

# GenderED Coalition

## National Report

## Gendered disinformation in Bulgaria 2024

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The purpose of the report is to identify the “good practices” that exist within the four European partners (Bulgaria, France, Greece, Italy) on the topic of gendered disinformation as a threat to achieving inclusive environments on social media platforms (and other media), with a high Media and Information Literacy (MIL) component. The data gathered will hopefully contribute to a clearer understanding of the similarities and differences between the European countries, especially in terms of the various actors involved in the process.

Three major areas are considered that might yield pertinent answers: 1/the public policies on gender, education, disinformation (official documents, standard setting tools); 2/ the capacity-building forces and tools (competences, resources, funding and the actors); and 3/ the role of communities of practices and networks (private sector, civil society ...).

For the purpose of this study, “good practices” are defined as projects involving strategies and/or activities that have proven to be effective, sustainable and/or transferable, relying on resources and materials that have been shared and tested, with desired results, to be found via a dedicated website. They therefore reflect what is visible, with an online display, due to the focus on gendered disinformation via social media; they do not necessarily the full range of existing strategies and actors. For feasibility purposes, national experts were asked to select a limited corpus of 5 “good practices” reflecting a mix of MIL, gender education and/or online disinformation among a larger number of initiatives. The expected results are therefore not fully exhaustive but reflect a modicum of representativity — and institutional as well as financial support — across a short period of time (2015--). They cannot be generalized but can point to major trends and emerging practices.

Such a mapping process can serve as a pilot for a more extensive diagnostic tool and as an inspirational guide to evaluate policies and practices in the European countries considered, so as to promote change in the area. The data gathered will be published as country reports on the Gender-ED website (<https://www.genderedcoalition.net/>) and compiled in a cross-country comparison report also published on the website. The results will be disseminated in diverse venues and shared with policy-makers in the shape of strategic policy recommendations.

## Methodology

-Identify 5 projects (from 2015--) that, according to the experts’ experience, deal with a mix of gender, online disinformation, and MIL. Enter the description of each using the online grid to create an ID card for each project with 12 dimensions (ranging from competences to stakeholders to funding and evaluation).

-Produce a synthesis (20 pages), with 1/brief national history/context, 2/national legal and political framework, 3/ most outstanding results of comparison of 5 projects, 4/ Conclusions derived from results (major trends, identified gaps...), and 5/ recommendations for public policies.

*The starting date 2015 is based on EU legislation and frameworks such as Equality in action; Roadmap for equality between women and men (2010); Strategy for equality between women and men (2010-2015). It is also based on the moment when disinformation was identified as a real democratic issue in the USA and the EU (2015--). The “good practices” approach was adopted as it is the most likely to yield concrete results in the case of issues like MIL or Gender education that are optional and cross-cutting, with no baselines for evaluating them.<sup>1</sup>*

## Executive Summary

(one page)

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.obs.coe.int/en/web/observatoire/-/mapping-of-media-literacy-practices-and-actions-in-eu-1>; see also <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315628851-2/mapping-media-information-literacy-policies-divina-frau-meigs-irma-velez-julieta-flores-michel>

**1/National history/context**

**2/National legal and political framework**

**3/ Most outstanding results of comparison of 5 projects**

**4/ Conclusions**

**5/ Recommendations for public policies**

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## Executive Summary

The current report presents the findings from the mapping in Bulgaria. It was conducted in the period March – May 2024, following the common project methodology. The projects and good practices described below are based on publicly available information (websites, social media pages) and grey literature (project reports, etc.).

The report highlights several key findings regarding the spread of gendered disinformation (GD) in Bulgaria; the existing institutional capacity to address GD; the resources available to tackle GD through media and information literacy programs; and the potential to introduce a gender competences framework as a way to prevent gender-based discrimination.

The mapping confirmed that the issue of “gendered disinformation” is not currently in the focus of researchers, MIL experts, educators, or policymakers. When GD is thematized, it is mostly from within the perspective of other topics, such as gender stereotyping, gender-based violence, gender equality, etc. Inspired perhaps by the political and public reactions to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as “the Istanbul Convention”, many of the projects mapped for the report put gender-based violence and violence against women on top of the agenda for law enforcement and civil society activists. Gender disinformation is not addressed as a standalone topic and seems to be subsumed under the umbrella of gender-based discrimination. When disinformation is challenged, it is done in initiatives tackling hate speech against vulnerable groups in society (without an explicit focus on women) or politically charged topics and, most recently, pro-Russian propaganda.

The report confirmed that MIL training is still a predominantly civil society initiative, despite some steps recently taken by the Ministry of Education. Without concerted efforts of both public and private actors to make such training programs readily available, society at large will be an easy target for disinformation, propaganda, and fake news. Finally, the report points out that the question of developing and applying a gender competence framework in MIL is not currently a policy priority.

