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Media Literacy Promotion in Moldova: Europeanisation Through Interactions Between Domestic Civil Society, International Civil Society Actors and International Funders

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Abstract

Media literacy promotion fosters the quality of public discourse and, thereby, democracy. For instance, media literate citizens are more resilient to politically biased news reporting and disinformation – both of which are challenges facing the Moldovan media sphere. In Moldova, past literature has identified civil society organisations (CSOs) as key actors in advancing media literacy, with international funding often supporting the organisations' actions. Thus, this paper studies how domestic civil society, international civil society actors and international funders, acting together, influence how media literacy is promoted in Moldova. The findings are based on 14 semi-structured interviews and written primary sources such as organisations' annual reports and media literacy learning materials. The paper finds that international civil society actors have significantly shaped the theoretical basis for media literacy activities in Moldova. Secondly, it finds that vis-à-vis funders, CSOs have been able to design their projects and actions rather independently according to their own programmatic priorities and research.

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Moldova is a member of the European Union's (EU) Eastern Partnership (EaP). Through EaP, the EU funds civil society organisations (CSOs), which can do 'bottom-up' democracy promotion in the partner countries.¹ This paper takes 'civil society' to primarily refer to non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Other international actors like the United States (US) also actively support Moldovan civil society, and in the past years, foreign grants have constituted most of Moldovan NGOs' funding.²

Whereas Eastern Partnership countries' information spheres face challenges like domestic and Russian-made disinformation, concentrated media ownership and partisan reporting,³ media literacy (ML) can foster a higher-quality public debate, and thereby a healthy democracy. As the abovementioned issues are all present in Moldova, the country offers a useful case study. Meanwhile, though the literature has recognised civil society's importance in ML promotion in Moldova and beyond, studies focusing on civil society have been lacking. This paper thus studies the interaction between international funders and the civil society working on media literacy in Moldova. Adopting the conceptual framework of Europeanisation, the paper analyses the interactions using two new institutionalist theories: rational choice and sociological institutionalism. The findings are based on 14 semi-structured interviews and written primary sources such as NGOs' activity reports, project descriptions, and ML learning materials.

The paper studies how domestic civil society, international civil society actors, international funders, and the interactions between said actors influence media literacy promotion in Moldova. It adopts two research questions: one about different actors' influence in shaping the theoretical basis for ML promotion in Moldova, and another about the actors'

¹ Petrova and Delcour, "From Principle to Practice?".

² Tîrdea and Chobanu, "Civil Society in Moldova".

³ Dunham and Aghekyan, *How do Eastern Partnership countries rate on media freedom?*

respective influence on the concrete design of ML actions. The paper finds that international civil society actors have considerably influenced how Moldovan CSOs conceive media literacy and, drawing from sociological institutionalism, argues that the diffusion of international expertise has been accompanied by changes in Moldovan actors' underlying beliefs and preferences. Secondly, key CSOs have designed their actions relatively independently, and proactively articulated to funders what needs should be addressed by ML actions. The paper argues that rational choice institutionalism can explain CSOs' independence in determining their actions and deploys Risse's 'logic of arguing' to interpret deliberations on funders' priorities. Overall, the findings support past literature's emphasis on civil society's importance in promoting media literacy in the region.

The next section presents the paper's theoretical framework and reviews relevant literature on civil society Europeanisation in EaP countries and on civil society involvement in ML promotion. The third section offers an overview of the Moldovan media landscape and civil society-led ML projects in Moldova. The fourth section introduces the paper's research questions and methodology. The fifth section presents the findings and links them to the theoretical framework and prior literature.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section adopts 'Europeanisation' as the paper's guiding concept and presents new institutionalism as a theoretical framework for analysing Europeanisation processes. It then reviews literature on civil society Europeanisation in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. Finally, it justifies the importance of media literacy for democracy and the relevance of studying CSOs in the context of ML promotion.

Domestic-level changes produced by European integration or EU-level actors have been analysed using the concept of 'Europeanisation'.⁴ Indeed, many researchers have traditionally

⁴ Sedelmeier, "Europeanisation in New Member and Candidate States".

defined Europeanisation as the EU's top-down influence on domestic actors.⁵ Some authors use broader definitions, not exclusively focusing on effects produced by the EU. For example, Subotić's⁶ definition encompasses "the construction, diffusion, and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, creation of shared beliefs, and ways of political practice in Europe". By adopting Subotić's definition, this paper considers 'European' norms, beliefs and practices, rather than only those directly associated with the EU. This approach is justified, as Moldovan actors involved in ML promotion interact with various governmental and non-governmental international actors, and not only with the EU.

An 'uploading' approach to Europeanisation concentrates on domestic actors' efforts to influence EU-level policies, instead of emphasising 'Europe's' top-down influence on them.⁷ For this paper, the approach entails studying Moldovan actors' influence on 'European' actors in a broad sense. By combining the 'top-down' and 'uploading' approaches, this paper considers that reciprocal interactions might influence the beliefs and practices of both domestic and international actors, rather than only those of domestic actors.

New institutionalist theories are frequently used to explain and interpret Europeanisation processes.⁸ The various 'new institutionalisms' aim to explain how institutions influence political and social outcomes.⁹ To gain the fullest understanding of the actors' interactions, this paper defines 'institutions' broadly to denote the patterns of interaction between the actors identified, whether or not they occur within formalised settings with codified rules and procedures. Secondly, while past literature has considered Europeanisation as both an independent and dependent variable, this paper adopts the latter approach.¹⁰ Thus, in brief, this paper studies how the patterns of interaction between Moldovan CSOs, international CSOs

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ Subotić, "Europe is a State of Mind".

⁷ Costa and Brack, *How the European Union Really Works*, 60.

⁸ See Bandov and Kolman, "Research on Europeanization in Literature"; Sedelmeier, *op. cit.*

⁹ Hall and Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms".

¹⁰ Bandov and Kolman, *op. cit.*, 136.

and international donors have influenced these actors' practices, beliefs and actions and – thereby – how ML is promoted in Moldova.

Rational choice (RCI) and sociological (SI) institutionalism are strands of 'new institutionalism' often used for studying Europeanisation among non-state actors.¹¹ RCI assumes that actors have fixed preferences and that non-state actors adjust strategically to the new context of European integration, for example by using European institutions as tools for advancing their interests.¹² By contrast, SI assumes that interactions within European-wide networks change actors' values, preferences and the 'logics of appropriateness' governing their actions, rather than merely changing their strategies.¹³ Accordingly, in discussing the findings in light of the theories, the paper considers whether actors' preferences are altered by their interactions.

The literature on civil society Europeanisation in Eastern Partnership countries has particularly considered EU funding programmes' effects on the organisations' actions and structures. EU grants for CSOs in the region have largely focused on individual short-term projects, which has driven applicant organisations to adopt more consultancy-like internal structures geared towards winning grants and managing projects.¹⁴ Meanwhile, funders have preferred projects with quantifiable outcomes, whereas evaluating the output of ML initiatives has been considered difficult partly due to challenges in measuring individuals' levels of media literacy.¹⁵ Within the EU, funding programmes have also been found to shift CSOs' focus towards activities like lobbying, research, and monitoring or administering state-run programmes.¹⁶ Consequently, some argue that international funding programmes weaken civil

¹¹ Borońska-Hryniewiecka, "Europeanization of Non-State Actors".

¹² *Ibid.*, 78 and 83; Bandov and Kolman, *op. cit.*, 136.

¹³ Borońska-Hryniewiecka, *op. cit.*, 83.

