podcast production, and the main rules and personal data protection settings on the most popular social media.

The guide *Teaching Media Literacy and Fighting Disinformation with eTwinning* was published in October 2021 by the European Union under the supervision of UNESCO in support of teachers and students. It focuses on the concept of media literacy, describing and referring to many documents and European policies in this area, and sheds light on disinformation and its effects, propaganda, hate speech, stereotypes, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking. It also offers guidelines for the use of eTwinning to support the development of media literacy and presents resources and specific class activities devoted to media literacy.

Citizen Education is a handbook for students in the 11th grade developed in 2021 by a group of Bulgarian authors with the support of the Representation of the European Commission in Bulgaria. While it focuses on citizen education, it also looks at the media as an element of deliberative democracy, defines the term 'media literacy', and presents specific class activities, such as discussions or projects for the verification of information sources, the presentation of different viewpoints in journalistic materials, writing social media posts through games, etc.

Media Literacy Through Distance Learning is a handbook for teachers working with students in the 5th, 6th, and 7th grade published in 2021 by the Media Literacy Coalition with the support of the America for Bulgaria Foundation. It was written by experts from the Safe Internet Centre, the Faculty of Pre-School and Primary School Pedagogy at Sofia University, and a history teacher. The handbook builds on and adapts the lessons from the manual *From Digital Competence towards Digital Citizenship* for university students of pedagogical majors and primary-school teachers to the new educational needs. The topics and the methods for organizing the teaching process presented in *Media Literacy Through Distance Learning* are developed in accordance with distance learning, which came into use with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the authors, the issues discussed in the handbook are appropriate for subjects such as class hour, information technologies, Bulgarian language and literature, and history, and are aimed at developing skills for critical thinking, looking for and analysing information, working in a team, solving problems, creating positive

and high-quality digital content, and communicating online in an ethical and safe manner. The book contains 10 lessons. As part of the project, Ucha.se, the biggest educational platform in Bulgaria, created video lessons on media literacy in collaboration with the Coalition, which cover topics such as personal data protection and identifying fake news on social media.

A Handbook for Young Reporters was published in 2021 at the initiative of the United Nations Association of Bulgaria and the For New Partnership in Journalism Foundation as part of the project ‘Young Reporters for Local Democracy’. The project is aimed at improving young people’s democratic culture and citizen awareness and focuses on regions outside of Sofia and collaboration with regional and local media. In 2020 – 2021, there were activities in five cities and towns – Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Karnobat, Montana, and Plovdiv, where experts, journalists, teachers, and students participated in a series of information events, trainings, and meetings for the purpose of laying the foundations of school newsrooms in which students can produce their own school newspapers. The handbook covers topics and issues related to democratic governance, local self-government, the responsibilities of institutions, the roles of the nongovernmental sector, the functions and tasks of the media within the society, media pluralism, media funding, fake news, journalistic ethics and the right of access to public information, and the features of citizen and student media. It even describes approaches to the creation of journalistic texts and school newspapers.

A Guide to Fact-Checking in a Digital Environment was published in 2021 by the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria in support of investigative journalists, as well as civil society representatives for whom the identification of fake news and disinformation is important. Written by journalists, media analysts, and fact-checking experts, the guide is the first manual on fact-checking adapted for people working with Bulgarian databases. It offers definitions of terms such as ‘fact-checking’, outlines basic principles for fact-checking, gives guidelines for navigating today’s online environment, working with sources of information and databases such as the Commercial and Property registers, and identifying manipulated photos, presents case studies, and offers a useful resource for the development of fact-checking skills.

A Guide to Media Literacy: Fake News Harm Our Rights, Safety, and Participation was published in 2021 as part of the project ‘The Facts, Please! Fighting Fake News – National and European Youth Policies’, co-financed by the EU’s Erasmus + Programme. The project partners include the Europartners 2007 Foundation and the Burgas Inspectorate of Education. The guide mainly focuses on fighting fake news.

Journalism, ‘Fake News’ and Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training was published by UNESCO in 2018. The handbook is

divided into modules devoted to truth and trust in journalism, formats of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information, digital technology and social platforms, fact-checking, social media verification for the purpose of assessing sources and visual content, and other topics.

