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Positioning Paper on National Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Policies and Strategies in Albania

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I. The need to intervene in advancing Media and Information Literacy (MIL)

Media and information play a crucial role in a democratic society as they enable citizens to make well-informed decisions, influence positively the strengthening of the position and encourage their contribution to society. The potential of new information technologies is enormous, so citizens and the media need to be able to use these new tools wisely and avoid the risks they carry. In this regard, knowledge and education on media and information literacy (MIL) is of paramount importance in the development of critical thinking and the efficient use of media and communication technology in an age when we face a wealth of information.

The Albanian media picture is dynamic in terms of the number of media outlets. There are currently 15 daily newspapers, including sports newspapers, although we have less than three million inhabitants and the press is not distributed throughout the country. The number of audiovisual media is also quite high: five licenses have been issued for national digital platforms, there are 45 local television stations, as well as the public radio and television that broadcasts on 12 channels, through its digital platform, including two branches of television in districts. In terms of radio broadcasts, there are two national radios, 53 local radios and four community radios. In addition to them, there is also Radio Tirana, which broadcasts on six radio channels and four branches in the districts.

On the other hand, the picture of online media is much more chaotic and in the absence of official statistics or other ways to calculate the number of online media, one can only speculate about the size of this media sector. According to the Union of Albanian Journalists, it is estimated that there are more than 800 online media in the country. The dramatic increase in the number of online media comes as a result of relatively low costs compared to other media sectors and the widespread spread of the internet across the country. According to the electronic communications regulator, the level of internet penetration at the end of 2019 was 75%. Likewise, Albanians are regular users of social networks, especially Facebook, with about 1.4 million pages, or a spread rate of 49 percent, by the end of January 2020.

With the rapid shift of the center of gravity of the Albanian media online, the media relief seems to have reversed. Albanian journalism experiences the phenomenon of portalisation and facebooking and, as in other countries, produces itself and faces false daily news. Conspiracy theories, previously found only in extremist media, are now widely dominating traditional media. Disinformation is presented as a serious problem that must be faced. This was clearly seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, when conspiracy theories and misinformation spread rapidly.

Experience has shown that the Albanian public does not have the necessary immunity and the necessary skills to face fake news and misinformation, it does not have the necessary critical

approach to distinguish the truth, to distinguish what is fake news, and what is real news etc. The Media Literacy Index of 2018 puts Albania almost at the bottom of the list of European countries, leaving behind only Turkey and Northern Macedonia.¹ This ranking signals the need for immediate intervention and the planning of strategic interventions to improve the level of media education and information in Albania.

Substantial changes in the media and information landscape show that schools are no longer the only sources of knowledge and learning. This also means the role that informal and intermediate teaching institutions should play, such as libraries, archives, museums and other cultural institutions.

In Albania, preparations and efforts for media and information education are still in the first steps and the project in question is one of the most consolidated interventions as it aims to make EMI part of the official curriculum in pre-university education.

II. MIL context in Albania

In our country *there is not yet a strategy that guides national policies on media and information literacy to respond to the needs in this field.* Various national strategies (National Strategy for Development and Integration; Strategy for the Development of Pre-University Education, Digital Agenda, National Strategy for Culture, etc.) mention one or more elements of MIL, such as the digitalization of services and increasing the computer skills, *but it is lacking the holistic approach towards developing MIL competences* (critical thinking, evaluation of information and information sources, ability to access and localize information resources, content creation, promotion of active citizenship, understanding of media and information systems, etc.).

The lack of a strategy is reflected in the three levels of education, formal, non-formal and informal. Although in the pre-university system priority is given to the use of ICT during the teaching and learning process, *this priority is limited only in terms of technological education and use of equipment, not focusing on other MIL competencies.* The integration of the MIL curriculum into the pre-university education curriculum, which is the goal of this project, would increase the knowledge and skills of students and teachers in the field of media and information literacy.

At the university level, certain concepts of MIL are taught by different academic training programs on Bachelor and Master cycle, in the faculties of public universities (University of Tirana, Aleksandër Moisiu, Aleksandër Xhuvani, etc.) and private universities (Beder University,

¹ Lessenski, M. (2018). Common sense wanted. Resilience to post-truth and its predictors in the new media literacy index 2018*. Open Society Institute, Bulgaria.

etc.). Depending on the study program, these concepts include media literacy, audience, digital competence, multimedia content production, etc., ***but what remains to be emphasized is the lack of general training for MIL. It is imperative that EMI interventions be made at university should be planned at three levels: 1) operational (including promotion, awareness 2) analytical (critical thinking, analytical skills, verification of sources, response to fake news and propaganda, etc.) and 3) creative (developing the ability to create content as well as publish it).***

Based on the identified needs and gaps that are existent, this document, drafted according to a comprehensive and multifaceted approach, ***suggests objectives for MIL policies and strategy, which should be extended to formal education (university and pre-university level); in non-formal and informal education thus affecting all members of society*** with the aim of increasing the level of education on media and information in Albania.

The need for media education and information has been recognized and has begun to attract the attention of various actors. The fact that there are initiatives, although sporadic and short-term, is a positive indicator in this regard. Although initiatives are present, the lack of strong community-level organizations and associations in the field of education, media, and information has hindered the further development of non-formal education in the field of EMI.