¹⁴ Aliyev, "Assessing the European Union's Assistance to Civil Society"; Buzogány, "Governance and Governmentality of EU Neighbourhood Policy".

¹⁵ Kurki, "Governmentality and EU Democracy Promotion"; Burn, "Process and Outcomes".

¹⁶ Börzel and Buzogány, "Environmental Organisations and the Europeanisation of Public Policy".

society's role as an intermediary between the public and the government by disconnecting organisations from their grassroots constituencies and the wider citizenry.¹⁷

One may consider whether such organisational changes simply indicate strategic adaptation to new circumstances, or whether they are also accompanied by genuine attitudinal change. Kurki¹⁸ argues that calls for funding foresee certain societal roles for CSOs, such as being a 'watchdog' of the government, or providing services in governmental actors' stead. When applying for funding, CSOs adopt language that reflects these logics, and Kurki therefore asserts that use of such language subconsciously alters CSO actors' underlying attitudes.¹⁹ By contrast, Buzogány²⁰ finds that Ukrainian and Georgian CSOs have criticised being assigned into roles where they undertake tasks like detailed legal analysis, which suggests that the organisations' actions have changed, but without corresponding changes in their perception of the 'appropriate' tasks for their organisations. Prior literature has not elaborated on international funders' responses to CSOs' criticisms, or how interactions with civil society may influence the funders' priorities. Studying how interactions between domestic CSOs and international funders influence the different actors' actions and priorities is therefore pertinent.

No single standard definition exists for 'media literacy', or 'media and information literacy' (MIL).²¹ This paper adopts the definition embraced by the European Commission's 'Media literacy expert group': ML "includes all the technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact with it".²² Such a broad definition helps ensure that all potentially relevant Moldovan projects are within the paper's scope. Meanwhile, the definition excludes activities

¹⁷ Lutsevych, *How to Finish a Revolution*, 4.

¹⁸ Kurki, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 362-363.

²⁰ Buzogány, "Civil Society Organisations Beyond the European Union".

²¹ See Jologua, *Media Literacy as an Instrument for Promoting the Public Sphere*, 13-20.

²² European Commission, *Media literacy expert group (E02541)*.

solely focusing on changing the legal operating framework for media, and capacity-building actions targeted at professional media.

Media literacy promotion helps to foster a healthy democracy and to combat disinformation. Mason et al²³ highlight that “democracies rely on informed citizens”, whilst media literacy is essential for informed public discourse. ML programmes can promote informed citizenship for example by teaching techniques for recognising political biases in media content.²⁴ Meanwhile, a 2018 report for the European Commission highlighted the significance of ML in a digital age, noting that media literacy improves societal resilience against disinformation.²⁵ Similarly, Jolls and Johnsen²⁶ explain that with digital media, professional journalists no longer gate-keep the information that the public receives, and simultaneously, the new technologies empower media literate citizens to express themselves. In sum, in a digital age, ML is an increasingly significant foundation for healthy democracy.

Both scholars and public actors have recognised civil society’s importance for ML promotion. European Audiovisual Observatory’s mapping of ML actions within the EU in 2010–2016 found that civil society was the most common type of stakeholder involved, ahead of public authorities and academia.²⁷ UNESCO’s 2014 Declaration on Media and Information Literacy states for example that civil society can support lifelong learning on media literacy, and reach disadvantaged groups.²⁸ In Moldova specifically, Marin²⁹ argues that given political elites’ relative unwillingness to address disinformation, international partners like the EU and the US have directed their resources to NGOs rather than state-led efforts. Civil society is thus a key stakeholder for ML promotion in Moldova and beyond.

²³ Mason, Krutka and Stoddard, “Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Challenge of Fake News”.

²⁴ Jolls and Johnsen, “Media Literacy: A Foundational Skill for Democracy”.

²⁵ European Commission, *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*, 26-27.

²⁶ Jolls and Johnsen, *op. cit.*

²⁷ European Audiovisual Observatory, *Mapping of Media Literacy Practices and Actions in EU-28*, 27 and 42-43.

²⁸ UNESCO, *Paris Declaration*, 6.

²⁹ Marin, “Information Resilience in Eastern Partnership Countries”.

MOLDOVAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND ACTIONS FOR MEDIA LITERACY

This section introduces the Moldovan context concerning media and ML. It first describes issues like partisan control of media and the prominence of rebroadcast Russian content. Then, it describes ML actions in Moldova, identifying the main funders and civil society actors involved.

The Republic of Moldova is a multi-ethnic society where the country's geopolitical orientation between the West and Russia is a highly divisive issue.³⁰ Romanian speakers represent nearly 80% of the population, Russian speakers account for 14.5%, while other significant minorities include the Gagauz and Ukrainians.³¹ The figures do not cover the self-proclaimed independent state of Transnistria, where ethnic Russians, Moldovans and Ukrainians each constitute roughly one third of the population.³² Around 50% of Moldovans are said to hold pro-Russian political views.³³ Television and Russian outlets play an important role in Moldovans' media consumption: 57% of Moldovans consider television as their main information source, while around 70% follow news on Russian media.³⁴

Moldova ranked 89th in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders (RSF).³⁵ As RSF highlights, media ownership in Moldova is heavily concentrated, with the coverage aligning with owners' political agendas.³⁶ In autumn 2020, Wilson wrote that the former Democratic Party leader Vladimir Plahotniuc owned five TV channels, while the Party of Socialists controlled three channels; the two also have significant holdings in local press outlets.³⁷

³⁰ Vardanean, *Moldova Between Russia and the West*

³¹ Moldovan National Bureau of Statistics, *Recensământul populației și al locuințelor*.

³² Dembińska, "Carving Out the Nation With the Enemy's Kin".

³³ Boulègue, Lutsevych and Marin, *Civil Society Under Russia's Threat*, 29; Vardanean, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Boulègue et al, *op. cit.*, 31.

³⁵ Reporters Without Borders, *Moldova*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Wilson, *Lessons from Belarus*.

Russian media products spreading pro-Russian narratives and propaganda are highly present in Moldova.³⁸ Multiple television channels have frequently rebroadcast Russian programming: for example in autumn 2017, two thirds of Moldovan TV news content concerning international leaders originated from Russian channels.³⁹ Even more strikingly, in Transnistria, broadcasting signals from the rest of Moldova are jammed, with Russian content broadcast on Moldovan channels' signal frequencies.⁴⁰ Russian online influence in Moldova manifests, for example, through pro-Russian trolling on social networks like VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, and through the Russian state-affiliated Sputnik news portal which received over 10% of Moldovan web traffic in October 2017.⁴¹

In sum, Moldova has a frozen conflict with a pro-Russian separatist government in Transnistria, the country's overall geopolitical orientation constitutes a major political fault line, and Russian propaganda and disinformation are present in the country's information sphere. Thus, besides hampering democratic public discourse, disinformation may also be considered a national security threat.⁴² The literature has highlighted promotion of critical media consumption and actions to expose media manipulations as important ways to address disinformation in Moldova.⁴³ Meanwhile, media literacy also helps citizens recognise biased coverage in an environment where various outlets have close partisan connections.

'Stop Fals!' led by the Association of Independent Press (Asociația Presei Independente, AIP) is perhaps the most prominent Moldovan fact-checking initiative.⁴⁴ Active since 2015, the initiative debunks fake news by publishing journalistic reports on the stopfals.md platform and on various other websites and newspapers.⁴⁵ Stop Fals has sequentially received funding

³⁸ Boulègue et al, *op. cit.*, 29-30; Rosca, "Media Security Structural Indicators", 397-398.

³⁹ Curararu, *op. cit.*, 217-218; Pasha, Cantarji and Sterpu, *Republic of Moldova's Television Content*.