Journalism for Children: Practical Guidelines is a handbook published in 2021 by the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria and the educational platform Knigovishte with the support of the America for Bulgaria Foundation, the Robert Bosch Foundation, and the US Embassy in Bulgaria. It gives advice to journalists about how to select appropriate topics for children, how to do journalism for children, what language to use, how to organize their stories, what to do if no children are featured in a story, how to provide context and perspective, and how to edit their work. The publication synthesizes key lessons from the discussions with lecturers that took place as part of Knigovishte's project aimed at creating the first Bulgarian online media for children, which the team launched in the spring of 2021.

Envision is a paid software programme created in 2009 with the aim of making teachers' lives easier and improving the quality of primary education by giving them access to numerous new technologies that they can use in their teaching. In 2018, the company behind the programme launched Envision Play – a cloud platform that students can use on their smart devices to play games in Bulgarian promoting the development of media literacy, which are the first of their kind in the country. In 2020, Envision, in collaboration with the Media Literacy Coalition, developed lessons on media literacy in the form of games for students in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade, plans for parents' meetings devoted to the topic 'Children in the Digital Era and the Role of Adults' for the parents of students from the 1st to the 4th grade and from the 5th to the 7th grade, etc.

The years 2019 – 2021 saw a genuine boom in the creation of handbooks, guides, and other educational resources related to media literacy. The nongovernmental sector's efforts are aimed not only at developing the skills of teachers in the system of formal education but also at helping journalists and members of different age and social groups.

A survey of media-literacy teaching practices in Bulgaria

In early 2022, our team conducted the first survey of media-literacy teaching practices in Bulgaria, which aimed to identify both the good practices and the deficits in media-literacy training in the system of formal education. We received the responses of 534 respondents from across the country. This means the results offer a useful glimpse into the state of art of media-literacy teaching practices in Bulgaria because according to data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI), there were 55 554 teachers in the country during the 2020/2021 school year.

The majority of the respondents work with students in grades 8 to 12 – 373 (about 70% of all respondents). Most efforts to promote media literacy education are aimed precisely at this group of teachers. Among the other respondents, 99 teachers (19%) work with students in grades 5-7 and 62 teachers (12%) work with students in grades 1-4.

One of the first questions in the survey was aimed at helping us understand the degree to which the teachers are familiar with the concept of media literacy. The responses we received show that 51% (270 respondents) are partly familiar with the concept of media literacy, 32% (171 respondents) are familiar with it, and 17% (93 respondents) are not familiar with it. These results suggest that high-school teachers need to go through additional media literacy training. This is especially important for them because, first, they are members of the society and the media audience, and secondly, they are professional instructors who not only deliver subject-based knowledge to students but also shape their media and civic culture. The responses to the first question in the survey already reveal a need for collaboration among universities offering media and public communication programmes, high schools, the Ministry of Education and Science, and the nongovernmental sector.

To the question ‘Do you think that understanding media literacy needs to be one of the competences every teacher should possess?’, 74% of the respondents gave positive responses, from which we can conclude that teachers see media literacy as an indispensable part of their professional competences. Of the remaining respondents, 18% responded ‘Partly’ and 5% gave negative responses. These results suggest that a lot of teachers would readily participate in various media literacy trainings organized by different institutions.

More than half of the respondents (55%) think Bulgaria lacks a well-developed state policy on media literacy, 24% say this is ‘Partly’ the case, and 9% can’t decide. The other 12% of the respondents believe that Bulgaria has such a state policy, but only three members of this group said ‘Definitely yes’.

Asked about the specific deficits in the state policy in relation to the inclusion of media literacy in high-school education, the largest number of respondents pointed to a combination of the following factors: ‘there is no national strategy’, ‘there is a lack of understanding of the importance of media literacy in formal education’, and ‘there is no model for teaching media literacy in high school’. Some of the respondents have said that ‘there are no initiatives aimed at improving teachers’ media and digital literacy’ and ‘the school curricula have not been updated, especially for the subject of information and communication technologies’. The results show that the strategy for the incorporation of media literacy in high-school education needs to be finalized and implemented as soon as possible,

as is the case in many European countries. Only 28 respondents said that they do not see any deficits in the state policy.

We also asked the respondents whether media literacy is taught to some degree in their schools and we received interesting results – a nearly equal number of the teachers said ‘Partly’ (187) and ‘I’d say no rather than yes’ (186). Only 98 respondents said ‘I’d say yes rather than no’. The number of responses ‘I cannot decide’ is telling as well – 63. These results show that media literacy is not sufficiently incorporated in formal education and that it is necessary for policy-makers to consider introducing media literacy as a subject in line with the specifics of the different levels of education – elementary, primary, and secondary.

