

# Media Literacy of Citizens as a Factor in Counteracting Manipulative Influence on the State

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## ABSTRACT:

In the current context of information warfare and the spread of large-scale disinformation, media literacy is gaining strategic importance as a key factor in ensuring national resilience and protecting citizens from cognitive threats. **The relevance** of this topic is due to the growth of information aggression and the need to develop critical thinking among the population. In particular, the relevance is enhanced by the growth of information aggression by the occupying country, Russia, which uses large-scale advertising campaigns to spread disinformation on social networks, as well as by dynamic changes in the perception of information by the Ukrainian population in the context of a full-scale invasion. **The main aim** is to consider the growing level of information and propaganda attacks, in particular, on the example of Russia's activities in this field, and media literacy in countering information attacks. The example of Finland demonstrates a comprehensive and strategic approach of the state to the formation of media literacy among its citizens, starting from preschool age and throughout life, in various forms and using an interdisciplinary approach and based on European legislative norms and concepts. The article also considers the intensification of information and propaganda attacks and the role of media literacy in countering them. **The methodological basis** of the work was the analysis of scientific publications, journalistic materials and interviews, as well as relevant official documents; analysis and synthesis of the information received, content analysis of relevant Internet resources. **The results of the study and their practical significance.** It is emphasized that media literacy significantly increases the ability of citizens to critically evaluate information, reduces the impact of disinformation and helps to preserve social cohesion. It was found that even in countries with a high level of media literacy, there are digital gaps, which requires continuous improvement of educational programs. In particular, the analysis of Ukrainian sociological data (2020–2024) showed a significant increase in the overall media literacy index during the full-scale war: the share of citizens with an above-average score increased from 55% to 81% (2022) and stabilized at a high level (76% in 2023). This indicates that the population is adapting and increasing critical thinking in response to external threats. The analysis of the Finnish experience and Ukrainian dynamics confirms the need for continuous improvement of educational programs to ensure uniform information sustainability of the entire society. The results obtained can be used to develop state strategies for media education, improve information security and form critical thinking of the population in the context of modern information threats.

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## 1. Introduction

The Law of Ukraine “On the Principles of the State Policy of National Memory of the Ukrainian People” defines the current Russian-Ukrainian war as the War for Independence and describes it as a struggle for “(...) independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of Ukraine against the aggression of the Russian Federation, which began on February 19, 2014. The war is the result of a consistent Russian imperial policy aimed at denying and destroying Ukrainian statehood and the identity of the Ukrainian people, and includes the temporary occupation by the Russian Federation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol; countering aggression by conducting an anti-terrorist operation, taking measures to ensure national security and defense, repulsing and deterring the armed aggression of the Russian Federation in Donetsk and Luhansk regions; taking measures necessary to ensure the The Law of Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2020).

A significant role in this War of Independence belongs to its informational, and more broadly, to its cognitive component. The war in Europe in the twenty-first century illustrates how the classical definition of war, formulated by Prussian General Clausewitz (1780–1831) after the Napoleonic Wars of the nineteenth century, as an act of violence aimed at imposing one’s own will on the enemy, is transforming in the information society of the twenty-first century. In addition to traditional hostilities that destroy infrastructure and cause human losses, there is an insidious cognitive warfare. Its goal is to influence the consciousness, emotions, and identity of the target audience. This form of warfare uses information technology, disinformation, propaganda, and psychological pressure, making almost everyone a potential target (Radchenko, 2024). According to Colonel, military theorist and strategist, US Air Force pilot J. Boyd (1927–1997), it is not machines that win wars, but people who fight. So, to win, one needs to get into the human brain. His theoretical developments in modern warfare formed the basis for the actions of the world’s armies. In particular, J. Boyd’s military strategy of network-centered warfare formed the basis of Ukraine’s Air Force Vision 2035 and was used during the Kharkiv operation of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in 2022 (Radchenko, 2022; Shynko, 2020; Ministry of Defence of Ukraine. Command of the Air Force of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, 2020).

However, in addition to hostilities, as already mentioned, the war covers almost all spheres of life in modern society. Tools of consciousness manipulation (propaganda, fakes, memes) are not new and have been known for a long time (Dzhus, 2023; Ingram, 2016; Kolinko & Petryshyn, 2022; Konstankevych et al., 2022). However, today they have reached an unprecedented scale thanks to digital technologies and social media (Pomaza-Ponomarenko et al., 2020). A key feature of modern propaganda is its participatory nature, where the audience is no longer a passive consumer. Instead, it is actively involved in the creation and dissemination of content that resonates with its own beliefs, thereby increasing the impact of propaganda narratives (El & Gaedi, 2025). The main danger of

cognitive warfare is its invisibility. Its impact is often realized only when it has already caused significant changes in public opinion and behavior. This type of aggression is one of the most sophisticated forms of manipulation, which requires the development of effective tools for protection (BBC, n. d.). Given that the struggle for the minds and hearts of people is as important as the battle on the battlefield, media literacy is becoming a critical factor in national resilience and an effective tool to counteract hostile information influences.

The relevance of the article is due to the growing importance of the cognitive component in modern military conflicts, where information and psychological influence is becoming as important as traditional combat operations. In the context of the War for Ukraine's Independence, media literacy plays a key role in ensuring national resilience, contributing to the ability of the population to critically perceive information, counteract disinformation, and protect their identity and consciousness from manipulative influences.

The main purpose of the article is to analyze the importance of media literacy in the context of modern information confrontation, to assess its impact on the ability of citizens to resist cognitive threats, and to study initiatives aimed at developing media literacy.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

Currently, research on case studies and comparative analysis of media literacy levels among different age groups, populations of different countries, people of different cultural and religious traditions, etc. is gaining in importance. They are usually comprehensive and cover media literacy as a matter of safety, ethics, and multisectoral systemic cooperation (Denisa-Liepniece, 2022; Kozłowska-Barrios *et al.*, 2024; Stamps, 2024; Scharrer, 2006).