⁴⁰ Curararu, *op. cit.*, 210.

⁴¹ Boulègue et al, *op. cit.*, 32.

⁴² Rosca, *op. cit.*, 374-376.

⁴³ Boulègue et al, *op. cit.*, 34-35; Rosca, *op. cit.*, 398; Curararu, *op. cit.*, 232-233.

⁴⁴ Curararu, *op. cit.*, 230-231; Boulègue et al, *op. cit.*, 32-33; Rosca, *op. cit.*, 394-395.

⁴⁵ Curararu, *op. cit.*, 230-231.

from different international governmental actors: from USAID in 2015–2017, the EU in 2017–2019, and the US Embassy in 2020.⁴⁶

Different initiatives have drawn attention to trolling and disinformation on social media. During the Independent Journalism Centre's (Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent, IJC) annual 'Fifth Power' media hackathons held since 2015, participants have created various media tools, including online games and quizzes on media literacy and critical thinking.⁴⁷ For example, the 2016 edition, co-organised with Deutsche Welle's DW Akademie, yielded the 'Trolless' browser extension, which allows users to flag troll accounts and displays warnings for reported users.⁴⁸ Shortly before the 2019 parliamentary elections, nearly 200 profiles and pages were removed from Facebook and Instagram thanks to the extension.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the Institute for Public Policy (IPP) think tank has regularly produced research about disinformation on Moldovan social media, with funding from the German Marshall Fund.⁵⁰

Public libraries have been another partner in ML promotion in Moldova. The Novateca project, with funding from USAID and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has seen investments in over 1,000 public libraries, generating tools to improve visitors' internet skills, among other outcomes.⁵¹ The American-founded NGO IREX has run the Novateca programme in Moldova.⁵² Moreover, IREX Europe⁵³, doing business as Equal Rights & Independent Media (ERIM), has since 2014 been running a series of projects entitled 'Strengthening Independent Media and Media Literacy' (SIMML), where Moldovan librarians have been trained to organise local ML sessions and set up 'media corners' in libraries.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Stop Fals, *Despre noi*.

⁴⁷ IJC, *The online edition of the Fifth Power Media Hackathon announced its winners*; IJC, *Winners of the "Fifth Power" Media Hackathon*.

⁴⁸ Curararu, *op. cit.*, 231-232; IJC, *Winners of the second media hackathon "The Fifth Power" have been named*.

⁴⁹ Internews, *Civil Society Tracks Trolls and Fakes*.

⁵⁰ Institute for Public Policy, *Articles on disinformation on social networks in the Republic of Moldova*.

⁵¹ Curararu, *op. cit.*, 232.

⁵² Marin, *op. cit.*, 15.

⁵³ ERIM is not part of the IREX organisation headquartered in Washington DC; the two are separate organisations.

⁵⁴ Palamarcu, "Media and Information Literacy Project in the Republic of Moldova"; ERIM, *Strengthening Independent Media and Media Literacy in Moldova (SIMML III)*.

Various other initiatives also promote critical media consumption, and consumers' ability to create their own media content. For example, DW Akademie has supported local stakeholders including the Youth Media Centre (Centrul Media pentru Tineri, YMC) in organising relevant workshops and 'training of trainers', especially for young people.⁵⁵ YMC was also a local implementing partner in the EU's €400,000 'Empowering Youth to Become Civic Actors' project in 2017–2019, during which it trained nearly 200 young people in media production and literacy.⁵⁶ Altogether, in 2019, YMC reported hosting 84 media training sessions with 1,668 attendees aged 15–18; besides DW Akademie and the EU, the organisation listed for example IREX Europe (ERIM), the Swedish development cooperation organisation IM, the United Nations, the German political foundation Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, and the Swiss diplomatic mission in Moldova as its funders.⁵⁷ Another ongoing initiative is AIP's 'Development of Critical Thinking of Rural Population, Pupils and Future Teachers' project, funded by the US Embassy in Moldova, which involves creating training materials and organising activities under the Stop Fals brand.⁵⁸ For its part, IJC runs an online platform, *mediacritica.md*, dedicated to fostering critical thinking; launched as part of the Stop Fals campaign, *Mediacritica* publishes materials like news, commentary and case studies.⁵⁹

Promotion of critical media consumption also features as a secondary objective in some international programmes run in Moldova. For instance, Internews's MEDIA-M project, funded by USAID and UK Aid, has promoted critical thinking, for example through displaying ML-themed posters on minibuses, and organising training sessions for Roma people.⁶⁰ However, the headline objectives of the project, run with an estimated budget of USD 6.35

⁵⁵ Deutsche Welle, *op. cit.*; Ponomarenko, *Zooming in on Media and Information Literacy*.

⁵⁶ EU4Moldova, *Empowering Youth to Become Civic Actors*.

⁵⁷ YMC, *Raport anual 2019*.

⁵⁸ AIP, *Development of Critical Thinking of Rural Population, Pupils and Future Teachers*.

⁵⁹ Gugulan, "Media Convergence in the Republic of Moldova".

⁶⁰ Internews, *Posters in Minibuses*; Internews in Moldova, *Media Literacy for Roma Communities in Moldova*.

million in 2017–2022, are capacity-building for independent media and addressing the media regulatory environment.⁶¹

Moreover, civil society has supported state institutions in introducing media literacy components to school curricula. Optional media education courses were introduced in primary schools in 2017, and by the 2019/20 schoolyear, primary, secondary and upper secondary schools had elective courses on the subject.⁶² The curricula were designed with the participation of IJC, DW Akademie and the MEDIA-M project.⁶³ Moreover, IJC has organised training for teachers of these courses, and printed textbooks.⁶⁴ The organisation reports that over 2,700 students followed the courses in 2019/20.⁶⁵

In sum, this section identified certain key civil society actors in ML promotion in Moldova, including the Association of Independent Press, Independent Journalism Centre, Youth Media Centre, ERIM, DW Akademie and Internews. The actors have received funding from governmental bodies like the EU and USAID, but also from non-governmental sources like IM Swedish Development Partner and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The review aligns with Curararu's observation that relevant Moldovan initiatives largely depend on foreign funding.⁶⁶ Actions have taken various shapes, including debunking of fake news, creation of digital media tools, promotion of digital skills and critical thinking, training for media content production, and design of school curricula.

Literature on civil society-run ML projects in Moldova has largely limited itself to listing the ongoing projects, typically as part of a broader discussion on the media landscape. Likewise, literature on similar initiatives in other EaP countries has mainly been descriptive,

⁶¹ USAID, *Moldova: Governing Justly and Democratically*.

⁶² IJC, *Media Education in Moldovan Schools*.

⁶³ Internews, *Braille Textbooks Make Media Literacy Accessible*.

⁶⁴ IJC, *Media Education in Moldovan Schools*, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Curararu, *op. cit.*, 230.

or focused on assessing the projects' effectiveness.⁶⁷ However, for instance Lokshyna and Prykhodkina⁶⁸ find that IREX's actions in Ukraine have brought media education closer to international standards developed within organisations like UNESCO and the EU. Nonetheless, at least English-language literature has yet to analyse how civil society-run ML actions are shaped in Moldova or other EaP countries.

METHODOLOGY

This section first articulates the paper's research questions. Then, it describes the data and how they are analysed.

First, the paper considers the actors' interactions concerning the definition of 'media literacy':

RQ1: What is the respective influence of domestic civil society, international civil society actors and donors in shaping the definitions of media literacy underpinning media literacy promotion in Moldova?

