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MEDIA LITERACY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE: THE SWEDISH APPROACH TO COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

МЕДІАГРАМОТНІСТЬ І ПСИХОЛОГІЧНА СТІЙКІСТЬ: ШВЕДСЬКИЙ ПІДХІД ДО ПРОТИДІЇ ДЕЗІНФОРМАЦІЇ

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Abstract. This article aims to examine the role of media literacy in building psychological resilience among the population, using Sweden as a case study, focusing on its significance in ensuring national resilience to contemporary information threats. Special attention is given to the analysis of threats posed by Russia, Iran, and China, which actively employ disinformation campaigns to undermine Sweden's information security. The article explores key mechanisms for developing media literacy, including government support, educational initiatives, and cross-sectoral collaboration, which effectively counter these threats. Classification methods, comparative analysis, and content analysis are employed to investigate Sweden's experience in implementing media education. Particular emphasis is placed on the activities of the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency, which plays a central role in implementing national information security strategies. The article analyzes educational programs aimed at developing citizens' critical thinking and information verification skills, as well as the contributions of libraries, media, and other institutions in enhancing media literacy. Sweden's international cooperation in countering disinformation is also considered, including participation in joint initiatives with international partners to address information threats. The study highlights the correlation between the population's media literacy level and its ability to resist external information influences. It concludes that Sweden's experience can serve as an effective model for other countries seeking to strengthen their informational defences, protect democratic values, and ensure national security in the face of modern hybrid threats.

Keywords: media literacy, psychological defence, resilience, disinformation, EU, NATO, Sweden, Russia, Iran, China.

Анотація. Метою статті є дослідження ролі медіаграмотності у формуванні психологічного захисту населення на прикладі Швеції, з акцентом на її значення для

забезпечення національної стійкості до сучасних інформаційних загроз. Особливу увагу приділено аналізу загроз з боку Росії, Ірану та Китаю, які активно використовують дезінформаційні кампанії для підриву інформаційної безпеки Швеції. У статті досліджуються ключові механізми розвитку медіаграмотності, включаючи державну підтримку, освітні ініціативи та міжсекторальну співпрацю, що дозволяють ефективно протистояти цим загрозам. Методи класифікації, порівняльного аналізу та контент-аналізу використовуються для вивчення шведського досвіду впровадження медіаосвіти. Особливу увагу приділено діяльності Шведського агентства психологічної оборони, яке відіграє центральну роль у реалізації національних стратегій інформаційної безпеки. Проаналізовано освітні програми, спрямовані на розвиток критичного мислення, навичок перевірки інформації серед громадян, а також внесок бібліотек, медіа й інших інституцій у підвищення медіаграмотності. Розглянуто міжнародну співпрацю Швеції у протидії дезінформації, зокрема участь у спільних ініціативах з міжнародними партнерами для протидії інформаційним загрозам. Особливий акцент зроблено на кореляції між рівнем медіаграмотності населення та його здатністю протистояти зовнішнім інформаційним впливам. Зроблено висновок, що шведський досвід може слугувати ефективною моделлю для інших країн, які прагнуть зміцнити свої інформаційні бар'єри, захистити демократичні цінності та забезпечити національну безпеку в умовах сучасних гібридних загроз.

Ключові слова: *медіаграмотність, психологічний захист, стійкість, дезінформація, ЄС, НАТО, Швеція, Росія, Іран, Китай.*

Introduction. In the contemporary global landscape, information threats and disinformation represent significant challenges to national security, democratic development, and social cohesion. Disinformation is increasingly utilized as a strategic tool for manipulating public opinion, undermining trust in governmental institutions, destabilizing societies, and disrupting the international order. Particularly concerning are foreign disinformation campaigns that aim to interfere in the internal affairs of states, weaken their informational security, and create conditions conducive to political or social destabilization. This underscores the critical necessity of developing and implementing comprehensive counter-disinformation strategies to enhance psychological resilience within society and promote media literacy. The relevance of this issue mandates the formulation of systematic, multi-tiered approaches that prioritize the cultivation of a robust informational culture, the advancement of critical thinking skills, and the capacity to identify and mitigate manipulative information influences.