Drawing upon the findings, the report also makes two main recommendations to address the weaknesses identified in the mapping.

## 1. Brief national history/context

Bulgaria, situated in the eastern Balkans, is a parliamentary republic with a single house legislature based on proportional representation. The first democratic elections were held in 1990, shortly after the collapse of the Communist state. Between 1944 and 1989 Bulgaria belonged to the socialist block in Central and Eastern Europe, and was closely associated with the former Soviet Union. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 triggered large scale economic, political and social reforms that facilitated the country's winding transition to liberal democracy.

Multiple political parties operate freely in Bulgaria's democratic system, which currently features peaceful transfers of power between rival parties

In 2007 Bulgaria became a member of the EU. In March 2024 the country also joined the Schengen area by air.

### Media context

In the last two years, Bulgaria has undergone a subtle period of improvement in press freedom. The country has climbed 12 positions to 59th place in [Reporters Without Borders'](#) annual media freedom ranking for 2024. However, it remains at the bottom within the EU, where it climbs only one place to 23rd position.

Concerning disinformation, fake news, and propaganda, the EU Disinfo Lab states that “the Bulgarian disinformation landscape faces both old and new challenges, as well as domestic and external threats that feed on each other. In addition to cross-border disinformation, there are also many home-grown disinformation narratives – e.g., the misrepresentation of national history, the technology-related fears, and the shutdown of social media accounts.”<sup>2</sup> In a recent study, [The Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory on Disinformation](#) (BROD) also claims that “citizen susceptibility to conspiracies and misinformation in Romania and Bulgaria is the worst in Central and Eastern Europe.” Another report by GLOBSEC<sup>3</sup> finds that 48% of respondents in Bulgaria believe conspiracy theories and misinformation. The research from BROD shows that the prevalence of misinformed beliefs in Bulgaria is also “exacerbated by the insufficient actions taken by the online platforms towards curtailing misinformation [...] and providing tools analysing Bulgarian language,” which could strengthen and promote fact-checking and research on disinformation. Fact-checking initiatives and MIL education programs have significantly improved in the past two years (for example, in 2022 Factcheck.bg, approved by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) started its operation in Bulgaria), but the number of fact-checkers is still low compared to other EU countries.

### Gender issues context

The history of gender studies in Bulgaria is relatively short; academic studies and university programs first emerged after the fall of communism.<sup>4</sup> This delay is causally linked to “the absence of a politically

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/20230627\\_BulgariaDisinfoFS.pdf](https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/20230627_BulgariaDisinfoFS.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> GLOBSEC (2020) *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Perceptions of democracy & governance in 10 EU countries*. p.60 Available on <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/voices-central-and-eastern-europe-perceptions-democracy-governance-10-eu>

<sup>4</sup> Slavova, Kornelia. "The beginnings of gender studies in Bulgarian academia." *Aspasia*, vol. 5, annual 2011, pp. 139+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A396767935/AONE?u=anon~cd6e01e8&sid=googleScholar&xid=15144686. Accessed 30 June 2024.

significant independent women's movement” during socialist times; “the lack of critical social research on gender issues before 1989, the absence of gender theory to articulate the concerns of postcommunist women, the lack of corresponding gender-oriented discourses in Bulgarian culture.”

Further research by A. Luleva<sup>5</sup> and R. Stoilova<sup>6</sup>, for example, explores various aspects of gender roles as socially constructed which contributes to the emergence of gender stratification and multiple inequalities. As Stoilova writes, “[t]he reproduction of traditional representations and prejudices in mass culture and advertising leads to discrimination. The message that commercials send to public attitudes regarding gender-sensitive dilemmas tend to preserve male domination and traditional gender roles.”<sup>7</sup> Analyzing the concept of gender order, Luleva demonstrates that the media and entertainment industry perfectly reproduce gender stereotypes, which only reinforces the feminization of femininity and the masculinization of masculinity.

Studies of school textbooks for elementary and secondary schools in Bulgaria have also found that gender stereotypes are prevalent and strongly prioritize a male-dominated understanding of society and social expectations.<sup>8</sup>

## Definitions of sex/gender

The country report on gender equality for Bulgaria from 2020<sup>9</sup> points out that the terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ are not defined explicitly in Bulgarian legislation. The notion of ‘gender’ for the purpose of protection from gender-based violence and as stipulated in the Istanbul Convention was not adopted, as the ratification of the Convention was rejected in a Ruling of the Bulgarian Constitutional Court from 2018. Interpreting Art. 3c, which contains the definition of gender (“socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men”), the Court held that ‘gender’ means “a social construct, determined by subjective perceptions and views of the individual and society on the role of men and women.”<sup>10</sup>