Much attention is paid to the legal context of the issue, as well as the formation and development of relevant institutions related to media literacy at the national and international levels. At the same time, researchers also focus on problems related to the analysis of cyberspace as an environment that is actively used to weaken democratic societies, create various cyber threats during political election campaigns or other socially important processes (Kubś, 2025; Whyte, 2020; Zadorožna & Butuc, 2024). Given the cognitive impact of information, there is a growing number of studies on media literacy and psychological resilience as important factors in resisting and countering disinformation (Pipchenko & Yurii, 2025; Ziapour *et al.*, 2024).

Research on media literacy not only addresses the legal and institutional aspects of media literacy, but also focuses on its role in combating cyber threats and information manipulation. Particularly noteworthy are studies that analyze the impact of media literacy on the psychological resilience of citizens and their ability to critically perceive information, which is becoming a crucial element in maintaining and developing democratic processes.

## **3. Methods**

In writing this article, the authors used a comprehensive approach to studying media literacy as a factor of national resilience in the context of information aggression.

The authors combined several methodological approaches. Firstly, authors analyzed scientific literature and regulatory documents, interviews and journalistic publications related to the topic of the article. The authors especially focused on publications reviewing propaganda narratives and those on the experience of implementing media education in Finland, as well as international recommendations from UNESCO and the EU.

The comparative analysis covered the study of media literacy in Finland in the context of its importance for Ukraine's experience in reforming school education. The focus was on assessing the level of integration of media education into national policies, educational systems, and civic participation tools.

The analytical and synthetic method involves the synthesis of information from various sources, which contributes to the formation of a holistic view of the importance of media literacy in the fight against information aggression and strengthening national resilience. This method allowed us to identify the main aspects of media literacy's impact, including its role in strengthening social cohesion, improving trust in government institutions, and stimulating the development of critical thinking among citizens.

#### **4. Results**

Media literacy is becoming especially important today due to the growing influence of information technology, including artificial intelligence (AI), and social media. For Ukraine, this topic is of particular importance as the country is in a hybrid war with Russia. The aggressor country Russia is actively using the media to spread disinformation and propaganda, seeking to manipulate public opinion, discredit state institutions, confuse the situation on the frontline, intimidate the population, sow divisions in society through fictional conflicts and its own narratives, and reduce international support for Ukraine. In addition, its propaganda flywheel works both for the domestic consumer, within the country, and for Ukrainian society, and actively spreads its Ukrainophobic clichés almost all over the world. For example, since 2022, Russia has significantly stepped up its efforts to increase its influence in the Middle East and North Africa. Especially in Arabic (the frequency of publications in Arabic on the *rt.arabic* media resource has increased by 30–35%, and *sputnik* by 80%). In order to strengthen media influence in these regions, “Russian houses” are also used to organize “cultural events” on the basis of which the main goal is to popularize the Russian language and history in line with Russian propaganda narratives. The purpose of such activities is primarily to spread anti-Western sentiment, justify aggressive foreign policy, and create a positive image of the Russian Federation while desubjectifying Ukraine. At the same time, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is positioned as a “war against Western hegemony” aimed at creating a “just world order”. Starting from February 24, 2022, the Arabic version of *rt* channel entered the top 3 TV channels in Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq, with an increase in viewership by 10 million people. The controlled media are widely spreading claims that Russia is at war with the United States in Ukraine and that Ukrainians are a “bargaining chip” for the Americans. To make these claims more convincing and humanize them, Russian propagandists broadcast stories in which Western companies conduct experiments on Russians in laboratories in Mariupol, and 70% of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) are mercenaries. Moreover, many of them come from the Global

South. For Iraqi viewers, stories are broadcast about the words of an alleged Iraqi soldier fighting in the ranks of the Russian armed forces, which are being heavily glorified, while they are opposed to the very troops that once invaded Iraq. The story that President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy fled to Poland at the beginning of the full-scale invasion was also popular. To enhance the effect of influence, films are created. For example, *Bridges to the East*, which is dedicated to the history of Arab countries' relations with the USSR and their relations with Russia today. There are already such films dedicated to Algeria and Egypt. The films were presented to students of journalism faculties. Another tool of media influence is a number of Russian Arabic-language accounts on the X network (Centre for Countering Disinformation, 2025; Unmasking Russia's \$1.9 Billion Surging Propaganda Budget, 2023).

Russia directs no less effort to influence the West. It is also trying to undermine Western solidarity with Ukraine through propaganda. It has launched powerful information and psychological operations, in particular, in the information space of Poland. Initially, manipulative messages are actively disseminated by Russian propagandists through social networks such as Facebook, X, and Telegram. Then these materials are picked up by Russian-controlled resources, including the platforms of the Kombat network, Lenta, RIA Novosti, TASS.com and others, ensuring the widest possible coverage. This information is then circulated through alternative channels, including forums, blogs, and private groups.

For example, one of the telegram channels circulated a video intended to discredit the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Ukraine in general in the eyes of Poles. In the video, two men stand in front of a row of wooden poles with images of human faces on them in a clearing in the middle of the forest. The portraits depict US President Donald Trump, Vice President J. D. Vance, and billionaire Elon Musk. An American flag is unfurled next to them. The men are wearing camouflage clothing with blue markings, a color often used by the Ukrainian military for identification on the battlefield. One of them, speaking in Ukrainian, states: "We don't need allies like you", before setting fire to a flag and portraits. However, this video, which has gained popularity among thousands of subscribers to a Polish-language Telegram channel, is staged. After all, the camouflage is of a standard model available for purchase online, and the Ukrainian pronunciation is accompanied by gross mistakes and sounds with a noticeable Russian accent. The content was published on the Telegram channel of Polska Grupa Informacyjna, one of 22 Polish-language channels with an audience of over 150 thousand subscribers. Telegram is not very popular in Poland, but it is the platform through which fake news is spread among radical groups and then reaches platforms with a much wider reach. The 22 channels on the platform mostly present themselves as Polish news resources and information services. Several of them claim to be "impartial" and one promises to provide "objective" news. Another positions itself as a source of "reliable and verified information hidden from the public", while one channel operates under the slogan "we are there when the truth is needed". Some of these channels regularly quote or directly copy materials from Russian state media outlets such as RT and Sputnik, which are banned in the EU for spreading propaganda and manipulating information. Poland, as a member of the European Union, is also among the countries where these media outlets are blocked. The channels often refer to by representatives of the Russian regime and their supporters. Some publications on these