Sweden, as a nation with high democratic standards and robust information security institutions, exemplifies a successful approach to addressing this challenge. Its strategy is grounded in integrating media literacy as a strategic tool for fostering psychological resilience among the population. Through a well-developed media education system encompassing diverse age and social groups, Sweden equips its citizens with critical thinking skills, the ability to analyze information sources, and the capacity to counter manipulative influences. These tools enhance societal resilience to external informational threats and uphold democratic values, even amidst heightened geopolitical tensions.

Ukraine, which faces intense information attacks and disinformation campaigns, requires the adaptation of similar approaches. Despite individual initiatives in media literacy, their lack of systematic implementation and insufficient coordination between government institutions, civil society, and media organizations limit their effectiveness in combating disinformation. Therefore, studying Sweden's experience in developing media literacy, adapting it to Ukrainian realities, and integrating it into educational programs and state information policies could become decisive factors in strengthening Ukraine's national information security.

The purpose of the study is to determine the role of media literacy in fostering psychological resilience within the population, exemplified by the Swedish experience.

Literature review. Countering information threats and fostering psychological resilience within the population have garnered significant attention from scholars at both international and

national levels. Research in this area examines various aspects of disinformation's societal impact, media literacy's role in enhancing information security, and the adaptation of successful international practices.

Among Ukrainian researchers who have focused on countering disinformation, information warfare, and the analysis of the impact of international information threats on national security, as well as exploring the psychological aspects of information influence on public consciousness and behaviour, notable contributions include the works of O. Andreeva, N. Karpchuk, V. Kopiika, Y. Makar, I. Makarenko, M. Ryzhkov, A. Shulyak, B. Yuskiv, and O. Zaporozhets. Among contemporary foreign researchers, the works of E. Bell, K. Heath, P. Jakobsson, U. Karlsson, N. Rossbach, J. Ruohonen, F. Stiernstedt, J. Stanley, T. Reid, and C. Wardle deserve particular attention. Moreover, it is important to highlight the contribution of international organizations and educational institutions to studying media literacy and information security. Notably, the European Commission, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, the Uppsala University, the University of Gothenburg, and the Fojo Media Institute significantly advance this field.

Main results of research. The spread of disinformation has emerged as a significant challenge to the democratic systems of nations, undermining their stability, public trust, and social cohesion. Sweden, with its historical commitment to democratic values, transparency, and social unity, stands out as a leader in implementing innovative approaches to counter these threats, offering effective models for preserving democratic resilience.

In Sweden, media literacy plays a pivotal role in the framework of psychological defence, particularly in countering disinformation and enhancing societal resilience. The concept of psychological defence in Sweden was established during World War II, when the country, facing a vulnerable position, recognized the necessity of protecting its population from the psychological warfare tactics employed by adversarial states. It became evident that conflicts are waged not only on battlefields but also through manipulating information and public opinion. To safeguard national security, the government developed a strategy that combined military preparedness with measures to counter propaganda and disinformation. A significant milestone in this effort was the establishment of the Psychological Defence Council in 1954, which was tasked with disseminating accurate information during wartime and studying public opinion and propaganda (*Andén, 2020*). The contemporary climate of disinformation, characterized by rapid technological advancements and the proliferation of social media, has further underscored the importance of these historical lessons.

The term «psychological defence» was introduced to avoid the negative connotations associated with «propaganda», which was largely linked to the tactics employed by Nazi Germany during World War II. The concept of psychological defence emphasized the importance of societal awareness of potential threats and the development of collective will to protect democratic values. This approach aimed to counter hostile narratives and enhance citizens' resilience against external manipulations (*Rossbach, 2017*).

