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RESILIENT MEDIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE DEMOCRATISATION PROCESS

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Media and Democratisation: The Role of Media, Challenges and Opportunities in Transitions to Democracy

With the signing and ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, the European Union enacted a separate provision on the founding values of the Union, among which human rights and democracy represent the cornerstone. The freedom of expression and information being a core element of human rights, its protection in turn serves as a tool to promote democracy. It has been argued that the growth of independent and free media is closely linked to the process of democratisation. This reciprocal relationship is indeed explained by the media mobilization theory,[1] stating that democratic consolidation is strengthened as the multiplication of free media producers ensures greater accessibility to information for citizens, supports political engagement, and facilitates transparency of government. It is especially important in the context of the democratization process, where the media can play a crucial role in the reinforcement of civic engagement and holding the government accountable. However, observing fourteen years of democratic decline, as measured by the Freedom House,[2] and the continuous decline in press freedom[3], such trends call for urgent action and reveal a range of challenges to the survival of the free media in contemporary times.

This is particularly evident in Belarus. Since they began on 9 August, mass demonstrations in Belarus against the rule of Alexander Lukashenko have brought together many people around the country who are committed to a democratic transition. In the country which is called "the last dicta-

torship in Europe," peaceful protests are being suppressed by force and violence. More than 30,000 people have been arrested since the beginning of the protests,[4] with journalists being one of the main targeted groups in order to prevent awareness raising and mobilisation of citizens. Therefore, support for journalists in Belarus is extremely important for a successful democratic transition and human rights protection.

Considering media as an important part of civil society promotion in the democratisation process, it is important to explore current challenges, which weaken the independent media, as well as search for new opportunities for its development and resilience strengthening in such difficult circumstances. In a context where press freedom is being held under control, it is crucial for the media to adapt and to counter rising threats of malicious propaganda with new debunking strategies and online tools. Therefore, this report firstly presents the issues faced by independent media that are important to tackle in order to promote democracy. Moreover, the circumstances of the media sector in Belarus are introduced. The last part of the report draws key conclusions from the Vilnius Young Leaders Meeting (VYLM), where alternative opportunities and debunking tools for media in the Belarussian democratisation process have been discussed.

The democratic function of media and journalism

The essence of a democratic system of government lies in the right of citizens to equally participate in the collective decision-making process, either directly or indirectly, through processes such as free elections and the power to hold elected representatives accountable. Yet such an exercise of citizens' rights requires the acquisition of a sufficient information base in order to make informed decisions. This can only be achieved through unrestricted access to reliable and unbiased information. The prevention of such access, however, might lead to the manipulation of public opinion and therefore in turn strengthens the concentration of power in authoritarian systems where propaganda and censorship tools are crucial for the capability of authorities to stay in power. Freedom of expression and media pluralism being core democratic values, they are enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 11), and the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 10).

Recognising the role of the Fourth Estate, its capability to change political landscape as well as challenges faced by independent media, in 2020, the European Commission (EC) issued an Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020−2024 and published a communique on it, highlighting support for independent pluralistic media and the fight against disinformation as one of the priority actions in the promotion of democracy and building resilient democratic societies. Through various means of implementing this action, the European Union is determined to support legislative initiatives on access to information, independent media, to promote investigative journalism and counter disinformation on the world stage throughout the period of 2020−2024.

Challenges faced by media and journalism

However, despite efforts to make the media more resilient, the widespread challenges which restrict journalistic freedom persist not only in authoritarian countries but also in democratic systems. In 2013, the High-Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism, which was established by the European Commission Vice-President, pointed out in its final report the main issues faced by the media and journalism. The main challenges, considering the changing media landscape and continuous digitalisation, include:

- Political interference in the media;
- Concentration of media ownership;
- Low protection of journalists;

Eight years have passed since this report was published as well as recommendations were given to the European Commission to act accordingly. However, the risks were again identified in the Media Pluralism Monitor Report 2020, co-funded by the European Commission. Therefore, it is important to revise potential risks posed by the rapidly changing media environment to journalism in the context of media freedom deterioration, which is closely linked to the global democracy decline that has been observed by Freedom House recently.