channels contain clear disinformation. For example, the UKR LEAKS\_pl channel published a photo showing people in military uniforms applying artificial blood to bodies with the caption “how the ‘victims of Bucha’ were created”. This is aimed at distorting the facts about the mass killings of Ukrainians by the Russian military in 2022, which have been well documented by the international community. Some channels systematically call Ukrainian leaders and the military “Nazis”. For example, InfoDefensePOLAND characterized the Ukrainian government as a “Nazi regime” in its publication, claiming that it is under the control of the United States and other Western powers (BBC, 2025).

Since 1999, Russia has tirelessly conducted propaganda campaigns aimed at weakening Polish-Ukrainian cooperation in the social, military, political, and economic spheres. In its information narrative, Ukraine was portrayed as an unstable, corrupt state incapable of independent development, a kind of “under-state” without its own identity, dependent on external support. At the same time, Russia sought to assume the role of a so-called “guardian” (*so-called “big brother”*). A similar strategy is currently being applied in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Lebanon, or Iraq, through influence operations. After the Revolution of Dignity, Russian propaganda focused its efforts on justifying the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The large amount of disinformation materials and manipulative narratives accumulated since 2014 has been actively used by Russia with a new intensity since 2022. The Russian side is actively analyzing public sentiment in Poland, adapting its information campaigns in accordance with the data collected. In the absence of the possibility of conducting traditional opinion polls, the Kremlin uses monitoring of social networks, forums, and websites. In this way, they identify the topics that cause the most controversy in Polish society. Based on these observations, a clear picture of vulnerabilities is created, which allows for adjusting the tactics of propaganda influences. Recently, Russian propagandists have been trying not only to devalue Ukraine in the eyes of the Polish public, but also to intimidate countries that oppose Russia. In particular, they are spreading claims that Poland’s support for Ukraine’s defense capabilities provokes Russia and allegedly jeopardizes the security of the Poles themselves. In this context, Russian propaganda deliberately plays on the historical traumas of Poland, which has repeatedly suffered from Russian aggression. The Russians often distribute video fragments of interrogations in which psychologically broken Ukrainian prisoners of war (under obvious coercion) call their decision to fight a mistake and urge their compatriots to surrender. For the defenders at the front, this should look like a signal that resistance is futile and that the fight should continue, while for the West, such materials should create the impression that Ukraine has lost the war and that supporting Ukrainian troops is nothing but a waste of resources. Another tool of Russian propaganda is the falsification of evidence to spread disinformation. For example, when the Ukrainian side publishes videos confirming Russian war crimes that receive wide international publicity, the Russians hastily invent staged events. They dress Ukrainian prisoners in Russian military uniforms, shoot them on camera right in the middle of the road, and then accuse the Ukrainian Armed Forces of crimes. Recently, Russia has been actively trying to increase the antagonism between Poles and Ukrainians, using manipulations to create a negative image of Ukrainian refugees. The Russians are actively trying to create a negative image of Ukrainians, destroying their perception as unquestioning victims. They are spreading false information that Ukrainians are allegedly

involved in arms and organ trafficking and selling women into sexual slavery. These efforts are aimed at creating the impression that Ukrainians are not so innocent and far from the idealized image of war victims. This disinformation often aims to distract the Polish information space from large-scale Russian war crimes in Ukraine, such as the abduction of children from the occupied territories. Russian propaganda is trying to create an image of Ukrainians as lazy and mercenary people who only take advantage of the welfare of Poles in Poland by abusing social support. One of the traditional methods of psychological operations is to appeal to historical traumas, especially those related to the Volyn tragedy. The Russians also actively used the situation with the grain blockade in their propaganda directed against both Ukrainians and Poles. The images and videos of spilled grain that caused the greatest emotional resonance were quickly disseminated through Telegram channels, which usually serve as a platform for broadcasting Russian propaganda (Varenia, 2025).

A lot of disinformation from Russia in Poland is also spread through Facebook, which has about 20 million users in this country. The main theses spread through these Facebook communities are:

- Ukrainians are presented as historical enemies of Poles;
- Ukrainian refugees are allegedly behaving like occupants in Poland, and the country is becoming a kind of colony of Ukraine;
- Polish citizens are allegedly becoming “second-class citizens” in their own country;
- there are statements about the so-called “Ukrainization” and “Banderization” of Polish society;
- the idea of the need to stop military assistance to Ukraine is being promoted;
- Poland’s economic difficulties are linked to its support for Ukraine;
- there are fears that assistance to Ukraine could drag Poland into a war (Center for Countering Disinformation, 2024).

With the development of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Poland remains a target of disinformation campaigns. The main emphasis is placed on fostering anti-Ukrainian, anti-Western, and anti-government sentiment. Fake messages are used to emphasize that the country is allegedly undergoing Ukrainization, and Poles are being presented as “second-class citizens” (Makedon *et al.*, 2025; Zadorožna & Butuc, 2024).

In today’s context of growing global information threats, states are increasingly becoming the target of disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining their sovereignty, destabilizing the domestic political situation, and provoking a split among the population. The complex interweaving of disinformation, malicious attacks on large information and communication systems, and psychological influence can pose a threat that surpasses traditional weapons. Their complexity lies in the fact that such threats are extremely difficult to detect and neutralize.