The question is relevant for debates on whether principles of media literacy are universally applicable. For example, Jolls and Johnsen⁶⁹ argue that in a "global media culture", the principles of approaching the media taught in ML programmes are global, while Walkosz et al⁷⁰ describe media literacy as a "global force, with a standard vocabulary and common understanding". However, since ML encompasses various aspects like critical thinking, ability to access the media, and media production skills, certain aspects might be prioritised over others depending on local needs. It is thus appropriate to examine international actors' influence in articulating the theoretical basis for ML education in Moldova.

⁶⁷ For Ukraine, see Haigh, Haigh and Matychak, "Information Literacy vs. Fake News"; Murrock et al, "Winning The War On State-Sponsored Propaganda", Negreyeva and Prasad, "Developing Media Literacy". For Armenia, see Grigoryan, "Taking Media Literacy Education in Armenia to the Next Level".

⁶⁸ Lokshyna and Prykhodkina, "Media Education".

⁶⁹ Jolls and Johnsen, *op. cit.*, 1397-1398.

⁷⁰ Walkosz, Jolls and Sund, *Global/Local: Media Literacy for the Global Village*.

One may expect that international actors have significantly influenced Moldovan civil society actors' understandings of media literacy. As ML actions in Moldova have largely depended on international support, Moldovan and international actors can be expected to interact constantly. Moreover, since the digital media landscape changes continuously, domestic actors may be prone to 'update' their understandings of what media literacy is. More specifically, we expect that international civil society actors have had greater influence than donors, as the former are more specialised in the subject and may therefore share insights from the detailed ML work they have done elsewhere. Assuming that international civil society actors interact with Moldovan CSOs more closely than international funders do, the expectation would also align with the sociological institutionalist argument that frequent interactions increase the likelihood of changes in actors' underlying attitudes.⁷¹

Secondly, the paper considers the design of concrete media literacy actions:

RQ2: What is the respective influence of domestic civil society, international civil society actors and donors in shaping the activities undertaken for promoting media literacy?

The question addresses the extent to which ML projects have local ownership. Using input from Moldovan-based CSOs can ensure that on-the-ground expertise is reflected in the design of projects. Secondly, local ownership may strengthen the legitimacy of international assistance: for example, the EU has considered that local ownership helps prevent assistance from simply amounting to the EU imposing its agenda.⁷² Local ownership can be considered particularly important for the legitimacy of ML projects, as they often seek to inform citizens' ways of consuming news content, and may therefore influence citizens' attitudes. For instance, Fedorov and Levitskaya, writing from a Russian perspective, contend that Western-supported ML activities in Moldova are intertwined with anti-Russian political agendas.⁷³ In sum, local

⁷¹ Checkel, "Social Construction and Integration", 549.

⁷² Petrova and Delcour, *op. cit.*, 343.

⁷³ Fedorov and Levitskaya, "Comparative Analysis of the Development of Mass Media Education".

ownership is a significant question in a context where media literacy may risk being politicised as an element of the geopolitical controversies touching Moldova.

One can expect that the funders largely define the projects' overall purposes, but civil society determines what types of actions are taken. As articulated above, both legitimacy considerations and CSOs' on-the-ground expertise may motivate giving broad discretion to civil society. However, funders can be expected to ensure that projects support their strategic objectives in Moldova. As such, we expect that the degree of independence that Moldovan CSOs have in running their projects is a result of rational cost-benefit calculations and negotiation between the actors, in line with rational choice institutionalist assumptions.

The analysis is based on written primary sources and interviews. The written sources are project descriptions, project assessments, organisations' annual reports, governmental actors' policy documents on Moldova, and ML teaching materials. The documents were collected from the websites of actors identified in the above section; additionally, the paper considers other projects identified through the literature review or thanks to comments made by interviewees. Annual reports were collected from 2013 onwards where possible, to build a timeframe that includes the entirety of the period since the highly publicised disinformation campaigns in Ukraine in 2014. The written sources are listed in Annex I. In this paper, 'domestic civil society actors' refer to NGOs and similar actors which are headquartered in Moldova, and are not a local chapter of a cross-border organisation. Association of Independent Press, Independent Journalism Centre, Youth Media Centre and the Association of Librarians of the Republic of Moldova (Asociatia Bibliotecarilor din Republica Moldova, ABRM) are included in this category. By contrast, Moldovan chapters of international CSOs, and other CSOs not headquartered in Moldova, are viewed as 'international' civil society actors. This category includes Internews, ERIM, IREX and DW Akademie. While Deutsche Welle is a German public broadcaster, this paper categorises DW Akademie as a civil society actor because it has participated in organising actions in Moldova, rather than only acting as a

funder. Finally, the other actors identified are included in the category of funders, encompassing governmental actors and foundations offering financial support for the above actors.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of Moldovan CSOs, international CSOs and funders. The interview questions revolved around the respective actors' conceptions of the notion of media literacy, and how the actors influence each other concerning the design of ML actions. Interviewees representing CSOs were managing directors, project coordinators, or media literacy trainers. Interviewees representing funders were officials working on Moldova. Additionally, two researchers studying the Moldovan media landscape were interviewed to collect broader insight and to help triangulate the findings from other interviews. The below table lists the 14 interviews; some interviewees preferred to remain anonymous.

Table 1: Interviews

Name	Organisation	Date (all dates 2021)	Remarks
Canaly, Olga	IM Swedish Development Partner	11 March	
Cepoi, Corina	Internews in Moldova	25 February	
Encev, Gabriel	Youth Media Centre	13 April	
Gogu, Nadine	Independent Journalism Centre	23 February	
Gonța, Aneta	Researcher	12 April	
Palamarcu, Viorica	Equal Rights & Independent Media	2 March	
Ponomarenko, Olena	Deutsche Welle Akademie	16 March	
Rosca, Alla	Researcher	9 March	
Vasilica, Victoria	Association of Librarians of the Republic of Moldova	1 April	An interpreter was used; the interviewee spoke in Romanian
Official	Donor embassy 1	31 March	
Official	Donor embassy 2	22 April	
Official	European Commission	8 April	
Official	USAID	10 March	
Program Officer	Swedish Embassy, Chisinau	19 March	

Representatives of most key actors were interviewed, although, for instance, no interview could be obtained with the Association of Independent Press. However, analysis of written sources also allows the paper to report findings about AIP.

While first-hand insight from stakeholders was instrumental for understanding the actors' perceptions and attitudes and for going beyond prior literature, reliance on self-reporting by interviewees also raises data validity issues. For instance, interviewees may overstate their organisation's impact, thus biasing the data.⁷⁴ To mitigate biases, interviewees' statements were compared with each other and with the written data; no noteworthy contradictions were identified. However, since especially the findings on the second research question are largely interview-based, the potential impact of self-reporting issues on data validity cannot be discounted.

The written sources generally provided sufficient data for answering the research questions. The main limitation was that publicly accessible project descriptions were typically limited to webpages detailing the project's main objectives and achievements. Thus, the written materials were not ideally suited for analysing how funders and CSOs might have negotiated how ML actions should be designed. However, the interviews addressed this subject, thus complementing the available written data.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the findings and places them in a theoretical context. It first finds that a small community of actors has defined the theoretical basis for media literacy education in Moldova, with international civil society actors playing a crucial role. Then, it finds that CSOs have defined the practical design of their ML actions rather independently. The final subsection argues that diffusion of international ML expertise to Moldovan actors has led to 'thick

⁷⁴ Berry, "Validity and Reliability Issues in Elite Interviewing".

learning’ as articulated by sociological institutionalism, whilst rational choice institutionalism can describe actors’ deliberations on the design of practical media literacy actions.