The last report issued by Freedom House revealed new forms of media freedom repression, which were even more acute since the coronavirus outbreak regardless of government system. According to the report,[5] 91 of 192 countries increased or set new restrictions on the news media and journalists as a result of COVID-19. This trend has occurred not only in countries that hold Freedom in the World 2020 status of "not free" or "partly free", like Russia, China, Venezuela but also in countries that are typically designated as "free" – the USA, Poland, India. New challenges round the world included the arrests of journalists and violence against them, state control over media content, limited independent questioning at press conferences.

More broadly, the outbreak of the pandemic only exacerbated deep-rooted issues related to journalism and contributed to a nadir of the continuous media freedom decline.

Political independence

As pointed out by Vytautas Bruveris, Lithuanian journalist of the news portal Lietuvos Rytas, during the Vilnius Young Leaders Meeting (VYLM), one of the main challenges for media in democratic societies is the political manipulation of media. It used to be a key tool in authoritarian and totalitarian states, and therefore results in general public distrust in the media. The Edelman Trust Barometer 2021[6] revealed the largest drop in traditional media trust globally with only 53% of respondents trusting in the media. Indeed, the Media Pluralism Monitor[7] has indicated an overall medium risk score across the EU and candidate countries, with editorial autonomy being the weakest point. The trend is particularly evident in legacy media (newspapers, TV, radio) where power alliances between authorities and commercial media owners are most prevalent. One-side reporting, partly fostered by a lack of financial resources for the maintenance of media independence and achieved mainly through state regulatory and financial pressure, has been one of the variables explaining the overall decline of trust in the media across the EU countries. On the

other hand, when direct state subsidies for media exist and are targeted to support resilient media sectors, in practice, the opposite effect has been observed - the distribution of subsidies usually lacks transparency, which in turn strengthens mistrust.

Concentration of media ownership

Another major challenge to the pluralism of media is the concentration of media ownership. This is of particular importance in the context of democratic transitions since the concentration threatens not only the ability of the media sector to reflect a variety of viewpoints but also prevents new independent media channels from entering the media market. This tendency has a significant influence on investigative journalism, which is still being undertaken at considerably low levels due to the high costs of production and usually smaller size of audience. Digital platforms like social networks might contribute significantly to the diversification of media, but it still remains difficult for new media channels to enter without substantial financial support since different search engines are partially powered by costly advertising services. As reported in a European Audiovisual Observatory study,[8] in 30 European countries, on average, 51% of the audience share is in the hands of two major broadcasting groups in each market, and three main groups have 64% of the audience share. Moreover, foreign ownership can become a significant issue in countries where the media industry is not yet fully developed or where there exists a strong agenda among foreign powers to use broadcasting as a soft power tool to manipulate public opinion. Strong foreign ownership might also become an important means to spread fake news and

propaganda, which shapes the perceptions of targeted audiences. With underdeveloped investigative journalism or without support for debunking strategies, the concentration of media ownership, whether at the hands of foreign or domestic entities, presents a great threat for democracy in general.

Protection of journalists

Another important risk to consider is the safety of journalists. In 2015, the Council of Europe set up the Platform to Promote the Protection and Safety of Journalists (the Platform) in order to facilitate the collection and dissemination of information in the Member States of the Council of Europe on serious concerns about media freedom and the safety of journalists. In its annual report in 2020,[9] the Platform recorded 142 threats to media freedom in Europe: physical attacks, detention and imprisonment, legal harassment and even two cases of impunity for the murders of journalists. Since 2017, the Council of Europe has been reporting an increasing number of threats every year:[10] 130, 139, 142, 201 serious alerts on press freedom and journalists' rights violations respectively from 2017 to 2020 inclusively. One of the most important attempts to address this issue was made already in April 2012 by the United Nations with the drafting of the Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. Since then, different reviews have been carried out and recommendations are continuously revised in order to better implement this Action Plan. However, the continuing deterioration of journalist security and recent events in Belarus call for even more urgent responses and security measures from the international community.

Challenges to the media in the context of Belarus events

While populist authorities in democracies usually try to coerce he independent media in order to shape the portrayal of certain policies and influence public opinion through the means of regulations and financial pressure, in authoritarian regimes, the pursuit of restrictions and the ways they are imposed usually reaches the next level. In the context of democracy being in retreat globally, it is of huge importance to strengthen the role of the media in authoritarian states, where journalists are the main target of political crimes and violence. The scope of recent political violence in Belarus in 2020 puts Belarusian media in even greater danger.