Psychological warfare is subject to the same principles as traditional warfare. The actions of one party to the conflict force the other to respond to them in order to restore the balance. Preventive measures provoke counter-reactions, and each subsequent step may be more severe and aggressive than the previous one. As a result, the conflict escalates, even if the participants are convinced that they are acting solely in self-defense or preventively. Psychological warfare, which is actively used today, is based on a number of

established methods and tactics. It uses tools of disinformation, media propaganda, threats and psychological manipulation aimed at suppressing or destroying the enemy. Effective defense against such attacks requires a transparent and balanced system based on factual information, realistic representation of events and absence of bias. The key to countering information warfare is the rational thinking of the public, its ability to assess the situation independently, and ensuring communication free from censorship and manipulation. The dominance of facts and open consideration of alternative points of view should be a priority. People who are critical of information do not seek simplistic solutions or exaggerated theses; instead, they expect a deep and comprehensive analysis of every aspect of an event (Veebel, 2015).

The methods of combating disinformation that are actively used in the West are mostly limited to refuting false information. However, this approach is not always effective. Those who launch an information attack have a significant advantage: they control the format and content of the presentation, select the target audience, and create an emotional impact. In response, the party engaged in refutation can only prove the factual falsity of the messages, which is often not enough to neutralize the full-scale impact (Varenia, 2025).

In this context, media literacy becomes not only an educational tool, but also an element of state security and a strategy for building national resilience. It allows not only to recognize and refute disinformation, but also to create a critical mass of conscious citizens capable of counteracting manipulative practices, resisting panic and maintaining social unity in a crisis. Developing a systemic media literacy policy at the state level is becoming a necessary component of protection against information attacks, as it provides a long-term effect, i.e., the formation of a culture of critical thinking and responsible information consumption. That is why the experience of countries that have successfully integrated media education into their national security strategies is of particular interest and deserves a detailed consideration.

It is also important to emphasize and note the key role of critical thinking in the development of media literacy. It is the ability of citizens to assess information flows in a meaningful and balanced way that forms the basis for effective countering disinformation, helps to strengthen social unity and ensures trust in state institutions. Critical thinking is the main tool that gives media literacy not only an educational but also a strategically important security dimension. The main aspects of its impact on the development of resilience to information aggression are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** The role of critical thinking in resilience to information aggression

No.	Direction of influence	Content
1	Protection against disinformation	A critical thinker questions sensationalized headlines, carefully checks sources, compares multiple points of view, and analyzes arguments and data. This greatly reduces their susceptibility to propaganda and fake news, the main purpose of which is to spread distrust and discord.
2	Preserving national cohesion and unity	Possession of media literacy skills, the ability to distinguish objective analysis from provocations and not to succumb to manipulations aimed at provoking conflicts or hostility. This allows us to maintain the unity of society in the face of external threats.
3	Increasing trust in state institutions	Citizens who have developed critical thinking can easily distinguish between constructive criticism and streams of paid discredit. They are more supportive of the army, government, law enforcement agencies and volunteers, and do not respond to provocations designed to destabilize the country.
4	Conscious choice and civic engagement	A high level of media literacy allows people to actively engage in the search for reliable information, meaningfully analyze political events, and be active in social interaction. The ability to make conscious choices, avoiding the influence of imposed scenarios.
5	Strengthening information sovereignty	The massive introduction of media literacy complicates the task of an information aggressor to manipulate public opinion. Critical thinking plays the role of a barrier that protects the state's information space from external influence and helps to strengthen its sovereignty in the information sphere.

*Source: based on (Bezkoronayna, 2025; UNDP, 2024; MCSC, 2024; UNESCO, 2025)*

The information summarized in the table shows that critical thinking is a key element that transforms media literacy from a simple educational skill into a strategic security tool. Its role covers a wide range of influences, from the individual level, where each person is able to distinguish between truthful information and manipulation, to the collective level. At this level, social cohesion is strengthened, trust in state institutions is enhanced, and the country's ability to withstand external threats is improved. As a result, critical thinking not only protects people from disinformation, but also helps to create conditions for strengthening the information sovereignty of the state. This approach allows us to consider media literacy as an important element of public policy that directly affects national security.

The results of a study of the impact of Russian disinformation and propaganda under the guise of advertising on Facebook are illustrative. The study was conducted jointly by the Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security (CSSI) and the Center for Democracy and Rule of Law (CEDEM). The results were published in 2024. This study was aimed not only at finding content with Russian disinformation and propaganda among the Ukrainian audience, but also at investigating the mechanisms of their dissemination and finding ways to counteract them. The search for relevant advertising messages was carried out through monitoring and classification on the Meta platform. A total of 596 advertising messages from 396 profiles were analyzed. It was

found that the following advertising tools were used to promote hostile information content

- a defined list of topics;
- messages consistent with current Russian propaganda narratives
- automation of pages for advertising forks;
- appropriate visual support.

Since March 11, 2023, systematic placement of advertising messages on Facebook has been recorded. The waves of such messages were aimed at promoting a number of topics that are important for Ukrainian society:

- attempts to demoralize the military and civilian population of Ukraine;
- convincing Western partners of the lack of support for Ukraine;
- the futility of resistance;
- feeding “traitorous” rumors and gossip;
- corruption and political struggle in the highest echelons of Ukrainian government (Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security, & Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law, 2024: 2-3).

The study also identified and structured 12 key topics that were most often thrown into the discussion on the social network (Table 2).

