EVENT DESCRIPTION SHEET

PROJECT	
Participant:	Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education (FECE)
PIC number:	940414710
Project name and acronym:	Media Literacy For Democracy — MLFD

EVENT DESCRIPTION		
Event number:	WP 5	
Event name:	MLFD Focus Group - Bulgaria	
Type:	3-day Focus Groups	
In situ/online:	In-situ	
Location:	Sofia, Bulgaria	
Date(s):	27, 29, 30 March 2023	
Website(s) (if any):	https://foundationece.eu/2023/04/04/focus-groups-on-media-literacy-conducted/	
Participants		
Female:	20	
Male:	9	
Non-binary:	/	
From country 1 [Bulgaria]:	29	
Total number of participants:	29	From total number of countries:	1
Description		

FECE conducted the MLFD Focus Group on March 27, 29 and 30 in-situ at the Cultural Studies department of Sofia University. The events had informative, educational and aware-raising objectives and used non-formal methods to engage the participants. The FG sessions gave participants the opportunity to discuss important topics on European and national level concerning the importance of the acquisition of media literacy skills, skills for fact-checking and the threat of the spread of fake news and disinformation for our societies and democracies. Each of the three FG's sessions was held in an interactive format, allowing participants to share thoughts and ideas concerning the topics of the project. Each session welcomed an expert in the field, together with FECE's facilitators and discussed a possible media literacy strategy to engage more young people at a national and European level.

Format of Focus Groups:

Each Focus Group's session followed a similar format as outlined below:

1. Presentation of the MLFD project, aims and objectives, and the information booklet created under WP1.

2. Short presentation of participants and the expert invited as well as a discussion around how young people and citizens receive and consume information and news articles.
3. A set of six questions created for the sessions of the FGs
4. Feedback questionnaire, summary, conclusion.

Each Focus Group's session differed in topic given the guest expert, who stimulated the debate by leading a discussion in the following topics related to their work:

- Session 1: 27.03.2023 – Media Literacy: Skills for dealing with fake news and disinformation. In this session Prof. Dr Milena Dobreva, Head of the research group on disinformation detection and research at the GATE Institute outlined the importance of acquisition of media literacy skills to combat the spread of fake news and disinformation at a global level. Furthermore, the other expert Zornitsa Hristova, editor-in-chief of the "Vizhte" newspaper for news for children joined the discussion by elaborating on the fact that nowadays, children from an early age, are spending hours online and treat of the circulation of fake news and ways to create objective content.

- Session 2: 29.03.2023 – The influence of disinformation on democracy at the European and national level. In this session, FECE's team created an interactive association activity. Participants were given words, such as "democracy and disinformation", "European society and civic engagement", "European institutions and sources of information" and they had to match the words with meanings, creating a picture of the influence of disinformation on our democracies. The discussion centred around the role of media as the fourth pillar of democracy, due to its ability to be a watchdog to the state and political actors and so establish a power balance within the political realm. Moreover, participants discussed diverse sources of information as critical in forming an informed opinion.

- Session 3: 30.03.2023 – Quality of traditional and digital journalism. In this session Ruslana Margova, a researcher at the GATE Institute with editorial experience in Bulgarian daily newspapers, joined the focus group. The discussion revolved around artificial intelligence, benefits and harms, and fact-checking methods in digital journalism. Participants further discussed the overlapping effects of traditional and digital media and the importance for digital media and journalism to adhere to the same standards. Furthermore, participants discussed how journalists can adapt to the changing media landscape and reached a conclusion that journalists should embrace new technologies while upholding traditional values of accuracy, objectivity, and transparency.

Participants:

The event was advertised on FECE's social media platforms, in the national portal of NGOs, and in the monthly FECE's newsletter (206 contacts), and in both the department of Cultural Studies and Journalism and Mass Media of the University of Sofia. In addition, FECE's team contacted a number of experts and journalists and invited them to join the Focus group..

Participants came from Sofia, Bulgaria and were students. The 3 separate sessions involved a total of 29 participants, 26 of which were aged between 18 and 35 (target group):

Country of residence: Bulgaria
Working language: Bulgarian

Average age: 22
Female: 17
Male: 9

Objectives:

The 3-day Focus group gave participants the opportunity to discuss, debate and understand the importance of media literacy skills in combating the spread of fake news and disinformation at national and European levels. Participants discussed how they receive and consume information, what sources of information they trust and how to fact-check the accountability of a given source of information. Each FG's session was very interactive and participants were engaged in the discussions and asked questions to the experts involved. The format followed a well-organised structure with an introduction and set of the context, presentation of the MLFD project and the booklet, welcoming experts, encouraging the involvement of all participants, respecting each view point and allowing participants to discuss the topics among themselves.

Results:

All of the three FG's sessions revolved around important topics both for the participants and for Europe as a whole. The combat of dis/misinformation is central to the European community and it becomes apparent when voting for particular policies that shape the future of a society, be it on

national or European level. Participants discussed the role of international cooperation in combating disinformation, media literacy education and training and the role of social media engines in shaping the quality of digital journalism. These topics helped participants debrief complex matters and scenarios and to better identify the effects of disinformation on our societies and democracies.

Moreover, participants discussed the skills and competencies that should be present in media literacy training and reached to a conclusion that critical thinking, fact-checking, evaluating sources and a general overview of the media landscape within one's society are essential competences for media literacy. Further skills include the ability to access information offline and online, language competence in order to differentiate the tone of a source among others. Additionally, participants discussed resources, such as online fact-checking tools, media literacy classes, and interactive games, which can be helpful. Socially disadvantaged youth should be provided full or partial access to the internet to be able to access and research information. Parents and teachers could also undergo a course or a seminar on how to navigate the media landscape and recognize misinformation and questionable sources.

The participants agreed that the EU institutions should all participate in the combat of dis/misinformation and the spread of fake news. There must be regulations and the EU must play a strategic role in this battle. Disinformation is a powerful way to undermine democracy. Regulations imposed by a governing body must be carefully considered and refined as to have limited or no impact on journalistic freedom. Possibly media that are known to regularly publish false information should be held accountable for their content over time. Platforms that serve as an agora for a plethora of media that seem to mainly publish misinformation could be held accountable as well. Instead of expecting private media to self-regulate, an independent committee could issue recommendations and warnings when a source has published ten or more articles with clearly false information or information out of context.

Participants recommended that European and international websites can list false facts and raise-awareness about misleading information. A list of outlets that disproportionately disseminate misinformation could be added to those fact checking websites. An international app can be created where ordinary citizens can report suspected misinformation cases to be reviewed by auditors and researchers.

A more effective, but unfortunately slower measure against disinformation and its consumption is educating people on how to discern fact from fiction, reliable source from an unreliable source. The audience must be convinced that taking the time to question and investigate the information they digest is worth their time and effort.

Finally, participants discussed the importance of free speech as an integral part of journalism and of utmost importance to democracy. Efforts to combat disinformation must be well considered and available for scrutiny before implementation in order to achieve the highest results with minimum infringement on the freedom of speech. All of the participants agreed that free speech does not absolve an actor from any accountability and although a person is free to make statements, there are consequences that need to be faced.

Feedback:

At the end of each FG's session, participants were asked to fill out a paper questionnaire for the final evaluation, which also included standardised questionnaires related to the content covered in order to gather more input to be used for the MLFD international workshops.

As for the quality of both the organisation and the content of the focus group, participants rated it from "excellent" to "good", and found the event useful to engage with different points of view and that the event was very interactive.