Belarus, as a member state of the United Nations and the OSCE, is committed to international standards and the protection of human rights. Even though the freedom of expression and freedom of the press are also embedded in the Belarusian Constitution, the country is listed 174 out of 198 in the 2017 Freedom of the Press rating by Freedom House.[11] According to Maksimas Milta, head of the Communications and Development Unit at the European Humanities University and associate analyst at Eastern Europe Studies Centre, journalists were being persecuted well before the outbreak of peaceful protests in Belarus in August. One of the most notable events until the 9th of August was the BelTA case. The largest Belarusian portal tut.by and independent news agency BelaPAN were accused of misappropriation of press releases from the propagandistic news agency BelTA. A number of searches were conducted at the BelaPAN News Agency, the TUT.BY web portal and other editorial offices. The aim was to

show that even if the regime is unable to completely banish independent agencies from the media environment, it can still apply means of coercion such as fines.

Since the beginning of the opposition rallies in the streets of Minsk, state authorities did their utmost to restrict the free media and to hide political crimes against citizens from the international arena. By the end of August, Associated Press, Reuters, Asse Fans News journalists' accreditations had been revoked following the decision of the of October 2 to cancel all accreditation for foreign journalists as a response to EU sanctions. The official justification for this action was that Belarus needed to "update" the procedures for accreditation as current media regulations were "outdated." Tut.by has also received three warnings from the Ministry of Communications and Informatization, and therefore, its status as a media outlet was abolished. Moreover, dozens of journalists were arrested, with many fined or sentenced to administrative detention and prison stays of one to two weeks. According to Reporters Without Borders,[12] around 370 journalists have been arrested since the 9th of August and nearly 450 press freedom violations were registered in Belarus.

With no means for traditional independent media to work securely, where state owned media is dominating, and in the context of the ongoing digitalisation of the media environment, social media platforms have become crucial for the spread of information, mobilization of citizens and democracy promotion in an authoritarian state. The Telegram app, which already saw widespread use among Belarussians before the protests to exchange news and information among neighbours, plays an important role when internet dis-

ruptions are being used as an important state's power tool. The decentralized nature of communication on Telegram allows messages to be spread quickly and instantaneously. Moreover, the transformation of media was also observed during the past months which in turn promotes democracy in the country. For example, the second largest portal, Online. by, which used to be highly commercial, has transformed into an important source of independent and reliable information, although it had little in common with civil society news before. To further strengthen Belarusian civil society and press freedom, the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists provides very consistent and focused training for journalists, such as how to write articles, how to describe these events, conduct interviews and ensure data security.

Disinformation

The failure to protect independent media or support investigative journalism opens doors for the use of soft power tools by particular regimes and foreign powers seeking to influence political processes in a country. In addition, growing confusion regarding responsibility over commercial, political and editorial content has blurred the line of democratic guarantees of freedom of opinion and effectively combating disinformation. Thus, the rising threats of malicious propaganda and disinformation campaigns force the media to adapt to new challenges in order to achieve a successful transition to democracy. State and mass media also had to rethink their strategies on fact checking - ensuring free speech but having robust measures to ensure the quality and truthfulness of broadcasted messages. In Lithuania and else-

where in Easter Europe independent media outlets and various news portals are crucial actors in democracy promotion through debunking and deconstructing disinformation campaigns or uncovering attempts to hinder truth. Recent challenges required the development of new techniques to identify and efficiently subdue any rising disinformation narratives. Based on the recommendations offered by Lithuanian media specialists during VYLM, the following chapter discusses the roles of mass media, the individual and the state, including concrete examples of the experts' work, methods and techniques in debunking disinformation.

Debunking disinformation

After the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the significant increase in the volume of disinformation and misinformation created a need to effectively and quickly deconstruct and disprove disinformation campaigns. The greatest danger of disinformation attacks is based on its particularly high spread over a very short period of time, spreading doubt in society more rapidly as it gains traction. Investigative media could not effectively solve the problem of disinformation because this type of journalism is characterized by a long and painstaking process. Also, it is extremely difficult to cover the amounts of information and process it properly. According to Vaidas Saldžiūnas, a participant in the Vilnius Young Leaders Meeting 2020, in 2016, the news portal DELFI had to find a way to find, unmask and deny the large quantities of disinformation that circulated in the information field. This led to the launch of the Debunk project, which brought together IT professionals and civil society