**Table 2:** The most common topics and themes of Russian information propaganda and fakes on Facebook

No	Subject of the message	Main points
1	The front line	Tense situation in the combat zone; situation in Bakhmut; southern direction of the front
2	Mobilization in Ukraine	The question of fairness and unfairness of mobilization criteria; speculation around fears of mobilization
3	Support from the West	Western partners’ disbelief in Ukraine; interference in Ukraine’s governance and military planning; delayed aid; interest in prolonging the war; territorial claims to Ukraine by neighboring states; poor attitudes toward Ukrainians abroad.
4	Weapons	Poor quality of Western weapons provided to support Ukraine; Ukraine is unable to produce the required amount of weapons of proper quality on its own
5	Corruption	Pervasive corruption of the authorities; embezzlement of aid
6	Government	Ukraine has an incompetent government; personal attacks on the President of Ukraine and his family and entourage, as well as on other representatives of the political and state authorities of Ukraine
7	Energy	Threats of prolonged or total power and heating cuts
8	Demography	Losses; unwillingness to return to Ukraine
9	Demoralization	Mockery and defamation of European values; promotion of the language issue; emphasis on regional differences; low morale of the Defense Forces; rising crime rate in Ukraine
10	Poverty	Social insecurity of the population; low and declining income levels

11	Payments	A powerful flow of disinformation about financial assistance to Ukrainians from the government, international organizations, and foreign partners
12	Attitude towards and care for the military	Indifference of the state to the military and their families; lack of proper assistance for the wounded and maimed by war

*Source: (Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security, & Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law, 2024: 4)*

As can be seen from the table, the large-scale use of social media advertising tools to spread disinformation that deliberately targets sensitive points in Ukrainian society not only creates powerful information pressure. It once again raises the question of the public's ability to effectively filter and critically evaluate such messages. Given the recorded intensity and high quality of manipulative advertising campaigns, there is a reasonable need to analyze the level of media literacy of the Ukrainian population, as it is an important factor in national resilience to information aggression by the occupying country, Russia. In particular, Detector Media has been conducting a study of the level of media literacy of the Ukrainian population for several years and has published its results on its website and discussed them at various information events. The surveys (national survey) have been conducted since 2020. According to the results of the 2020 survey (2,000 respondents were interviewed), authors have the following results.

During December 23, 2020 – January 10, 2021, 2,000 respondents, aged 18-65, men and women, from different regions of Ukraine were interviewed. 63% of respondents see the main mission of the media as “informing citizens about socially significant events”; it is also important to “educate, provide important information and broadcast certain values important to society and the state”. At the same time, 25% of respondents believe that “the media have no influence on them, or they have a significant influence – 24% change their life values and interests”. At the same time, 36% admit that “the media influence their assessments of the socio-political situation; one in three (33%) states a change in emotional state after reading certain content; 31% believe that the media form an “agenda” by drawing attention to certain events”. In 2020, only 15% of respondents did not use the Internet, while 71% considered themselves heavy users. The problem of media manipulation was important to 57% of respondents. And only 8% had heard of manipulative messages in the media for the first time. When assessing the level of media literacy from 0 to 10 (1 – low, 5 – average, 10 – high), 15% of Ukrainians had a low level of media literacy; 33% – below average; 44% – above average; 8% – high. The level of media literacy is influenced by age, gender, and level of education. The highest level was recorded among young people aged 18–25, due to digital competence; the lowest level was recorded among the age group of 56–65. The lower the level of education, the lower the level of media literacy (Detector Media, 2021).

In subsequent years, the study was conducted using the same methodology (Len Masterman's concept, qualitative research “Ukrainians' media consumption practices: conceptual development of the audience media literacy index”) and among the same number of respondents. According to the results of the Detector Media study, in 2021, the level of media literacy of the Ukrainian population did not change compared to 2020.

There was only a slight increase in the number of people with a high level of media literacy, which generally did not affect the overall sociological indicators (Detector Media, 2022).

The level of media literacy of Ukrainians has undergone significant changes in 2020-2022. The number of people with an above-average index increased from 55% to 81%, and the average score increased from 4.8 to 5.9 points. The share of the audience with high competence in understanding the role of media in society increased from 45% to 72%; in digital literacy – from 49% to 64%, and in sensitivity to distorted content – from 56% to 66%. Media literacy among young people aged 18-25 has traditionally remained high due to better digital skills and active use of media. In the older age group of 56-65, this figure remains much lower. Among people with a general secondary education, 33% have low or below average skills. At the same time, only 10% of those with complete or incomplete higher education have such a status. Financial status is another important factor. People with low income demonstrate a lower level of media literacy. Among those who have enough money only for food, 27% have low or below average levels. In the group with above-average income, who not only cover their expenses but also have the opportunity to save, this share is much lower and amounts to 12% (Detector Media, 2023).

According to the study, in 2023, there was a significant decrease in the level of the overall media literacy index: the share of respondents with an above-average score decreased from 81% to 76%. At the same time, the understanding of the role of media in society remained almost unchanged compared to 2022. There has also been an increase in the number of Ukrainians who are sensitive to content distortion (from 65% to 70%). However, the number of people with digital competence has decreased: 64% in 2022 vs. 55% in 2023. There is also a dependence of the level of media literacy on age, educational level, wealth, and place of residence. The indicator of understanding the role of media in society remains stable. However, the share of those who perceive the media as working in the interests of the state has decreased – 31% in 2022 vs. 25% in 2023. 30% of respondents are convinced that the media primarily represent the interests of their owners or investors (Detector Media, 2024).

The results of the 2024 study show significant changes in the overall level of the media literacy index since the beginning of the Great War. During 2021–2022, the share of the audience with an above-average level increased significantly – from 55% to 81%. Accordingly, there has been a decrease in those who demonstrated a low or below average level of media literacy – from 45% to 29%. Over the three years of full-scale war, the media literacy index remains high and will not decline until 2022. There has been significant adaptation to the existing media landscape, and some experience in content analysis and verification has been gained. There is also emotional fatigue from information, especially traumatic content. At the same time, there has been a decrease in the number of sources and experts that Ukrainians turn to in search of information, especially socio-political news. Compared to 2023, in 2024, attention to socio-political information increased (63% and 70%, respectively). the share of those who get information from people rather than from the media also increased. 5% of Ukrainians do not use the Internet, while 91% consider themselves active users. Of these, 28% use artificial intelligence: 14% use it for work; 12% use it for education; 13% use it for other purposes. 72% of Internet users do not use artificial intelligence; 37% believe they do not need it; 13% do not know how to

use it; 10% do not trust this technology. At the same time, there are 11% of Ukrainians who have never heard of artificial intelligence. For 62% of the surveyed audience, the problem of misinformation is significant. Only 17% believe that they can always distinguish fakes and avoid them. Also, people are becoming more competent in understanding that information is fake. This trend has been noticeable throughout the entire period of full-scale war. At the same time, 18% intuitively decide whether can be trusted. While 43% of respondents are looking for a link to the source of information to verify it (in 2023, there were 37% of such people). Video and photo evidence (for 33%) and the reputation of the content author (for 30%) are also important. At the same time, Ukrainians are still suspicious of most media, trusting them only partially. There is a downward trend in the level of trust in various media, from television to messengers (Detector Media, 2025).