The global context in which Sweden operates raises significant concerns. According to the Global State of Democracy 2024 report, published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, democratic governments worldwide are experiencing a marked decline. The report indicates that in 2023, 47 % of the evaluated countries saw a deterioration in at least one key indicator of democratic performance (*IDEA, 2024*). This marked the eighth consecutive year in which the number of countries with an overall decline in democracy outpaced those showing improvement. Such a trend underscores the urgent need for proactive measures to safeguard democratic values. Sweden's commitment to promoting media literacy becomes particularly significant in this context, as it is a powerful tool for reinforcing democratic principles and effectively countering disinformation.

As Sweden approached NATO membership, it faced significant challenges stemming from the malicious influence of Russia, China, and Iran. These states actively employed tactics aimed at destabilizing Swedish society, undermining trust in state institutions, and fostering social divisions. The Swedish Security Service identified these countries as primary threats, highlighting their

coordinated efforts to manipulate public opinion and influence on national security (*Säkerhetspolisen, 2023*).

Russia represents the most significant threat to Sweden's security. Disinformation campaigns orchestrated by Russian operators aim to fuel societal tensions and undermine government trust. By leveraging social media, Russia disseminates false narratives that exacerbate social conflicts. Notably, the incident involving the burning of the Quran outside the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm in January 2023, reportedly financed by Russian sources, served as a tool to incite anti-Swedish sentiments, strain diplomatic relations with Turkey, and complicate Sweden's NATO accession process (Wee, 2024). Beyond disinformation, Russia engages in cyber operations targeting critical infrastructure and influencing political processes. The Swedish Security Service warns that Russian operatives are actively involved in espionage and orchestrating cyberattacks on governmental and private institutions, posing a direct threat to national security.

China continues to expand its influence over Sweden's information space through various pressure mechanisms. A key instrument is economic leverage, aimed at suppressing critical voices and reducing resistance to Beijing's policies. Of particular concern are China's strategic investments in Swedish technology companies, which could potentially be utilized for espionage or the transfer of sensitive information. In response, Sweden has implemented stringent measures to strengthen oversight of foreign investments, particularly those originating from China, in an effort to safeguard its national interests and ensure the security of critical information infrastructures (*Säkerhetspolisen, 2023*).

Iran, in turn, actively employs cyber operations and disinformation tactics aimed at destabilizing the situation in Sweden. Notably, an incident was recorded in which Iranian hackers targeted Sweden's SMS service, sending messages calling for «revenge» over the Quran burning incident (*Åklagarmyndigheten, 2024*). The objective of this campaign was not only to incite intergroup conflict but also to shape a negative image of Sweden as an «Islamophobic state».

In the face of such challenges, measures to enhance societal information resilience gain critical importance. One of the key tools in this regard is media literacy, which fosters the ability to assess information and resist manipulative influences critically. To this end, Sweden established the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency (Myndigheten för psykologiskt försvar, MPF), which plays a central role in developing strategies to counter disinformation and preparing the population for information threats, particularly in the context of the country's integration into NATO (*Psychological Defence Agency: 2024a*). The agency's activities also focus on building a resilient society capable of effectively countering disinformation attacks while upholding democratic values and fundamental human rights. One of MPF's key priorities is preparing for various scenarios, including potential armed conflict. This preparation involves not only identifying and neutralizing information influence operations but also ensuring the capability of Sweden's population and civil society to withstand malicious external interference (*New Eastern Europe, 2024*). MPF emphasizes raising awareness and training diverse social groups, including government bodies, municipalities, non-governmental organizations, media representatives, and the general public.

The Swedish Psychological Defence Agency (MPF) plays a pivotal role in countering disinformation and strengthening media literacy as a critical component of societal psychological resilience. One of the strategic priorities of MPF is supporting media organizations targeted by information attacks and establishing a platform for collaboration with media industry representatives. In partnership with the Fojo Media Institute at Linnaeus University, the agency conducts training programs designed to prepare journalists for effectively identifying and countering information manipulation (*New Eastern Europe, 2024*). These initiatives contribute to the development of professional competencies among journalists working in complex informational environments, ensuring adherence to ethical standards and the preservation of high professional principles.