According to E. Slavova, the inconsistent translation of the term ‘gender’ in the Istanbul Convention created not only terminological but also a political “confusion”: it was translated in the Bulgarian version as either “pol” (sex) or “social pol.” “Gender identity” appeared as one of the most contentious items in the text, as it was assumed that a person was free to choose their gender identity regardless of their biological sex, and probably to switch from male to female or vice versa at a whim.”<sup>11</sup>

## 2. National legal and political framework

Bulgaria does not yet have a long-term strategic vision, nor a clear political commitment made by the main political forces to tackle the external influence and disinformation operations (including gendered disinformation) spread through classical and social media. According to Freedom House, though the media

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.cwsp.bg/upload/docs/gender\\_order\\_BE.pdf](http://www.cwsp.bg/upload/docs/gender_order_BE.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Stoilova, Rumiana, The Influence of Gender on Social Stratification in Bulgaria (Fall 2012). International Journal of Sociology, vol. 42, no. 3, Fall 2012, pp. 11–33., Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2283087>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.bghelsinki.org/media/uploads/obektiv/izsledvane\\_dpb.pdf](https://www.bghelsinki.org/media/uploads/obektiv/izsledvane_dpb.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/5234-bulgaria-country-report-gender-equality-2020-1-25-mb>

<sup>10</sup> Ruzha Smilova, ‘Promoting ‘Gender Ideology’: Constitutional Court of Bulgaria Declares Istanbul Convention Unconstitutional’ (OxHRH, 22 August 2018 <<https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/promoting-gender-ideology-constitutional-court-of-bulgaria-declares-istanbul-convention-unconstitutional>>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gendercampus.ch/en/blog/post/notes-from-the-gender-republic-the-curious-case-of-translating-gender-in-bulgarian>

sector remains pluralistic, outlets face pressure from political and business interests, and ownership concentration remains a problem.<sup>12</sup>

### **Gender equality policy and institutional framework<sup>13</sup>**

The principle of equality is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria adopted in 1991. Article 6(2) of the Constitution states that ‘All citizens are equal before the law. No restrictions on rights or privileges based on race, nationality, ethnicity, sex, origin, religion, education, beliefs, political affiliation, personal or social status or property are allowed’.<sup>14</sup>

The Law on Equality between Women and Men (Закон за равнопоставеност на жените и мъжете) adopted in 2016 is the main legal document on gender equality.<sup>15</sup> It includes a legal obligation to implement gender mainstreaming under Article 4(1) which sets out that the state’s policy on equality between women and men shall be implemented through ‘integrating the principle of equality between women and men in legislation and all national, regional and local policies, strategies programmes and plans’. However, there are no provisions regarding enforcement or sanctions. In addition, since January 2004, the Law on Protection from Discrimination prohibits discrimination on a broad range of grounds, including sex (Article 3).

The National Strategy for Promoting the Equality of Women and Men 2021-2030 is the key policy document in the field of gender equality and gender mainstreaming.<sup>16</sup> The strategy is implemented through annual national plans for promoting gender equality. The current action plan in place is the Action Plan for the Promotion of Equality Between Women and Men 2021-2022. The action plan does not have targets but has detailed quantitative indicators for monitoring change and designated agencies responsible for collecting data.

With 65.1 points out of 100, Bulgaria ranks 16th in the EU on the Gender Equality Index for 2023. Its score is 5.1 points below the score for the EU as a whole.

Since 2010, Bulgaria’s score has increased by 10.1 points, mainly due to improvements in the domains of time (+ 19.9 points) and power (+ 16.9 points). Since 2020, Bulgaria’s score has increased by 4.4 points, which is one of the biggest improvements among Member States. This can be attributed to increases in the domains of time (+ 21.1 points) and money (+ 2.0 points).

### **Government equality bodies**

The governmental equality body is the Equal Opportunities, Anti-discrimination and Social Assistance Department (the department) within the Disability Policy, Equal Opportunities and Social Assistance Policy Directorate, within the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP).<sup>17</sup> The department has held this responsibility since 2004.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bulgaria/freedom-world/2023>

<sup>13</sup> The information below is based on the country profile of Bulgaria published by the European Institute for Gender Equality, <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/countries>.

<sup>14</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, promulgated in State Gazette. No. 56/1991 <https://www.parliament.bg/en/const>

<sup>15</sup> Law on equality of women and men, promulgated in State Gazette No. 33 of 26 April

2016 <https://www.lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2136803101>

<sup>16</sup> National strategy for promoting the equality of women and men for the period 2021-

2030 <https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=1343>

<sup>17</sup> Minister of Labour and Social Policy (n.d.) Department for Equal Opportunities, Anti-Discrimination and Social Assistance <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/koi-sme-nie>

The Minister's mandate is set out under Article 7 of the Law on Equality between Women and Men, which is implemented through the department. It states that 'the Minister of Labour and Social Policy manages, coordinates and controls the implementation of state policy on equality between women and men.'