Thus, the results of national surveys conducted by Detector Media in 2020–2024 demonstrate important changes in the media competence of Ukrainian society. Although the overall media literacy index remained moderately low before the full-scale invasion (2020–2021), the results of the surveys in the following years show significant adaptation to changes, including the media landscape, and an increase in media literacy. This was driven by the urgent need to critically reflect on the realities of a full-scale war and to counteract manipulations and propaganda fakes. Despite the fact that in 2023 there was a slight decrease in the overall index due, among other things, to a decline in digital competence, the key indicators continue to remain high and do not decline to the level before the full-scale invasion. Positive trends include an increase in the number of people looking for primary sources of information; increased attention to socio-political content. Media literacy is invariably dependent on the level of education, wealth, and age.

The level of critical thinking among the Ukrainian population has increased, but systemic Russian propaganda and the presence of socially vulnerable groups with lower levels of media literacy confirm that strengthening information resilience remains a strategically important task for the state as a *component of national security and public administration*, in particular, it requires targeted educational programs aimed at strengthening national media literacy (Pomaza-Ponomarenko *et al.*, 2024).

*It can be argued that media literacy is an important factor in the national security strategy of the state and public administration. A high level of media literacy among different age, social, and professional groups of the population not only effectively minimizes the disintegrating impact of information threats, but also increases the level of public trust in government institutions. This is extremely important for the state in the context of the ongoing war and further development, including in the geopolitical context. The skills of critical perception of information, especially from different sources, contribute to more effective interaction between the government and society, reduce the risks of manipulation, information injection and the impact of fakes on social and social stability, strengthen the democratic stability of the state and improve its image in the international arena.*

The outlined mechanisms of Russian information aggression make it possible to identify the scale and intensity of influence, but analytical representativeness is enhanced by explaining the causal relationships between information influence and behavioral transformations of the target audience. Conceptually defined dependencies can be operationalized as a sequence: propaganda influence tools → cognitive vulnerabilities of recipients → affective reaction → modification of attitudes and behavioral patterns. In

differentiated socio-political contexts, these causal chains demonstrate a variable configuration that determines the measurable parameters of resilience. Their systematization forms the conceptual basis for the development of targeted strategies to counteract disinformation influences.

In this context, the experience of countries that have successfully implemented long-term media literacy programs is worthy of note. Their achievements are illustrative and require careful analysis. The authors propose to focus on Finland, which is a confident leader in media literacy as a national development strategy.

*Finland*, as a part of the European democratic space, has long been exposed to disinformation attacks by external state actors such as the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (PRC). The purpose of such attacks is to undermine trust in state institutions, undermine social cohesion, and influence domestic and foreign policy. However, Finland has a powerful and effective system of countering foreign policy disinformation based on a comprehensive approach to information security (Makedon et al., 2024). This system includes the introduction of media literacy at all levels of education, support for an independent media environment, active use of fact-checking, and expansion of international cooperation.

Finnish society is highly resilient to disinformation attacks thanks to a long-standing policy aimed at developing critical thinking and raising public awareness. The experience of implementing media literacy programs is particularly valuable, as this country was one of the first to recognize the key role of media literacy in protecting the information space and supporting democratic values. The media literacy system in Finland includes both formal education in schools and universities and out-of-school initiatives for adults and the elderly. Thanks to a comprehensive approach, Finnish society has a high level of information analysis skills, which allows its citizens to successfully counteract disinformation. The study of the Finnish experience in implementing media literacy programs is of great importance for other countries facing similar challenges. Finland has proven that investments in media literacy are justified, as they contribute to strengthening national security, social cohesion, and the stability of democratic institutions. Analyzing the Finnish model and adapting its key elements to the peculiarities of the national context can be an effective tool for states in the fight against information threats (Yurii, 2024: 89).

In Finland, media literacy is an important part of the state policy, which was laid down in the media education strategy published by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2019. This document updated and expanded the principles of cultural policy in the field of media literacy, which were first formulated in 2013. The need to revise the previous policy arose due to significant changes in the media and cultural environment, as well as the expansion of the audience in need of media education. The structural reforms of the government program emphasize the importance of media skills for people of all ages, from children to the elderly. The main goal of the new policy is to create opportunities for every citizen to improve their knowledge and skills related to media literacy. This policy aims to support the development and planning of media education activities. A variety of organizations may be involved in the implementation of the proposed initiatives, including ministries, municipalities, associations, educational institutions, foundations, companies, and civil society groups. Implementation of the national media education strategy requires active interaction and effective communication between these actors (European Union, 2024). The policy document "Media literacy in Finland

National media education policy” emphasizes the growing role of media in people’s lives. Learning, professional activities, social influence, self-expression, personal development, use of services, and interaction with other people are increasingly intertwined with media in the modern world. Media literacy has become an integral part of civic competencies that help individuals and communities lead full and meaningful lives. That is why it is important that policies aimed at developing media literacy in Finland cover all population groups without exception. Recently, this concept has often been emphasized in the context of various social threats. These threats include the deliberate spread of disinformation and anti-democratic ideas, hate speech and media violence, as well as data privacy or security breaches. It is generally recognized that people with a high level of media literacy are able to effectively protect themselves from such risks. However, the task of media education goes far beyond protection. Its main goal is to stimulate the desire and ability of individuals to act actively and responsibly in the modern media culture, while supporting positive trends in the development of society in the future. It is worth noting that media culture includes not only positive but also negative aspects. Therefore, media education is designed to help people take an active role in this environment, not just respond to its challenges. Media literacy is inextricably linked to personal development, creativity, critical thinking, general level of education, and a sense of belonging to society and culture. That is why high-quality media education is becoming a crucial factor in the process of collaborative learning and improving media literacy, with attention to ethical aspects. Cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary cooperation is an essential condition for ensuring that media education, research and other relevant activities and services are accessible to every Finnish citizen (European Union, 2024: 5).