At the same time, initiatives targeting the general public play an equally vital role in building national information resilience. As such, a key component of MPF's strategy involves educational campaigns, such as «Don't Be Fooled» (*Psychological Defence Agency: 2024b*). These initiatives aim

to raise citizens' awareness of disinformation tactics and foster critical thinking when consuming information. Specifically, the «Don't Be Fooled» campaign emphasizes the importance of thoroughly verifying sources before sharing any content, thereby promoting a culture of scepticism toward unverified claims. The practical recommendations provided through these efforts help citizens distinguish credible information from manipulative narratives, which is particularly critical in the context of the rapid spread of disinformation on social media. Through such initiatives, MPF contributes to developing a critically thinking society capable of effectively resisting external informational influence and manipulating public opinion. This underscores the strategic importance of media literacy as a tool for ensuring national information security and safeguarding democratic values in the contemporary world.

In this context, Sweden demonstrates significant achievements in implementing media literacy as a key tool for strengthening democratic values and protecting citizens from disinformation. Although a comprehensive national policy in this area has yet to be established, a range of strategic initiatives reflects a clear commitment to raising public awareness and developing critical thinking. A central element of these efforts is the activity of the Media Council under the Swedish Ministry of Culture, which was officially tasked in 2018 with coordinating media literacy measures (*Wagner, 2023*). This decision marked a pivotal moment in the national strategy, signifying an increased focus on media education at the governmental level and laying the foundation for developing an effective legislative framework. Specifically, Sweden's legal foundation for media literacy development is based on key regulatory acts, including the Constitution on Freedom of Expression, the Freedom of the Press Act, the Library Act, and the Education Act (*Wadbring, Ohlsson, 2024*). Additionally, the government implements digitalization and democracy-strengthening strategies that emphasize the importance of media literacy as a critical tool for fostering the informational resilience of the population.

This approach establishes media literacy as an integral component of Sweden's educational policy, embedded in curricula at various levels, ensuring the systematic development of critical thinking among citizens. The Ministry of Education and Research oversees the incorporation of media literacy courses into school curricula, the funding of libraries, and adult education programs, focusing on equipping students with the skills necessary to navigate an increasingly complex media landscape (*Government Offices of Sweden, 2024*). The National Agency for Education plays a pivotal role in supporting this process by providing educators with methodological guidelines, teaching materials, and professional development programs (*Skolverkets organisation, 2024*). These resources enable teachers to utilize modern tools for teaching media literacy effectively. Thus, at the national level, media literacy is established as a mandatory element of the educational curriculum in Sweden, while educators retain the flexibility to design lessons tailored to local needs and contexts. This comprehensive approach effectively integrates media literacy into the general education process and fosters the development of an information culture among youth.

In the Swedish educational system, media literacy begins as early as preschool, when children are introduced to the concept of source criticism. They learn to distinguish between fiction and reality through engaging classroom and library activities. This foundational knowledge is crucial for their further education. In grades 7–9, lessons expand to include critical online reasoning, during which they analyze digital content more deeply and develop skills for assessing the reliability of various information sources (*Sundin, 2015*). Collaboration with school librarians becomes increasingly important at the upper secondary school level. These partnerships help children refine their critical analysis skills for evaluating information from diverse sources, fostering a deeper understanding of how media influence public perception and societal discourse.