The Minister of Labour and Social Policy organises monitoring of the implementation of the national policies regarding gender equality and produces an annual monitoring report, but it is presented to the government through the Council of Ministers, not parliament.

The National Council on Gender Equality under the Council of Ministers is the coordination structure for gender mainstreaming within the government. Founded in 2004, the department is the secretariat of the National Council on Gender Equality with the Minister of Labour and Social Policy acting as chair. It is a permanent, coordinating and advisory body that assists the Council of Ministers in the development and implementation of state policy on equality between women and men, as well as a body for consultation, cooperation and coordination between central and territorial executive bodies, social partners and civil society. The Council provides opinions on draft strategic documents and draft legislation containing provisions related to gender equality before they are put forward to the Council of Ministers. It also participates in developing the National Strategy on Gender Equality, proposes measures for promoting the state's policy on gender equality, and participates in devising quantitative and qualitative indicators needed for the monitoring system.

### **Independent equality body**

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD) is the independent equality body established in 2005 by the Law on Protection from Discrimination.<sup>18</sup> The CPD is an independent semi-judicial body which aims to prevent discrimination and ensure equal opportunities.

The CPD receives and decides on cases of direct or indirect discrimination based on sex, race, ethnicity, the human genome, nationality, origin, religion or beliefs, education, political affiliation, personal or social status, disability, age, sexual orientation, family situation, property status and any other grounds established in laws or international treaties to which the Republic of Bulgaria is a party. It also conducts research on gender equality issues, integrates gender equality considerations into EU and international affairs, publishes and disseminates gender equality-related information, conducts training, and carries out gender-sensitive analysis of policies and legislation.

### **Parliamentary body**

No parliamentary committee includes gender equality as a specific part of its activity. Different committees can receive or seek information on the progress of gender equality.

### **Consultation with civil society**

The National Council on Equality between Women and Men is the permanent body for consultation and cooperation between institutions and civil society on the development of gender equality policy.

### **Gender impact assessment**

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<sup>18</sup> [12] Commission for the protection against discrimination (n.d.) <https://www.kzd-nondiscrimination.com/layout/>



There is a legal obligation to undertake gender impact assessments when drafting laws, policies, plans and programmes under Article 14 of the Law on the Equality of Women and Men, which states that estimates are to be made on the impact of regulations and strategic documents on gender. The act also states that gender equality coordinators, appointed at the central and regional levels, should participate in this assessment. ‘Impact assessment on gender’ is defined in the act as ‘part of the social assessment [and] includes assessing the impact of regulations and strategic documents on the situation of women and men so that by applying these suggestions to ensure the neutralisation of the discriminatory effects and to promote equality.’ [...so that by applying these suggestions discriminatory effects will be neutralised and gender equality promoted].

### **Gender statistics**

There is no website or section of website devoted to gender statistics on the website of the National Statistical Institute (NSI).<sup>19</sup> The NSI includes some sex-disaggregated data on demographic issues, mortality, migration, and education.

There is no national legal obligation to collect statistics disaggregated by sex. The NSI issues publications (sporadically) on the development of the situation of women and men online, in brochures, in flyers and books, such as the statistical publication ‘Women and Men in the Republic of Bulgaria’.

### **The Istanbul Convention**

On 1 October 2023, the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence entered into force across the European Union (EU). In Bulgaria, this happened only partially.

The Istanbul Convention establishes a legal framework for the protection of women from cases of domestic violence. It includes a number of steps to raise awareness of the issue, as well as legal measures to criminalize various forms of violence against women. It also regulates asylum and victim support. The Convention entered into force in 2014 and was signed by the EU on 13 June 2017. In June 2023, the Council of the EU announced that it had approved the Union's accession to the convention by a large majority. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia voted against. These are also the countries that have not yet ratified the convention. In Bulgaria and the other five countries that voted against the convention, it will be applied at EU level and in areas that fall within the competence of the Union. This includes cooperation in criminal matters, as well as campaigns against violence and training of employees working with victims.