Finland is a recognized leader in education, and media literacy is an integral part of it. This competence is integrated into the national curriculum from the earliest stages, preparing students for life in a complex digital world. This approach not only teaches how to use technology, but also fosters critical thinking, digital responsibility, and an understanding of the impact of media. The Finnish education system considers media literacy as a key element in the formation of a well-rounded personality. It goes beyond purely technical skills to include social and civic competencies. The National Media Literacy Strategy in Finland considers it a fundamental cross-cutting competence. It includes three key goals, which authors can present in the form of a diagram (Figure 1).

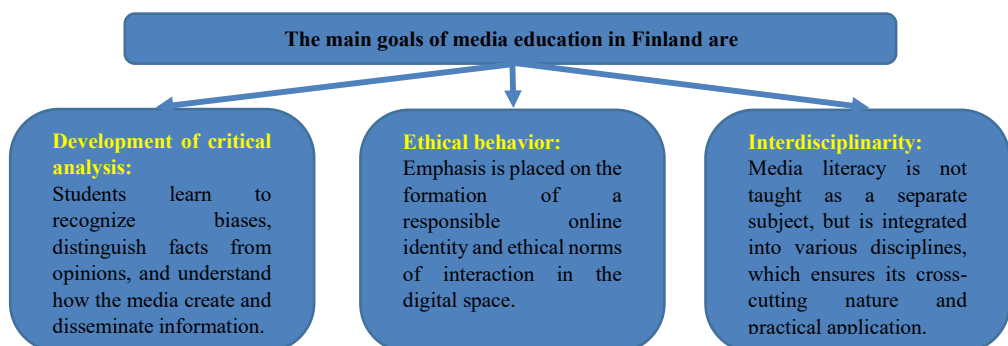


Figure 1. Key goals of media education in Finland

Source: compiled by: Salomaa (2019), EAWI, *Information and Democracy* (n.d.)

As one can see from the diagram, Finland's approach to media education strikes a balance between the development of individual skills, social competencies and adaptations, and civic responsibility. In other words, it is a comprehensive system that guides a person not only to master the technical skills of modern media and communication, but also to comprehend information and interactions in the digital environment and to realize the consequences of their actions and deeds. Thus, the Finnish model of media literacy combines educational, cultural, and socio-political dimensions, making it not only a means of learning but also a tool for strengthening democratic values and civic engagement.

Finland has been focusing on media literacy since 2013, when it presented the document *Good Media Literacy – National Policy Guidelines*. This policy recognized media literacy as a key competency of the digital age and offered a framework of recommendations for media companies, legislators and educational institutions. The main goal was to prepare all citizens, regardless of age, to critically analyze their interaction with the media, which would contribute to the creation of an educated and media-literate society. To ensure a comprehensive approach to media education, the document also emphasizes the importance of cooperation between government agencies, the media sector, and academic institutions. The document enshrines media education as a strategic priority of cultural policy, defining its key areas as social inclusion, active citizenship, critical thinking, creativity and self-expression. The coordination of the processes was provided by the Center for Media Education and Audiovisual Media (KAVI), which brought together schools, municipalities, NGOs, and the media industry. The practical tasks include the development of daily media education for children and adolescents, the creation of sustainable institutional structures, and Finland's active participation in international initiatives. The effectiveness of the policy was assessed by annual monitoring with the participation of expert panels (Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland, 2013). Thus, in 2013–2016, Finland formed a regulatory and institutional framework for media education, combining cultural policy and educational strategies, which strengthened its position as a European leader in media literacy.

This strategy is the result of close cooperation between various governmental and non-governmental institutions, which guarantees its effectiveness and consistency. Taking into account the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027), Finland's National Program for Youth Policy and Youth Work for the period 2024–2027 (VANUPO) identifies media literacy and critical thinking as key tools to support the younger generation. Changes to the curriculum in Finland have integrated media literacy at all levels of education, from kindergarten to adult lifelong learning. It has become a cross-cutting competency in the teaching of languages, art, social studies, history, and health, as well as part of interdisciplinary educational modules (European Commission, 2025).

In Finland, media and information literacy is considered one of the key civic competencies necessary for the functioning of democracy. It is actively promoted not only in schools, but also in libraries, non-governmental organizations, and other educational institutions throughout a person's life. Particular attention is paid to developing this skill from an early age, as most preschool children have already interacted with digital media: watching movies and advertisements, listening to music, and some even playing computer games. Digital literacy in Finland is seen as an ambitious strategic goal. At the same time,

the results of the CRITICAL (2025) project show that there are significant challenges: about 40% of 12-year-olds are unable to clearly distinguish commercial information from factual information; most adolescents have difficulty interpreting manipulative graphs, and almost a third of high school students have difficulty assessing the reliability of texts. Thus, despite the high average scores, digital gaps remain significant. An additional challenge is the heterogeneity of the student audience. It is especially difficult to ensure effective coverage of young people who are not fluent in Finnish and study under adapted programs (Kivinen & Verfürth, 2025).

The Finnish experience clearly demonstrates how media literacy is moving from the plane of educational competence to the status of a strategic tool for national security. The systematic integration of media education at all levels of education, complemented by the development of critical thinking, digital responsibility, and civic skills, significantly strengthens society's resilience to disinformation, strengthening the country's information independence. The effectiveness of this model is based on well-organized cooperation between government agencies, educational institutions, and civil society organizations. Despite the existing digital barriers, Finnish practice proves that investments in media education contribute to social cohesion and stability of democratic institutions, serving as a guide for other countries in countering information challenges.