Moreover, Sweden has achieved significant progress in developing non-formal education to enhance media literacy and promote safe internet use. The Swedish Safer Internet Centre (SIC SE) plays a key role in fostering responsible behaviour in the digital environment among children and youth. This initiative aligns with the European Union's broader efforts to create a safer digital space through awareness campaigns and resources based on the UNESCO media literacy framework. A distinctive feature of SIC SE's activities is the active involvement of young people in developing

programs and strategies. Youth panels, comprising representatives from various organizations, enable the incorporation of the experiences and needs of the younger audience. This approach facilitates the creation of effective educational programs that address the challenges of the digital age, fostering critical thinking skills and safe internet practices (*Swedish Agency for the Media, 2024*).

Sweden integrates media literacy into key strategic documents at the national level, such as the Ministry of Economy's Digitalization Strategy and the Ministry of Culture's Democracy Strengthening Strategy (*OECD, 2018*). These documents emphasize the importance of information management skills in the digital era, recognizing media literacy as a fundamental prerequisite for active citizen participation in democratic processes. For instance, the «Library Development Strategy 2022–2025» designates libraries as central institutions for fostering media literacy among the population, including individuals of all ages and social groups (*Regeringskansliet, 2022*).

A unique feature of Sweden's approach is the involvement of the Ministry of Infrastructure, which implements digitalization policies that encompass the development of media literacy skills. The Ministry of Justice also integrates media literacy into civil defence strategies to enhance citizens' psychological resilience to informational threats. This focus is particularly significant for maintaining civic unity during crises that may threaten national security (*European Commission, 2019*).

Moreover, Sweden is actively involved in international initiatives to promote media literacy, which is crucial in countering disinformation. One notable example is its participation in the ProMS project (Promoting Media Literacy and Youth Citizen Journalism through Mobile Stories), which brings together organizations from various countries to develop tools that train young people to create and critically evaluate reliable news content (*Media and Learning Association, 2024*). This project illustrates how international collaboration contributes to developing a unified approach to countering informational threats while supporting local initiatives.

Funding media literacy initiatives in Sweden are a critical component of the national strategy to counter disinformation. The majority of funding is provided by the state budget, reflecting the priority placed on integrating media literacy into the national education system. The Ministry of Culture is central in supporting these initiatives, coordinating funding through administrative appropriations and targeted government projects. The Swedish Psychological Defence Agency, responsible for enhancing the psychological resilience of the population, finances its educational programs from the defence budget. Specifically, it allocates resources to training citizens in identifying disinformation and countering external informational threats. For non-governmental organizations and independent initiatives, funding typically comes from self-generated resources or external grants (*Giannetto, 2024*).

Conclusions. Sweden demonstrates a comprehensive and systemic approach to ensuring psychological resilience and strengthening societal resistance to disinformation through advancing media literacy. Amid malicious influences from Russia, China, and Iran, which deploy disinformation campaigns to undermine trust in state institutions and sow social divisions, the country equips its citizens with critical thinking skills, the ability to recognize manipulative narratives, and tools to counter external informational threats. The Swedish Psychological Defence Agency plays a pivotal role in implementing this strategy, which focuses its efforts on combating disinformation and fostering societal resilience. The agency conducts awareness campaigns, supports media organizations, develops educational programs, and collaborates with the Fojo Media Institute. These initiatives enhance public awareness of informational threats and reinforce democratic values.

The integration of media literacy at all levels of education and within strategic frameworks such as the Digitalization Strategy and the Democracy Strengthening Strategy establishes a foundation for developing informational resilience. Libraries, educational institutions, and the Safer Internet Centre play pivotal roles in these processes, aligning national approaches with European standards. Funding for media literacy initiatives is supported by both the national budget and international projects. Active collaboration with non-governmental organizations and international partners enhances the effectiveness of these programs and ensures their sustainable implementation.

Sweden's experience demonstrates that effective counteraction to disinformation and the provision of psychological resilience require a comprehensive approach. This approach combines the advancement of media literacy and the efforts of specialized institutions such as the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency, state support, and international cooperation. Such a strategy is critical for safeguarding national security, preserving democratic values, and strengthening public trust in state institutions.

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