Shaping Moldovan actors’ understandings of media literacy

ML promotion in Moldova is done by a small and consistent community. AIP, IJC, YMC, ERIM or Internews were involved as local implementing partners in all the projects identified, besides one project where media literacy is merely an ancillary objective.⁷⁵ Moldovan-based organisations’ annual reports show that especially US governmental actors and DW Akademie were prominent funders throughout the timeframe. Furthermore, many key individuals have belonged to the community for years: for example, the current Directors of AIP, IJC and YMC all have held their positions since at least 2015.⁷⁶ Individual experts may significantly influence how ML is explained to Moldovans: for example, Natalia Grîu was a member of the working groups for all media education school curricula, a co-author for each respective schoolbook, and author of the media education manual for Moldovan librarians.⁷⁷

Further, the USAID official interviewed pointed to the regular communication between USAID and the NGOs, and to conferences which bring actors together.⁷⁸ Though not explicitly mentioned by the interviewee, one networking arena is the annual Mass Media Forum, co-organised by AIP, IJC and other actors and funded by multiple international actors including USAID.⁷⁹ For example, the 2020 edition was attended by organisations like DW Akademie, Internews, the EU delegation to Moldova, USAID, Freedom House and various Moldovan news outlets.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ EU4Moldova, *Strategic Communication and Support to Mass-Media*.

⁷⁶ IJC Annual Report 2013, accessible from IJC, *Reports*; AIP Annual Report 2013, accessible from AIP, *Strategies & Reports*; YMC Annual Report 2015, accessible from YMC, *Despre noi*.

⁷⁷ Media education curricula for years 10-11, 7-8 and 3-4, accessible at Mediacritica, *Curriculum*; Media education textbooks for years 10-11, 7-8 and 3-4, accessible at Mediacritica, *Manual*; IREX Europe, *Manual de Educație Mediatică și Informațională: Autori*.

⁷⁸ Interview with an official, USAID.

⁷⁹ Mass Media Forum, *Forumul Mass-Media 2020*.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

The USAID interviewee explained that different international governmental actors cooperate and share a goal of closer EU–Moldova relations, which in turn requires a strong media landscape underpinned by Western-style journalistic traditions and criteria.⁸¹ Similar goals are echoed in relevant Moldovan-based organisations’ activities and objectives, which further strengthens the possibility of socialisation. For example, AIP’s 2013, 2014, 2016 and 2017 annual reports mentioned “promoting European integration” among the organisation’s objectives.⁸² Concerning the IJC, for instance in 2014, the organisation produced a video series dedicated to reducing negative stereotypes about the EU, and more broadly, the organisation describes “strengthening a free and viable press” among its key objectives.⁸³ More specifically concerning the diffusion of ML-related norms, Alla Rosca said that the topic is a new trend globally, and that it is “step by step coming to Moldova”, especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, DW Akademie’s Program Director for Moldova, Olena Ponomarenko, mentioned DW Akademie’s international Media and Information Literacy Expert Network as an arena for transferring expertise and approaches, and noted that IJC’s Director Nadine Gogu belongs to the network.⁸⁵ In sum, international actors help spread new notions on media and ML across Moldova.

International governmental actors’ strategic documents provide no detailed guidance on how media literacy should be understood. Of the different documents, only USAID’s 2020–2025 strategy for Moldova specifically mentions media literacy, by stating that USAID will build on the ML education programme that has been brought into Moldovan schools, and by mentioning media literacy as a way to strengthen societal resistance to malign influences.⁸⁶ Similarly, one interviewee said that when their embassy seeks project partners, the project’s

⁸¹ Interview with an official, USAID.

⁸² AIP, *Strategies & Reports*.

⁸³ IJC annual reports for 2014 and 2020, accessible from IJC, *Reports*.

⁸⁴ Interview with Alla Rosca.

⁸⁵ Interview with Olena Ponomarenko.

⁸⁶ USAID, *Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) 2020–2025*.

contribution to ML is one – albeit non-essential – criterion, but that the partners retain the freedom to define the notion of media literacy themselves.⁸⁷

By contrast, DW Akademie has disseminated detailed ML expertise to Moldovan actors. For example, when asked whether IJC's definitions for the notion of media literacy have changed over time, the Director Nadine Gogu responded that the organisation had from the beginning worked with DW Akademie, which has well-developed concepts of the topic.⁸⁸ Similarly, Youth Media Centre's activity reports show that experts from DW Akademie often served as trainers in YMC's organisational development workshops, including workshops covering training methods for ML education.⁸⁹ Gabriel Enceev, a media literacy trainer at YMC, said that DW Akademie's training sessions influenced how he sees media literacy, as the topic was initially new to him.⁹⁰

Moreover, funds from a DW project were used for creating the school textbooks for media education, and Aneta Gonța who was a consultant for developing the upper secondary school textbook described DW as an important partner in elaborating learning materials, with DW experts contributing to the work.⁹¹ Olena Ponomarenko also discussed workshops on teaching MIL that DW Akademie has offered for teachers. Furthermore, Ponomarenko referred to evaluation reports where DW Akademie found that it had introduced the concept of media and information literacy to local actors like YMC, which had not previously consciously acknowledged that their activities amounted to MIL promotion. In sum, DW Akademie has influenced Moldovan-based actors' understandings of the concept of media literacy.

⁸⁷ Interview with an official from donor embassy 2.

⁸⁸ Interview with Nadine Gogu.

⁸⁹ YMC annual reports, accessible from YMC, *Despre noi*.

⁹⁰ Interview with Gabriel Enceev.

⁹¹ Media education textbooks for years 10-11, 7-8 and 3-4, accessible at Mediaticritica, *Manual*; Interview with Aneta Gonța.

The Moldovan government has cooperated closely with domestic and international civil society in preparing educational materials on media literacy. The ML manual for librarians was developed within an ERIM project, with the Moldovan government official Natalia Grîu as the main author, but the manual's contents were reviewed by ERIM team members.⁹² Meanwhile, Aneta Gonța said that the initiative for introducing school courses on media education came from IJC, while international governmental actors and DW offered financial support and expertise; ultimately, the school curricula were published by the Ministry of Education.

The school curricula and textbooks mention various European and international policy documents on media literacy. The curriculum for secondary education refers to the definition of ML presented in the UNESCO Paris Agenda of 2007, while the curriculum for upper secondary education additionally references the 2008 European Parliament resolution on media literacy in a digital world.⁹³ Furthermore, the curriculum for upper secondary education explains that Moldova “takes and learns from the practices and experiences of European countries, which have a solid experience” in the field.⁹⁴ Each textbook lists documents offering a “normative framework” on media education; the lists feature official documents on media literacy from international bodies like the EU, UNESCO and the Council of Europe, besides national-level documents.⁹⁵ Thus, governmental actors wield indirect influence on the definition of ML in Moldova by offering models and standards for media education at schools.

Though international actors have brought their notions of media literacy to Moldova, they also emphasised the need to adapt to the local context. For example, when highlighting the need to tailor projects for local needs, one donor embassy official said that disinformation as a hybrid threat is a crucial challenge in Moldova.⁹⁶ Likewise, the USAID interviewee said

⁹² IREX Europe, *Manual de Educație Mediatică și Informațională: Autori, op. cit.*

⁹³ Media education curricula for years 10–11 and 7–8, accessible at Mediacritica, *Curriculum*.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Media education textbooks for years 10-11, 7-8 and 3-4, accessible at Mediacritica, *Manual*.