An analysis of the Finnish experience confirms its high effectiveness, but the mechanistic transposition of this model to other countries is limited by cultural, linguistic, and managerial determinants. In countries with prolonged exposure to hybrid threats and transformational institutional dynamics, digital inequalities, informal education channels, and the specific needs of vulnerable social groups are of critical importance. Adapting the model requires flexible media education formats, civil society integration, and a synthesis of formal and informal education, which increases its practical relevance beyond highly developed democracies.

Systematizing the results allows us to conceptualize media literacy not only as an educational competence, but as a full-fledged tool for ensuring national security. Resilience to cognitive threats is formed through the synergy of continuous education, the development of critical thinking, and institutional trust. In this paradigm, media literacy is transformed into an element of long-term security policy capable of countering adaptive and prolonged information attacks. This approach is particularly relevant for democratic societies that are in a state of institutional vulnerability or prolonged conflict.

## 5. Discussion

Media literacy in modern realities is not just an educational skill, but also an important element of national security and a means of combating information threats. With the increasing globalization of the media space, the active use of digital platforms, and the spread of disinformation, classical approaches, such as refutation or fact-checking, are becoming less effective. This is evidenced by both theoretical research (Konstankevych *et al.*, 2022; Sádaba & Salaverría, 2022) and practical analysis of the spread of manipulative information that affects the emotions of the audience and undermines trust in government institutions (Araújo Silveira & Roazzi, 2025).

An analysis of media literacy as a key factor of national resilience in the context of modern information aggression shows that the cognitive component of war is becoming no less important than traditional combat operations (Kharchenko et al., 2024). Critical thinking of citizens is a key factor in the fight against information aggression. The ability to verify facts, evaluate arguments, and compare different sources forms a kind of “information vaccination” that reduces or even negates the impact of propaganda and disinformation (Bezkorovayna, 2025; Kolinko & Petryshyn, 2022; Veebel, 2015).

The practice of refuting fake news, widely used by Western countries, shows limited effectiveness in large-scale information campaigns. The main reason is that the aggressor maintains control over the narrative and creates a strong emotional resonance among the audience. This situation emphasizes the importance of applying a systemic approach, in which media literacy becomes an integral part of all levels of social life (Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022; Taranenko, 2024; Varga, 2024).

Finland’s experience is a good example of a systematic approach to countering information threats. The success of the Finnish state is based on a combination of formal education, extracurricular programs, intersectoral interaction and international cooperation, which ensures a high level of society’s resilience to the challenges of the information age. However, it should be emphasized that even in a country with high media literacy rates, a number of problems remain: the digital divide, difficulties in integrating language minorities, and the lack of ability of adolescents to recognize manipulative information (Kivinen & Verfürth, 2025). Media literacy in the 21st century is evolving from an educational competence to one of the key elements of national security. Its effectiveness is determined not only by the quality of curricula and the appropriate level of teacher competence, but also by a systematic approach to ensuring the information resilience of society, continuous threat analysis, and flexible policy adjustment to meet new challenges (Dutsyk et al., 2022). Ukraine has every chance to strengthen its information space, using the best practices of the international community, in particular the experience of Finland, and improve the psychological and cognitive endurance of its citizens. This will lay a solid foundation for long-term national security in the digital age.

The results obtained correlate with current scientific developments in the fields of cognitive warfare and media education, where critical thinking is positioned as a fundamental determinant of democratic resilience. At the same time, alongside the European paradigm represented by Finland’s experience, it is advisable to integrate alternative conceptual approaches that have developed in non-European sociocultural environments. In particular, in the regions of Southeast Asia and Latin America, priority is given not only to institutionalized educational practices, but also to civic initiatives, digital self-organization, and localized networks of social trust.

The use of secondary sociological data and descriptive analytics significantly expands the empirical basis of the study, but implies methodological limitations regarding causal inference and the external validity of the results obtained. In particular, Ukraine’s media literacy index represents an informative composite indicator, but requires explicit justification of the principles of weighted aggregation of indicators, potential systematic sampling biases, and comparative compatibility of research waves in conditions of martial law.

Further scientific research should focus on the use of experimental and quasi-experimental designs that enable the assessment of the impact of media education programs on real-time decision-making processes in crisis scenarios. Comparative analysis of the cognitive processing of identical disinformation stimuli by different age and socioeconomic groups under conditions of psychological stress is of particular heuristic value. Research into the effectiveness of differentiated pedagogical interventions — from formalized learning to digital simulation environments — in reducing vulnerability to manipulative influences in modern global media ecosystems also remains relevant.

## 6. Implications and further research

Media literacy is becoming a key element of national resilience in the context of modern information aggression, which is especially acute in the context of the War for Independence in Ukraine and powerful Russian propaganda that has spread to many countries.

Media literacy promotes critical analysis of information, helps to counter disinformation and preserve one's own identity, which significantly enhances the state's ability to overcome cognitive threats. Modern information wars are characterized by camouflage, psychological and cognitive influence. Due to their complexity and hidden nature, threat awareness becomes a difficult task. That is why systematic, strategically planned and methodically implemented training of citizens, as well as the development of critical thinking and media literacy, is of strategic importance for national security.

Finland's experience demonstrates the success of a comprehensive approach to media education that includes formal education, extracurricular projects, cross-sectoral cooperation, and international coordination. At the same time, even in a country with a high level of media literacy, there are still digital gaps and difficulties in adapting for certain groups of people, which indicates the constant development and change of this process.

Implementation of a systemic media literacy strategy that takes into account the specifics of Ukraine and the current situation related to the war can be an important factor in strengthening the information and psychological resilience of citizens. Priority should be given to developing critical thinking in the younger generation, ensuring access to relevant resources throughout life, and developing responsible behavior in the digital environment. Media literacy should be perceived not only as a skill in education, but also as a key component of national security that requires sustainable monitoring, continuous performance evaluation, and flexible response to the latest information challenges.

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