The convention has been at the heart of a disinformation campaign in Bulgaria since its introduction; the campaign was coordinated to a large extent by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the nationalist VMRO as well as conservative-labeled civil society organizations. They presented the convention's text as a conduit for promoting gay marriage and a "third sex" [трети пол]. As mentioned above, in a split (8 to 4) decision in 2018 the Constitutional Court declared it contrary to the Bulgarian Constitution with eight votes and four dissenting opinions.<sup>20</sup> In 2023, the BSP began collecting signatures to organize a referendum

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<sup>19</sup> National Statistical Institute (n.d.) Statistical Data <https://nsi.bg/en/content/766/statistical-data>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.constcourt.bg/bg/Acts/GetHtmlContent/f278a156-9d25-412d-a064-6ffd6f997310>

against "gender ideology".<sup>21</sup> Analyzing the court's ruling, R. Smilova<sup>22</sup> argues that by establishing a narrow link between biological sex/social role of sex and underscoring "the importance of biologically-determined differences between sexes, the judges also held that the Constitution's equality clause requires differential treatment of women and men based on their biological differences." Five female judges sitting on the Court argued with the majority that the Constitution defines "woman's social roles" as "mother," "giving birth," and "midwifery."

### Media Literacy, Education, Awareness Raising

Media literacy was introduced for the first time in the curriculum of formal education in Bulgaria in 2018 with the amendment of Ordinance No 13 of 21.09.2016 on civic, health, environmental and intercultural education. In para. 1 art. 11 of the normative act of the Minister of Education and Science is added item 10 "e-government and media literacy".

With an amendment to the Radio and Television Act of 2020 in connection with the transposition of Directive 2018/1808 of the EU from 2018, a requirement to promote and take measures for the development of media literacy skills (paragraph 1) has been introduced into Bulgarian legislation for the first time. 33a (1) of the law must be achieved through the preparation of a national media literacy policy by the Minister of Culture with the participation of the Council for Electronic Media. Directive 2018/1808 requires Member States to report to the Commission on the application of paragraph 1, with the first report to be submitted by 19 December 2022. Art. 33a of the Radio and Television Act regulates the cooperation of the Council for Electronic Media with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education and Science and other public authorities, media service providers, academia, civil society organizations and consumers.

Media literacy is defined in the Radio and Television Act as skills and knowledge that allow citizens: 1. to make informed choices about media content and media services; 2. use media services and media content in a safe manner; 3. create media content and participate responsibly, ethically and effectively in various forms of communication

According to a report of the Media Literacy Coalition,<sup>23</sup> by 2022, there are no strategic frameworks in place to develop and measure media literacy, digital competence. Indirectly relevant to these areas is the National Strategy for Promotion and Enhancement of Literacy (2014-2020), which has not yet been updated with a policy document for the next multiannual framework.

### Media Literacy Index

Bulgaria ranks last among the EU countries in the Media Literacy Index for 2023.<sup>24</sup> Bulgaria ranks 35th out of 41 evaluated countries in Europe, placing it among the countries most vulnerable to disinformation. The

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<sup>21</sup> [https://bsp.bg/news/view/23794-](https://bsp.bg/news/view/23794-ninova_za_istanbulskata_konventsia_iskame_detsata_ni_da_sa_momche_ili_momiche_a_ne_neshto_treto.html)

[ninova\\_za\\_istanbulskata\\_konventsia\\_iskame\\_detsata\\_ni\\_da\\_sa\\_momche\\_ili\\_momiche\\_a\\_ne\\_neshto\\_treto.html](https://bsp.bg/news/view/23794-ninova_za_istanbulskata_konventsia_iskame_detsata_ni_da_sa_momche_ili_momiche_a_ne_neshto_treto.html)  
<sup>22</sup> Ruzha Smilova, 'Promoting 'Gender Ideology': Constitutional Court of Bulgaria Declares Istanbul Convention Unconstitutional'

<sup>23</sup> Media Literacy Coalition. A national study to assess the digital-media competences of high school students. 2022. Analytical report,

<https://gramoten.li/%d1%80%d0%b5%d1%81%d1%83%d1%80%d1%81%d0%b8/%d0%b8%d0%b7%d1%81%d0%bb%d0%b5%d0%b4%d0%b2%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b8%d1%8f/>