⁹⁶ Interview with an official from donor embassy 1.

that while their objective of promoting critical thinking is the same in different countries, they take into account the high presence of Russian media content in Moldova. IJC's Nadine Gogu also stated that international donors often emphasise critical thinking skills when working with Moldova, adding that she understood the reasons behind such an approach. However, she said that IJC has reminded donors of the necessity of addressing other ML needs such as many rural residents' lacking skills to access the media and their lacking cybersecurity awareness.

The interviews suggested that donors recognise and defer to CSOs' media literacy expertise. When asked if the Swedish government has influenced CSOs' understandings of what ML means, the Swedish embassy interviewee said that the partners' expertise on the subject is greater than that of the interviewee or their colleagues.⁹⁷ Likewise, another interviewee from a donor embassy said that organisations like IJC and Internews are highly professional and their understanding of media literacy need not be questioned, but instead the embassy can learn from them.⁹⁸

In summary, a relatively small community of actors has defined the theoretical basis for ML education in Moldova. Official documents like the UNESCO Paris Agenda contribute to offering a normative basis, but non-governmental actors like DW Akademie and ERIM have been instrumental in bringing international insight on media literacy to Moldova through practical activities like designing manuals and offering workshops. Meanwhile, interviews suggest that donor embassies defer to specialised CSOs' expertise on the subject.

Civil society organisations' independence in designing their media literacy projects

CSOs have followed their own priorities in designing their projects, and even redirected funders' priorities. For example, IJC's Nadine Gogu said that international partners' strategies are created in bilateral cooperation with CSOs, while Internews's Corina Cepoi⁹⁹ said that the

⁹⁷ Interview with a Program Officer, Swedish Embassy.

⁹⁸ Interview with an official from donor embassy 1, *op. cit.*

⁹⁹ Interview with Corina Cepoi.

organisation has contributed to bringing ML to funders' agendas. Similarly, one donor embassy official said that they and other likeminded donors have their ideas on where to direct support, but the embassy will likely consider continuing to support ML initiatives as long as CSOs express need for it.¹⁰⁰ Olga Canaly from IM Swedish Development Partner, which has funded YMC, reported that IM has somewhat adjusted to YMC's strategic objectives, for example by supporting YMC's suntparinte.md website dedicated to parents even though the activity initially seemed complicated to fit with IM's priorities.¹⁰¹ Canaly referenced local ownership as a principle of the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, and emphasised the importance of letting organisations advance their own priorities. Thus, CSOs do not simply adapt to funders' wishes, but they can advance their own preferences in negotiation with funders.

While projects comply with the funders' broad objectives, the implementing organisations determine the practicalities. For example, the Swedish embassy interviewee said that projects should comply with the funder's values, but while quality checks may involve the funder proposing adjustments to the project, the recommendations are typically technical whilst the projects' creative design is up to the CSOs. Accordingly, an interviewee from another embassy said that donors should not "dictate" what the organisations do; instead, the interviewee saw the embassy as an actor enabling projects to be carried out.¹⁰² Meanwhile, Viorica Palamarciuc noted that funders have been understanding towards adjustments within ERIM's activities, such as adding small activities on new topics, or adjusting event sizes depending on local contexts.¹⁰³ Furthermore, for example the EU's 2016/17 call for proposals for the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) contained no

¹⁰⁰ Interview with an official from donor embassy 2, *op. cit.*

¹⁰¹ Interview with Olga Canaly, IM Swedish Development Partner. [Suntparinte.md](http://suntparinte.md) is not specifically focused on media literacy, but offers resources for parents on various topics related to children's health, safety and education. IM has supported YMC's organisational development, but does not directly support YMC's media literacy actions.

¹⁰² Interview with an official from donor embassy 2, *op. cit.*

¹⁰³ Interview with Viorica Palamarciuc.

detailed instructions on how media literacy should be advanced, but two ML-related Moldovan projects received funding through the call.¹⁰⁴ In sum, CSOs have significant discretion in determining the practicalities of their actions.

Both the IJC and Internews interviewees said that the organisations' own research inspires their actions. Nadine Gogu said that IJC initially studied how media literacy is advanced in other countries, and upon concluding the research, decided to advocate for a separate school course for media literacy, rather than integrating ML components into other subjects. Moreover, data from the organisation's surveys has helped IJC assess the need for various types of actions. Original research is arguably one means whereby the organisations can display their expertise, and demonstrate specific needs to funders.

Nonetheless, international actors have also influenced the types of actions carried out by the organisations. When asked about the subject, the European Commission official said that in different fields, Moldovan organisations have increasingly emphasised gender equality in their project proposals.¹⁰⁵ The official described the need to strike a balance: the EU has its policy objectives to advance, but civil society actions lose their added value if they are simply determined by the EU. Concerning ML projects specifically, Aneta Gonța said that while problems like propagandistic content in the information sphere remain, funders constantly expect Moldovan organisations to innovate new ways to address the issues, which requires creativity from the organisations. Gonța added that while sometimes project outcomes are not easily countable, funders are attracted by measurable results, and for example the number of pupils taking the media education school course is a concrete figure to report. In sum, the interviews offered some indications that international demands influence civil society actions.

Avoidance of unproductive overlaps between different organisations' activities arose in multiple interviews. For instance, Viorica Palamarciuc said that ERIM avoids interfering with

¹⁰⁴ European Commission, *EIDHR Country-Based Support Scheme for the Republic of Moldova*; European Commission, *Publication Award BS EIDHR 2017*.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with an official, European Commission.

other organisations' actions concentrating on formal education, while the interviewees from Internews and DW Akademie also highlighted the importance of complementarity to other organisations' actions. Meanwhile, Gabriel Encev said that YMC's format of two-day ML training sessions, including practical media production exercises for participants, gives them a distinctive "trademark". The interviewees from USAID and another donor embassy¹⁰⁶ likewise noted that existing actions influence their planning, with the USAID interviewee highlighting the geographical distribution of projects as one factor. Multiple interviewees emphasising, unprompted, the importance of coordination arguably showcases the close communication between the different actors, furthermore suggesting that different actors broadly espouse a common vision for developing ML in Moldova. Indeed, when asked, one interviewee from a donor embassy said that they strongly feel that different actors have the same ideas of how ML should be promoted in Moldova.¹⁰⁷

International actors engage in capacity-building to enable Moldovan-based organisations to run actions independently. Viorica Palamarcu explained that ERIM has worked with the Association of Librarians to train librarians on media literacy, and that ABRM is intended to carry on with the activities once ERIM's project finishes. IREX's Novateca project has also involved organisational development support for ABRM, for example reforms of the organisation's financial management structures.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, Olga Canaly described IM Swedish Development Partner's organisational support for YMC, such as guiding the organisation on how to develop a strategic plan. Meanwhile, Corina Cepoi said that one of Internews's five-year objectives in Moldova is to empower local NGOs to implement large-scale projects, so that Internews presence would be unnecessary. AIP, IJC and YMC all report significant financial growth in their annual reports. Since 2013, AIP's total income nearly tripled, the funding that IJC received for projects more than doubled, and YMC's number of

¹⁰⁶ Interview with an official from donor embassy 1, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁷ Interview with an official from donor embassy 2, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁸ Novateca, *Newsletter*, December 2015, 4.

employees grew three-fold; all organisations are chiefly funded by international partners.¹⁰⁹ In sum, international actors have emphasised Moldovan-based CSOs' organisational development and self-sufficiency, and though ML promotion is not the only activity of the organisations concerned, the key Moldovan organisations working on ML are increasingly well-resourced. However, the data confirm that foreign support remains crucial for the organisations.