From the research that has been done, it is noticed that the initiatives and contribution given to EMI in formal education is mainly focused on ICT and digital competencies; in non-formal education is short-term, sporadic and uncoordinated between key actors. These initiatives are mainly focused on journalism, multimedia creativity, digital education for children and young people, but there is still no real contribution to EMI as defined by UNESCO. While in informal education, EMI has focused on access to information, provision of digital services, as well as promoting reading and increasing the number of attendees in relevant institutions, thus contributing to some elements of the holistic approach of EMI, but not to the whole his.

Based on the identified needs and gaps in existing initiatives, within this project, MIL curriculum for pre-university teachers was drafted in cooperation with the Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ASCAP). The curriculum is based on the competencies of UNESCO and will become part of the official curriculum in the cycle of pre-university education, which will be piloted initially in 20 schools, primary and secondary, in Tirana, Durres, Lezha and Elbasan, as in rural and urban areas. This will be the first integrated curriculum for EMI in formal education in Albania.

III. Key principles (on policies)

The guiding principles in this document adhere to democratic values that include the right to information and the right to expression, as well as the contribution that these values make to the wider involvement of citizens in democratic processes and democratic communication.

Based on the UNESCO's definition of media education and information, this study seeks to harmonize the comprehensive approach to MIL and apply this concept to the Albanian situation. The aim is to encourage an approach that empowers citizens, fosters critical thinking, promote cultural diversity, social inclusion and gender equality.

This document is based on the involvement of many stakeholders in this process, following the UNESCO concept of media education and information. The purpose of this paper is to serve as an incentive starting point for the design and implementation of policies on MIL, building on existing policies and key actors in Albania.

IV. Overall positioning

Based on the results of the study on the current situation of Media and Information Education in Albania, at the three educational levels (formal, non-formal and informal) this report advises a comprehensive approach and policies regarding MIL, which respond to the needs of all members of society, without distinction.

National consultations and interviews with key actors contributing to the advancement of Media Education and Information issues in the country highlighted the need for intervention in regulating media and information illiteracy. Although MIL efforts and initiatives have increased over the past four years, they remain sporadic, uncoordinated, and uncoordinated. The need to have singers between actors and the initiatives that are taken remains at the top of the list.

A good starting point for creating synergies is the multilateral approach, which was also followed in this study, to gather stakeholder suggestions on the national strategy for media education and information. Such a strategy has not existed to date; therefore, the contribution of key actors is very valuable in shaping it.

Important actors in advancing media education and information remain the central government - the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, which has shown interest and readiness to integrate the MIL curriculum into the formal pre-university education curriculum. The Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education is a key party in this project and has contributed to the drafting of the curriculum for teachers, which will be the basic document that will guide teachers to pass on knowledge and teach MIL competencies to students.

In addition to central institutions, important stakeholders are actors in the field of university education, business, private and public libraries, museums, information operators, representatives of the private sector and civil society. Given the fact that this is a very new concept, which has not been sufficiently taken into account by current policies, it is possible to develop a clear and comprehensive strategy on EMI, which will take into account all aspects, concepts, objectives, mechanisms and actors, as well as ensure their full involvement in the process.

The main suggestions from the national consultations emphasize the development of a comprehensive strategy that addresses the needs for media education and information at all three levels of education, formal, non-formal and informal, which simultaneously affects all age groups (children, youth, students, adults.) and promotes large-scale media and information education.

V. Strategic directives and specific attitudes regarding MIL

To develop and approve the National Strategy for Media Education and Information that will serve as a guide for specific programs and policies to be created in order to promote MIL in formal, non-formal and informal education.

To address MIL in the Strategy and policies from the UNESCO perspective and to include all areas, such as media education, information education, digital education, critical thinking, media creativity, etc., so that this concept can be included in strategic documents, as well as in the regulations or guidelines that will follow.

To support and promote the integration of MIL in the official curricula of pre-university education in the primary, 9-year and secondary cycle.

To support and promote the integration of MIL in the official curricula of university education, specifically in three areas: 1) operational (including promotion, awareness 2) analytical (critical thinking, analytical skills, verification of resources, response to fake news and propaganda etc.) and 3) creative (developing the ability to create content as well as publish it).

To organize awareness and promotion campaigns and activities to acquaint the general public first with the MIL concept, as it is not widely recognized.

VI. Strategic Recommendations from the national consultations for MIL

- To give priority to MIL in formal, non-formal and informal education in order to guarantee the sustainability and creation of a culture for media and information.
- University-level education programs to provide specific education and continuing education to improve media and information literacy among young students and professionals.
- MIL programs at pre-university level provide specific education and continuing training to improve media and information literacy among teachers and students.
- MIL programs should be designed in such a way as to enable the widest possible involvement of citizens in this process (regardless of age, level of education, gender, employment status) by improving their relations with the media and information, as well as helping the crystallization of critical thinking about them.
- MIL programs should promote the improvement of media professionalism and the creation of self-regulatory bodies that will assist in the process of educating citizens about media and information.
- MIL programs to promote the values of media, archives, libraries, museums and other conductors of information to improve social inclusion, anti-discrimination policies, and lack of development in areas with limited economic opportunities.

VII. Conclusions

The need to challenge and address media and information illiteracy is crucial. National consultations emphasize the need for intervention at the national level in this regard.

Interventions are suggested to be made in formal education (university and pre-university cycle; in non-formal and informal education, with the aim of having a broad achievement of all groups in society, to increase the overall level of education on MIL in Albania.

Creating synergies between stakeholders in this process, to ensure the coordination of joint efforts in the field of media and information education, remains a gap that needs to be fulfilled.