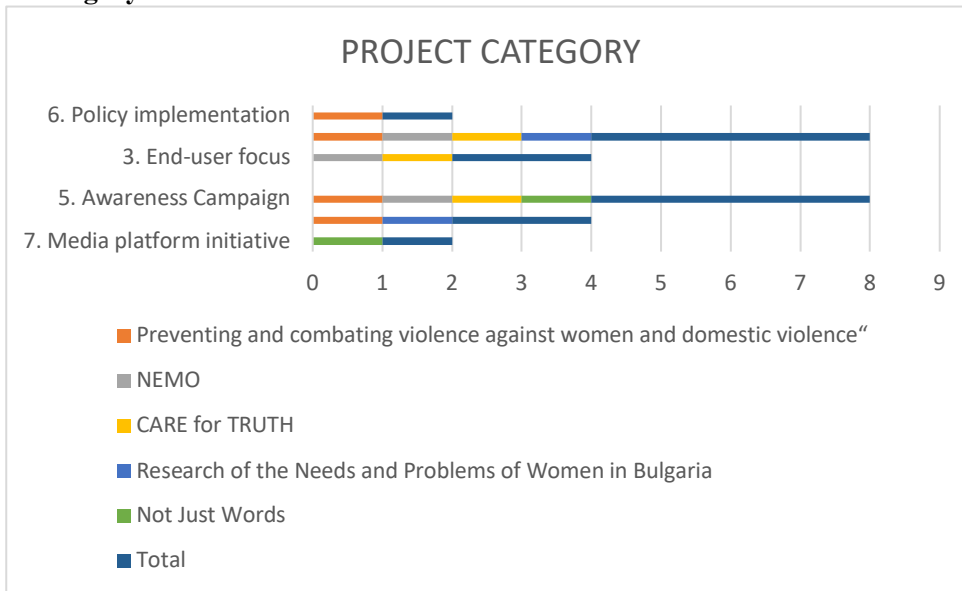
<sup>24</sup> <https://osis.bg/?p=4449>

index measures the potential vulnerability of societies to disinformation and related negative phenomena based on indicators of quality of education, media freedom, trust in people and e-participation.

With a score of 31 points out of a possible 100, Bulgaria is still ahead of its neighbors Turkey (36th with 29 points) and North Macedonia (39th with 22 points) but lags its other neighbors Serbia (31st with 33 points) and Romania (34th with 32 points). According to the cluster analysis, which divides the countries in the ranking into groups with similar characteristics, Bulgaria falls into the 4th penultimate cluster together with Serbia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Turkey. In the last 5th cluster, where the countries with the lowest scores are, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Georgia are ranked. Compared to the 2022 index, Bulgaria fell two places – from 33rd place in 2022 to 35th place in 2023, losing 2 points – from 33 points in 2022 to 31 points in 2023. Bulgaria performs worst in indicators related to education and media freedom, and best in indicators related to new forms of civic participation.

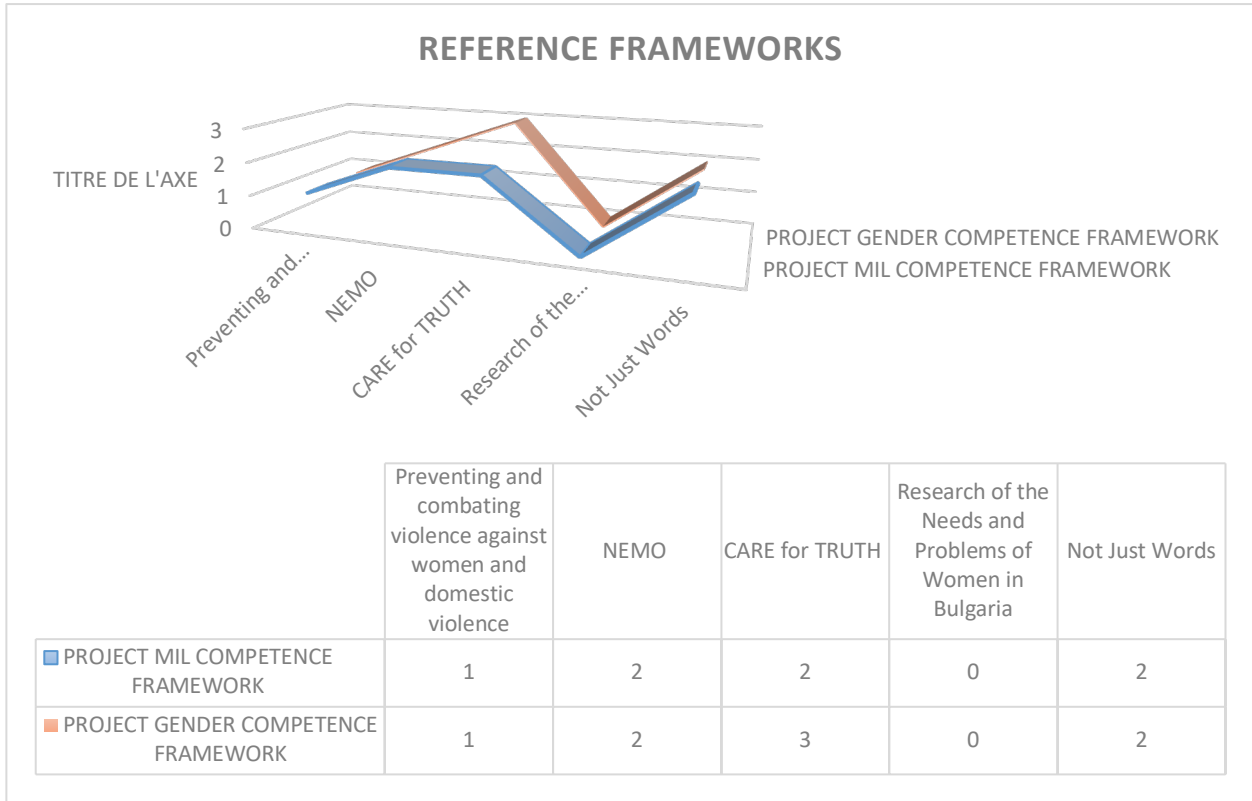
### 3. Most outstanding results of comparison of five projects