Some ML actions specifically target rural areas and minority groups, with the initiative mainly coming from the CSOs. Viorica Palamarcu from ERIM said that librarians are useful multipliers for ML promotion, as they are often trusted figures in their local communities. Meanwhile, Internews's Corina Cepoi said that displaying media literacy posters in minibuses was inspired by the observation that no ML action targeted rural citizens commuting to Chisinau yet. An interviewee from one donor embassy said that they choose to focus on Russian speakers, thus catering to a community with weaker access to reliable media in their mother tongue.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Swedish Embassy interviewee said that the increasing focus on regions has been perceived in the requests made by NGOs, which suggests that civil society has taken initiative for widening the geographical scope of actions. Likewise, Aneta Gonța explained that both funders and CSOs recognise the importance of ML promotion in rural areas, but that the initiative has rather come from local CSOs that were inspired by their local expertise.

Media literacy is continuing to rise higher on international donors' agendas. The European Commission interviewee said that disinformation and strategic communication may gain prominence in upcoming EU documents on Moldova, such as the next multiannual programming document. The official added that the EU's approach to the Moldovan media

¹⁰⁹ AIP annual reports for 2013 and 2019, accessible from AIP, *Strategies & Reports*; IJC annual report for 2020 and financial report for 2013, accessible from IJC, *Reports*; YMC annual reports for 2016 and 2019, accessible from YMC, *Despre noi*.

¹¹⁰ Interview with an official from donor embassy 1, *op. cit.*

landscape increasingly emphasises the audience's competences in media consumption, rather than just the 'supply side' of ensuring objective reporting. USAID Country Development Cooperation Strategies for Moldova already indicate a growing focus on media: while the 2013–2020 document explicitly stated that the media was not a focus area due to competing priorities, the 2020–2025 document commits USAID to supporting independent media and ML.¹¹¹ Thus, activity for media literacy promotion in Moldova may be expected to continue to strengthen.

To summarise, CSOs have been able to define their activities relatively independently, with major actors reporting that they can negotiate with funders on the priority areas to address, based on their own research and programmatic priorities. However, funders also have specific preferences, with one interviewee mentioning innovation of new modes of action and the quantifiability of project outcomes. Avoiding overlaps between different organisations' actions guides both CSOs' and funders priorities, with different organisations having their signature activities like trainings for librarians or non-formal courses for youth. Another trend is the focus on rural areas, with interviews suggesting that the main impetus for targeting rural communities has come from CSOs themselves. The resources of key Moldovan CSOs working in the field have grown significantly in the past years, and ML promotion continues to gain prominence on international funders' agendas. Though the interviews highlighted international actors' aim to enable CSOs to become self-sufficient, international funding has remained crucial for ML actions.

Interpreting the findings through theories

The findings for the first research question support the expectation that international civil society actors shape the definitions of media literacy underpinning ML promotion in Moldova. Actors like DW Akademie and ERIM have shared their ML expertise with

¹¹¹ USAID, *Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) 2013–2020*; USAID, *Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) 2020–2025*, *op. cit.*

Moldovan actors through regular interaction in arenas like workshops. The paper argued that Moldovan organisations' favourable stance towards European integration and Western journalistic standards further facilitated the diffusion of ideas, which corresponds with Schimmelfennig et al's¹¹² argument that identification with the "Western international community" fosters socialisation into international norms. In sum, Moldovan CSO actors' understandings of 'media literacy' have become Europeanised through a learning process involving the 'downloading' of 'European' civil society expertise. In turn, this 'European' expertise informs how ML is explained to the public in learning materials and actions organised by civil society.

While the findings show that diffusion of 'European' expertise has influenced how Moldovan actors conceive media literacy, one must consider whether the new knowledge is also accompanied by changes in the actors' beliefs and preferences. The methodological challenge is the difficulty of obtaining direct, reliable evidence of change in actors' underlying intentions.¹¹³ However, there is reason to conclude that such change, described as 'thick learning',¹¹⁴ by sociological institutionalists, has occurred in the present case.

The interactions between international and Moldovan actors align with prior theory on when interactions are likely to alter the actors' underlying preferences. The interactions correspond with multiple hypotheses presented in Checkel's¹¹⁵ review. Firstly, ML was introduced as a new concept to actors from organisations like YMC. Besides the circumstantial evidence offered by the match with theoretical assumptions, the YMC interviewee's explanation that DW Akademie workshops 'changed how he sees the topic' directly suggests that attitudinal change took place. Secondly, the international civil society actors involved are, to adopt Checkel's wording, "authoritative members of the in-group to which the persuadee

¹¹² Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel, *International Socialization in Europe*, 60.

¹¹³ See Kurki, *op. cit.*, 362-363.

¹¹⁴ Borońska-Hryniewiecka, *op. cit.*, 83.

¹¹⁵ Checkel, *op. cit.*, 549.

belongs or wants to belong”:¹¹⁶ ERIM and DW Akademie have run numerous projects in this field, located in multiple countries. Finally, Checkel writes that repeated interactions and meetings between the parties foster thick learning, while the findings showed that actors from the same organisations have cooperated for years, and interviewees from USAID and DW Akademie specifically referenced frequent meetings and an established international MIL network as means to share approaches. Besides the abovementioned arguments, one may argue that upon acquiring new knowledge of ML and pedagogical strategies for advancing it, CSO actors feel a need to apply the knowledge to practical projects, which implies adjustments in their preferences.

The findings therefore correspond with theoretical expectations for ‘thick learning’, and interviews additionally offered some direct backing for the theoretical assumptions. Thus, one may conclude that sociological institutionalism offers an appropriate tool for analysing how international (civil society) actors diffused their understandings of media literacy to Moldovan civil society actors, influencing the values and preferences of the latter in the process.

Regarding the second research question, the findings mostly support the expectation that CSOs have broad discretion on designing their actions, whilst funders give guidance on the actions’ overall objectives. Interviews with both funders and CSOs suggested that civil society actors have independently assessed what actions are needed, and negotiated with funders on that basis. Some funders have specific priorities, such as catering to minority groups, but overall, funders rarely give detailed guidance on what needs ML actions should address. Thus, the ‘overall guidance’ on the actions’ objectives remains largely at the headline level of promoting media literacy or a healthy media sphere.

The finding that CSOs had specific preferences on what projects to advance, and sought funders’ support for these actions, aligns with the rational choice institutionalist notion of actors using ‘European’ instances as tools for promoting their pre-existing interests.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 550.

Meanwhile, the findings offered some direct evidence of funders adjusting their priorities in response to civil society preferences, as with IM Swedish Development Partner making adjustments to support YMC's online platform for parents. Moreover, ML is gaining prominence on funders' agendas, with interviews suggesting that civil society contributes to drawing funders' attention to the subject. CSOs' influence in demonstrating to funders that media literacy actions are needed may be interpreted through Risse's 'logic of truth seeking or arguing' ('logic of arguing' in short), which inhabits a space between the 'logic of consequences' associated with RCI, and the 'logic of appropriateness' associated with sociological institutionalism.¹¹⁷ According to the logic, when deliberating on whether their assumptions about the world are accurate, goal-oriented actors may convince each other to adjust their preferences – here, the priorities of funding programmes – “in light of the better argument”, thus reaching a “reasoned consensus”.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, RCI may be deployed for interpreting funders' choice to let CSOs design their media literacy projects independently. Firstly, ensuring grantee CSOs' independence itself constitutes one of the funders' predetermined preferences, articulated in documents like the 2005 Paris Declaration. Moreover, given CSOs' deeper subject matter expertise and experience of implementing ML-related projects, leaving the 'creative design' of projects for CSOs can be seen as a way to maximise the projects' results.