Despite their view that there is no state policy on media literacy and that media literacy is not taught sufficiently, Bulgarian teachers make an effort to integrate media literacy topics in their teaching. This is true for 336 (53%) of the respondents – 142 of them said ‘Yes’ and 194 said ‘Partly’.

Based on our survey, our research team reached the following conclusions:

- as a whole, Bulgarian teachers know of media literacy, but very few of them feel confident that they are familiar with the concept. This reveals a need for additional training for teachers and better integration of media literacy in formal education, as media literacy is becoming a key competence at an increasingly early stage in one's life;
- Bulgarian teachers are open to learning about media literacy and want to integrate it into their teaching but there is a lack of appropriate planning and implementation at a broader level by the Ministry of Education and Science, and a lack of access to the necessary resources. This once again reaffirms the conclusion of the research team that the formal education in media literacy still stands behind the non-formal in many aspects. The drive to integrate media literacy in formal education often arises from actions at the local level, for example at the initiative of school managers, and teachers themselves mainly rely on self-training and looking for the study materials they use in class on their own. This opportunity is given by the big number of manuals analysed in the paper compiled and published by the non-governmental organisations in the recent years;
- Bulgarian teachers are open to collaborating with universities for the purpose of acquiring additional qualifications in the area of media literacy and, thus, developing their professional competences, as well as using resources that support the integration of media literacy into the subjects they teach.

Conclusion

Drawing on our analysis, our research team confirmed the thesis that formal education in secondary and higher schools in Bulgaria lags behind in terms of the development of media literacy compared to non-formal education, which directs attention not only to students and teachers, but also to different age and social groups. The main conclusions are: (1) There needs to be an effective national strategy for the development of media literacy in Bulgaria and the system of formal education needs to catch up with the non-formal education sector in relation to media literacy; (2) media literacy has been promoted as a part of other high-school subjects rather than as a separate subject, which we believe will be more effective as an approach - it is particularly important to develop appropriate curricula depending on the age of the students and the corresponding media education needs within grades 1 – 4, grades 5 – 8, grades 9 – 12 class; (3) the comparative analysis of the teaching resources prepared for the education of secondary school students and the resources of the non-governmental sector show that the topic of media literacy is developed much more deeply and multifacetedly in the sphere of non-formal education; (4) at the same time, the main emphases placed in media literacy training by the non-governmental sector are primarily related to internet safety, cyberbullying and online misinformation, and media literacy also includes a number of other important topics such as media ownership and funding, creating own media content, media effects, principles of communication and media ethics and others; (5) in today's complex media ecosystem, the concept of media literacy should be analysed and applied in a much broader context and cover a wide range of knowledge, skills, and competences.

Despite the unsatisfactory expert assessment of the development of media literacy in Bulgaria over the past few years, there is a visible shift in a positive direction. The evolution of formal and non-formal media literacy education in the country should continue at an even faster pace because media literacy is set to become more and more important for the effective functioning of democratic societies, which are evolving under the influence of digital technologies, the new means of communication, and the new ways of creating and consuming media content.

Acknowledgement

The paper contains the results of a study financed with funds from a subsidy for the Scientific Research Activities of the UNWE under contract No. NID NI – 12/2019.

References

- Spasov, O., Ognyanova, N., Daskalova, N. (2016). Monitoring of Media Pluralism in Bulgaria, available at: https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/46789/Cover_Bulgaria_O.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y (accessed 10 May 2022)
- Spasov, O., Ognyanova, N., Daskalova, N. (2017). Monitoring of Media Pluralism in Bulgaria, available at: http://www.fmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/mpm2017_narrative_report_bulgaria_bg.pdf (accessed 10 May 2022)
- Spasov, O., Ognyanova, N., Daskalova, N. (2019). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era 2018 – 2019, available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/9bceb540-dd0d-11ea-adf7-01aa75ed71a1> (accessed 10 May 2022)
- Spasov, O., Ognyanova, N., Daskalova, N. (2021). Monitoring of Media Pluralism in Bulgaria 2020, available at: https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/71939/bulgaria_results_mpm_2021_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed 10 May 2022)