#### 3.1 Project category

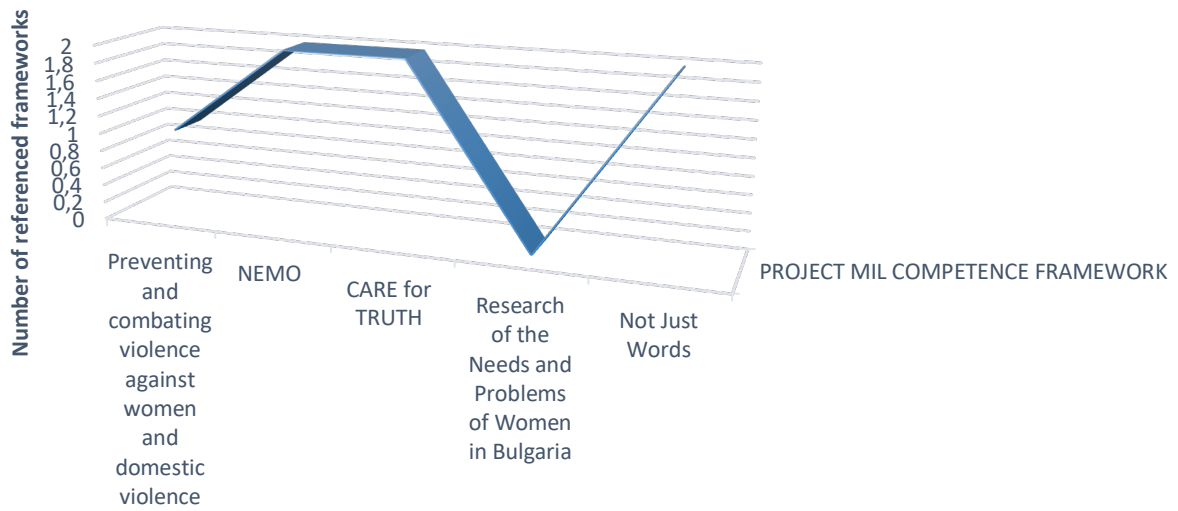


The listed projects vary in terms of their specific objectives and target groups; overall, they seek to develop resources (learning, information, advocacy) related to gender equality and gender discrimination. While one project is specifically targeting members of the judiciary and building their professional capacity, the rest focus on raising awareness about the issues and encouraging support to social groups which are traditionally victims of gender discrimination and disinformation (e.g., Roma, migrants).