(volunteers known as "elves"). These specialists cooperated with the "elves" and were able to recognize disinformation narratives and effectively unmask them.[13] Advancement in technological solutions created the possibility to efficiently categorise and filter information and various narratives that later could be grouped into groups with varying levels of urgency and danger. According to V. Saldžiūnas, the very main goal of the Debunk project was focused on quick and firm action against malicious attempts to mislead public opinion, as soon as possible. Debunk aimed at delivering clear, concise and simple messages to the public in order to successfully deconstruct any disinformation attempts. The Debunk project has now developed into a joint initiative including all the main Lithuanian media channels and has become a more analytical project – it provides data and observes certain trends, curves, and monitors the prevailing narratives at the moment.

However, Vaidas Saldžiūnas notes that with time, disinformation itself and its spreaders adapted to the above mentioned measures and themselves started searching for ways to bypass the Debunk project's technological framework. Some techniques used by disinformation spreading actors cannot be seen and caught by even the most sophisticated systems, some messages are distributed throughout grey channels such as fake emails, foreign media channels etc..

A significant number of unknown narratives came to light during the electoral crisis in Belarus. Lukashenko cynically rigged the country's elections and directed disinformation campaigns mainly against democracy movements and states like Lithuania and Poland through Russian state media rather than Belarus' own, thus making it harder to detect. V. Saldžiūnas proposes the idea that the Belarusian protests struggle with identifying and recognising the Russian role in misinformation campaigns against democratic movements. Belarus' people are successful in organising protests, gathering in public places and keeping resolve and morale high, but also partially fail to recognise that the Russian Federation is to blame for waging soft informational war on democratic protesters

It also should be noted that the social media sphere in Lithuania saw a clear rise of various civic and private initiatives to boost civil spirits, educate people about dangers of misinformation campaigns, and provide knowledge about the defence, security and give military perspectives. In recent years, this kind of initiative has gained significant traction among the younger generation of Lithuanians. One of authors of this kind of initiative and Vilnius Young Leaders Meeting 2020 speaker is Giedrius Petkevičius, who manages an online Facebook blog Sausuolis about defence and security matters. G. Petkevičius notes his blog was started as a hobby just to debunk myths about the Lithuanian armed forces. Petkevičius notes that through these myths society creates unreachable or illogical requirements for the armed forces. Petkevičius stresses that in order to educate today's youth it is necessary to provide education in the form of entertainment/shows. It is now crucially important to encourage young people to learn more about the dangers of disinformation campaigns. At this moment, there are already at least half a dozen of Facebook blogs, similar to Sausuolis that help and educate people on how to identify malicious attempts to conceal the truth or cloud judgement.

Strategic communication

The Lithuanian Department of Strategic Communications and Public Affairs was created with the intention to grasp the main narratives that are circulating in the foreign and domestic informational domains. Strategic communication is an essential tool for understanding and learning how disinformation affects society. This department is set to strengthen the resilience of the Lithuanian public and armed forces against attempts to tamper the main tenets of democracy and sovereignty of Lithuania by offering analysis and evaluations of the informational environment and narratives in it.[14] The Strategic Communication Department coordinates the public image of the armed forces as it is also crucial to note that a substantial number of disinformation attacks are directed at the trust and ties between civil society and the Lithuanian and NATO Armed Forces. In VYLM 2020, Tomas Čeponis noted that two main world events were dominant in the information field in 2020 – the COVID-19 pandemic and the democratic protests in Belarus. The narratives surrounding COVID-19 pandemic ranged from distorted truth to outright conspiracy theories. The second event that was widely targeted were the democratic protests in Belarus. T. Čeponis identified several key narratives that disinformation campaigns and propaganda were trying to disseminate across Eastern Europe:

- Security and defence – portraying that the problem is not one of domestic affairs but rather caused by aggressive foreign actors such as Lithuania and Poland (Belarusian military exercises near the Lithuanian-Polish border symbolised Lukashenko's narrative that domestic issues are caused by foreign third parties);

- Foreign policy – various statements from governments and leaders are often open to interpretation, disinformation attacks were centred around misinterpreting, distorting and ridiculing statements;

- The economic sphere – escalating the idea that the flow of goods and energy resources would be diverted from the Baltic States, thus seriously hurting the Baltic States' economy.