In sum, for the second research question, the paper argued in line with rational choice institutionalism that CSOs have been able to use funders' resources to run projects that accord with their existing vision of how media literacy should be promoted. Further, the paper argued that by guaranteeing discretion for civil society on how ML should be advanced, funders also acted following their own interests. The analysis was supplemented with Risse's 'logic of arguing', used for interpreting adjustments in funders' priorities. Given the argument that the

¹¹⁷ Risse, “Let's Argue!”

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

different actors involved broadly have a shared vision for ML promotion in Moldova, one can characterise their interactions as coordination to ensure that available resources – for instance, funds, expertise and human resources – are mobilised most effectively. Viewed in this way, while the interactions may involve deliberation on which actions are needed, the communication process about the design of ML actions does not entail the type of change in the actors’ underlying beliefs described by sociological institutionalism. Next, the sub-section relates the findings to prior literature on internationally-funded CSO actions.

The findings suggested that the numerical measurability of outcomes has currency even in the field of ML promotion. One interviewee explicitly described funders’ numerical indicators on projects, and moreover, survey data has served as a quantitative justification for the need for action on media literacy. Further, numerical indicators are prominent in YMC activity reports: for example, the 2018 report presents each project’s “results” through data like the number of participants and media products created, and all reports from 2015–2017 feature a similar section dedicated to “Results”.¹¹⁹ Though media literacy promotion is not exclusively reduced to numerical indicators, quantitative data plays an important role in assessing ML actions in Moldova.

The findings also show that partnership with international donors has directly contributed to ‘professionalising’ Moldovan organisations’ institutional structures. International funders’ involvement in reforming the Association of Librarians’ structures, and guidance for YMC in developing its strategic planning, support earlier literature’s arguments that international funding is accompanied by internal organisational change. However, whilst Kurki¹²⁰ wrote that international funding programmes may push CSOs towards usurping the state’s role in service provision, this paper’s findings suggest the reverse. Through advocating for introducing media education in school curricula, organising training for librarians, and

¹¹⁹ YMC annual reports for 2015–2018, available from YMC, *Despre noi*.

¹²⁰ Kurki, *op. cit.*, 358.

publishing textbooks, Moldovan CSOs have advanced stronger public action for media literacy and complemented the state's capacities. Thus, the findings rather recall Börzel and Buzogány's¹²¹ account of environmental organisations in CEE countries, which offered resources such as expertise to state actors whose capacities were limited.

Finally, one should consider the generalisability of the findings. Since the literature has considered that the core principles of media literacy are globally applicable, the dynamic of specialised international actors diffusing their ML expertise might occur anywhere. However, more specifically, Eastern Partnership countries broadly share Moldova's key specificities, such as the presence of Russian-produced media content and disinformation.¹²² Moreover, the EU considers EaP as a collective, while interviews revealed that DW Akademie and the Swedish Embassy also run region-wide media-related programmes for EaP countries. However, the low level of freedom of assembly in Azerbaijan and Belarus creates a different operating environment for civil society, which weakens generalisability for these countries.¹²³ In sum, the findings may be particularly generalisable to other EaP countries, except perhaps Belarus and Azerbaijan.

In summary, while sociological institutionalism can help interpret the diffusion of ML expertise in Moldova, rational choice institutionalism – complemented with the 'logic of arguing' – is apt for explaining how different actors coordinate concerning the design of practical actions. The findings largely align with earlier literature on international funding programmes' influence on domestic CSOs, and they are a possible starting point for analysing civil society-run ML actions across the EU's Eastern neighbourhood.

¹²¹ Börzel and Buzogány, *op. cit.*, 719-720.

¹²² Gahler, "Boosting the EU's Soft Power in Eastern Partnership Countries".

¹²³ See World Bank, *GovData360: Freedom of association and assembly*.

CONCLUSION

This paper studied Moldovan civil society's interaction with international civil society actors and donors in the context of media literacy promotion. It used the concept of 'Europeanisation', viewed as encompassing Moldovan actors' relations with not only the EU, but also the multiple other relevant international actors. Media literacy is an increasingly important ingredient for healthy democracy, and challenges like partisan content and foreign disinformation make Moldova an opportune case study for ML promotion. Though civil society, supported by international partners, is crucial for media literacy promotion in Moldova, no prior studies had examined these actors' interactions.

The paper found that specialised international civil society actors have significantly shaped how Moldovan actors conceive media literacy and, thereby, how ML is explained to the wider Moldovan public. Using sociological institutionalism, it argued that the diffusion of new knowledge on the subject has also influenced Moldovan organisations' underlying beliefs and preferences. Secondly, civil society has defined the practical design of ML actions rather independently, and funders have adjusted their priorities in response to civil society input. The paper argued that rational choice institutionalism can explain CSOs' independence in designing their projects, and connected the process of deliberating on funders' priorities to Risse's 'logic of arguing'. Empirically, the findings corroborate prior literature's emphasis on the importance of civil society in ML promotion in Moldova and beyond. Civil society has helped define the theoretical basis for ML campaigns and education in Moldova; articulated to funders what types of ML actions are necessary; and complemented the state's capacities for acting on media literacy. Amid rapidly changing political events in the country, civil society-led media literacy actions make a continuous, long-term contribution to strengthening Moldovan democracy.

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Annex I: Written primary sources collected for analysis

Type of document	Organisation	Document title/description
<u>Project descriptions</u>	<i>Format: Funder (Implementing partner)</i>	
	US Embassy (AIP)	Development of Critical Thinking of Rural Population, Pupils and Future Teachers
	EU (AIP)	Educating Moldovan consumers of information to reduce the effect of the false information and manipulation through the media
	EU (IREX Europe, YMC)	Empowering Youth to become Civic Actors
	EU (CommWithUs)	Strategic Communication and Support for Mass Media in the Republic of Moldova
	US Department of State (Main implementing partners: IREX Europe, Association of Librarians)	Strengthening Independent Media and Media Literacy in Moldova
	Same as above	Strengthening Independent Media and Media Literacy in Moldova (SIMML III)
	Swedish Embassy (Recipient: IJC)	Institutional Support Program (2016 – 2019)
	USAID and FHI360 (IJC)	Media campaign against false and biased information “Stop Fals!” (2015 – 2017)
	Swedish government (Internews)	Internews: Support to Moldovan Media and Innovative Media Literacy Efforts
	USAID (Internews)	MEDIA-M: Media Enabling Democracy, Inclusion and Accountability in Moldova
<u>Calls for project proposals</u>		
	EU	European Instrument of Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) Call for proposals, 2016/17

<u>Assessment reports</u>		
	DW Akademie	Evaluation Report – Executive Summary Moldova: Critical Perspectives on Media Content: Media and Information Literacy in Moldova
	IREX	Novateca Program: Impact Assessment Study
<u>Annual reports</u>		
	Independent Journalism Centre	2013–2020
	Youth Media Centre	2015–2019
	Association of Independent Press	2013–2019 (2015 unavailable)
<u>Policy documents</u>		
	Council of Europe	Council of Europe Action Plan: 2021–2024, 2017–2020
	EU	Single Support Framework: 2017–2020, 2014–2017
	Sweden	Results strategy for Sweden’s reform cooperation with Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey, 2014–2020
	USAID	Country Development Cooperation Strategy: 2020–2025, 2013–2020
<u>School curricula</u>		
	Moldovan Ministry of Education	Years 10–11, years 7–8, years 3–4
<u>School textbooks</u>		
	IJC et al	Years 10–11, years 7–8, years 3–4
<u>Learning materials</u>		
	IREX Europe et al	Media and Information Education Manual for Librarians and the Wider Public

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