T. Čeponis stresses that Russian and Belarusian authorities are in tight control of their own informational space. One example is how in 2014, Russian state media reversed public opinion about the Ukrainian people in a few months, from being a "friendly nation" to a "grave foe." The Russian propaganda and disinformation machine is able to shift domestic public opinion in an extremely short timespan, building support for the government's policies. The actions of Russian state media against Belarus' democratic protests and its leaders are exceptionally similar to the strategy Russia employed during the Ukraine crisis in 2014. It is necessary for Western democracies to try and offer Belarusians independent and unbiased information, as it is possible that one future narrative of propaganda will be based on the idea that no one is supporting the democratic protesters. T. Čeponis concluded that it is vital for the European Union and NATO states to combat the increasing number of disinformation attacks and to prevent Russian propaganda from dominating our informational space.

OSINT

Open source intelligence is one of the main tools for various actors to research and uncover attempts to hinder with truth or debunk false narratives. The OSINT method is based on researching open data that is available online, evaluating and comparing with existing hypotheses. It is a crucial method to uncover various attempts to hide the truth or introduce confusion. As G. Petkevičius and V. Saldžiūnas underlined, huge amounts of information can be found on various social media platforms, online forums. Social media platforms have a two-way effect - they provide huge amounts of data and also distribute data. Twitter is a notable platform where significant information could be obtained if observed properly. Notable examples of the success of OSINT methods are the investigations by independent investigative journalists of Bellingcat – the investigation of the MH17 flight incident,[15] where journalists investigated and combined online resources, blogs, social media geo tags to find irrefutable evidence that the Russian armed forces operating in Eastern Ukraine were involved, proving that Moscow's version was not credible.

Belarusian democratic activists have displayed notable capability in conducting OSINT investigations - identifying individuals that are involved in the security structures of the Belarusian government, identifying armed forces personnel, monitoring Russian government officials' activity in Belarus, and searching for individuals committing atrocities against peaceful demonstrators.[16,17] Democratic protesters in Belorus have embraced IT solutions and developed ways to effectively communicate, organise and conduct protests, but there is a lack of effective deconstruction of false and hostile disinformation campaigns. There is clear evidence that the Belorussian protesters have to have ways to use the same IT solutions to identify and deconstruct disinformation campaigns.

Over a number of years, Ukraine developed a strong apparatus to research and identify disinformation campaigns.[18] InformNapalm has become one of the leading entities in disproving and deconstructing various Russian propaganda.[19] Ukraine's investments in such projects are already paying off as it is easier to discredit malicious actors. Ukrainians developed methods to clearly identify the origins of kinetic and non-kinetic threats, allowing them to effectively combat those threats. The InformNapalm project extensively uses the OSINT method, searching and investigating any clues of Russian activities, tracing weapons systems and even geolocating exact hostile military unit locations. However, it is also important to underline that the socio-economic issues of Ukraine and Belarus are very different, as Ukraine has already forgone post-soviet nostalgia and embraced free market economic systems.

Recommendations and observations

Witnessing the deterioration of democracy and the freedom of press, which is followed by the rising threats of malicious propaganda and disinformation campaigns, it is important that the media would manage to adapt to such circumstances in order to support democratization processes. During the VYLM, Lithuanian media and disinformation specialists have outlined the best practices and recommendations that would not only help to combat disinformation attacks but would also strengthen the resilience of media in democratic transitions.

- It is crucial to limit and contain the speed at which disinformation and propaganda campaigns spread among the public;
- Ensuring checks and balances on democratic processes, free speech but having effective measures to fact check and debunk propaganda narratives;
- Mass media collaboration projects can be effective in combating disinformation, however these initiatives should be improved constantly and adapt to rising challenges;
- Open source information is a valuable asset in debunking disinformation narratives and falsehoods. Moreover, OSINT tools are necessary in investigative efforts to uncover facts and truth, which hostile states are determined to keep secret;
- The situation of journalistic freedom and safety should be taken into account more seriously when discussing trade and partnership agreements on the international arena;
- Bigger attention on the EU level should be paid to funding quality journalism and projects supporting and promoting independent media;
- Media literacy should be included in the secondary education programs with a particular focus on the development of critical thinking as a means to counteract fake news and propaganda campaigns;
- The protection of free information and security of journalists should be enshrined in the EU member states' legislation with restrictions being possible only on the basis of an independent court order;

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