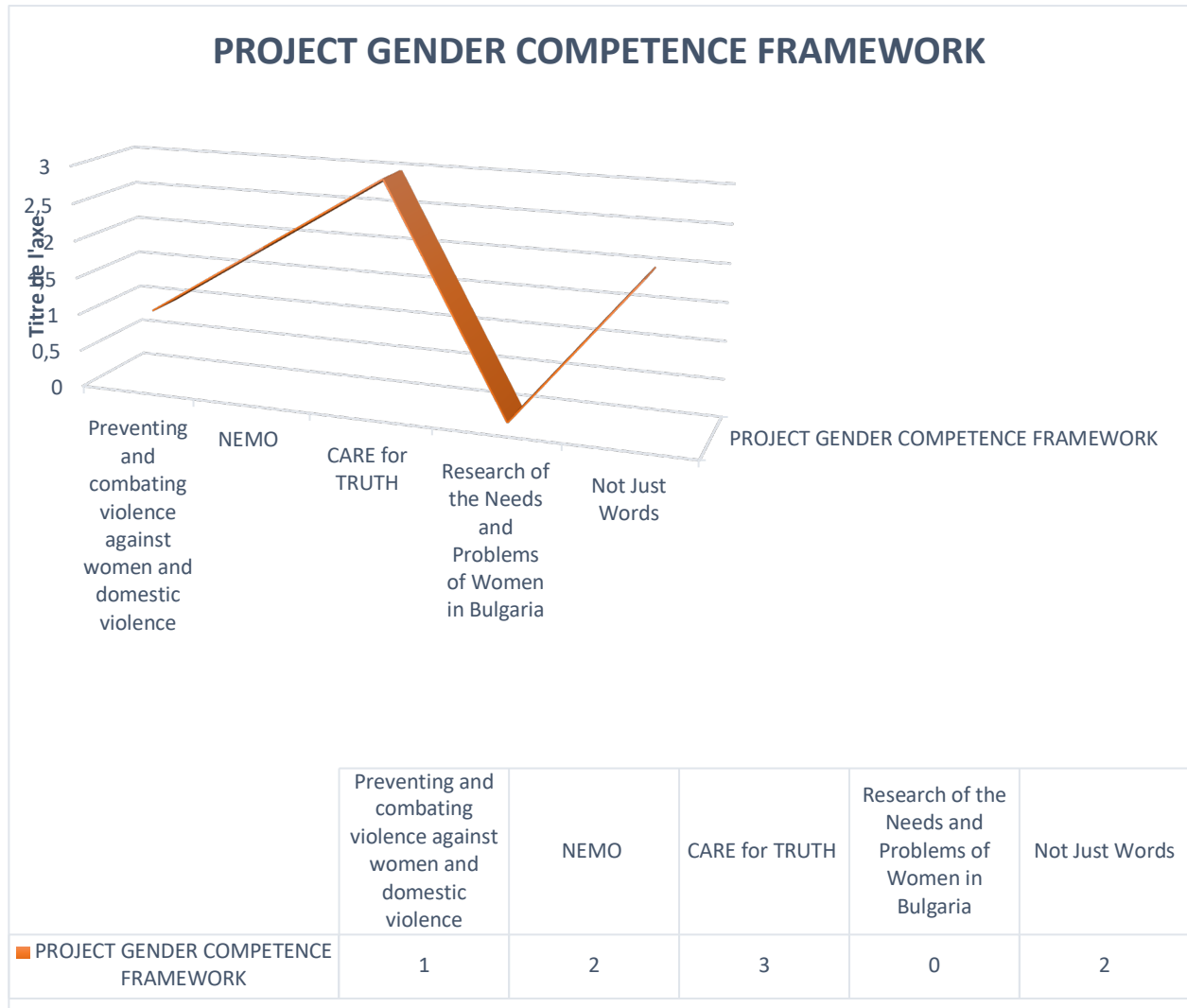
#### 3.2 Project MIL competences that mention gender



## PROJECT MIL COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK

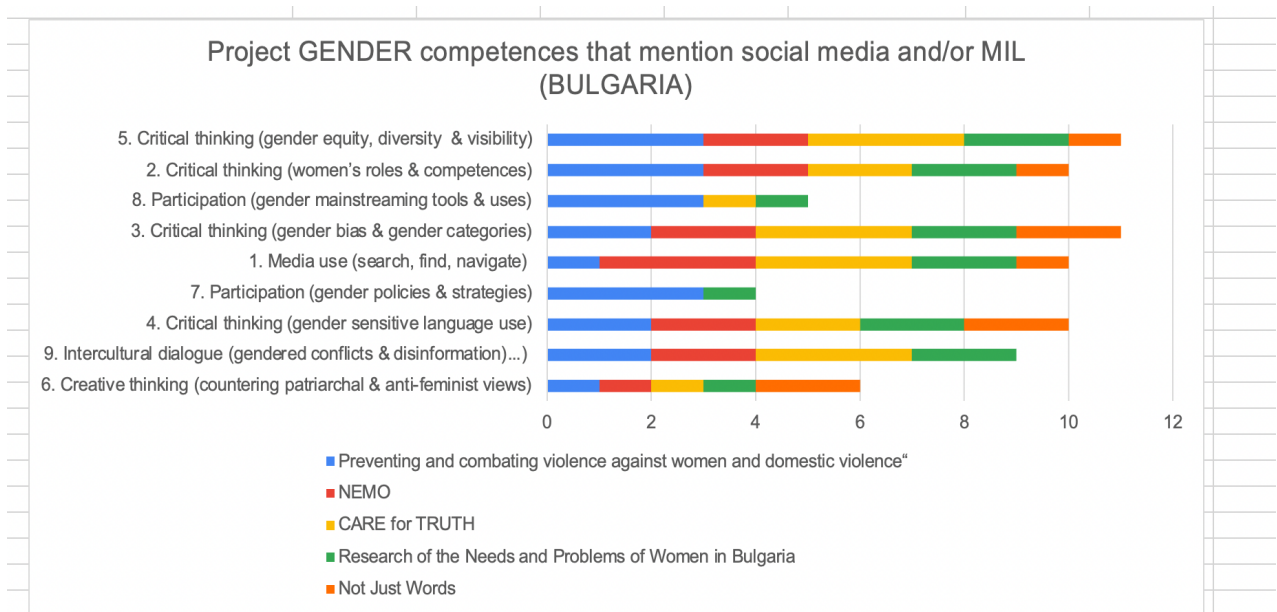
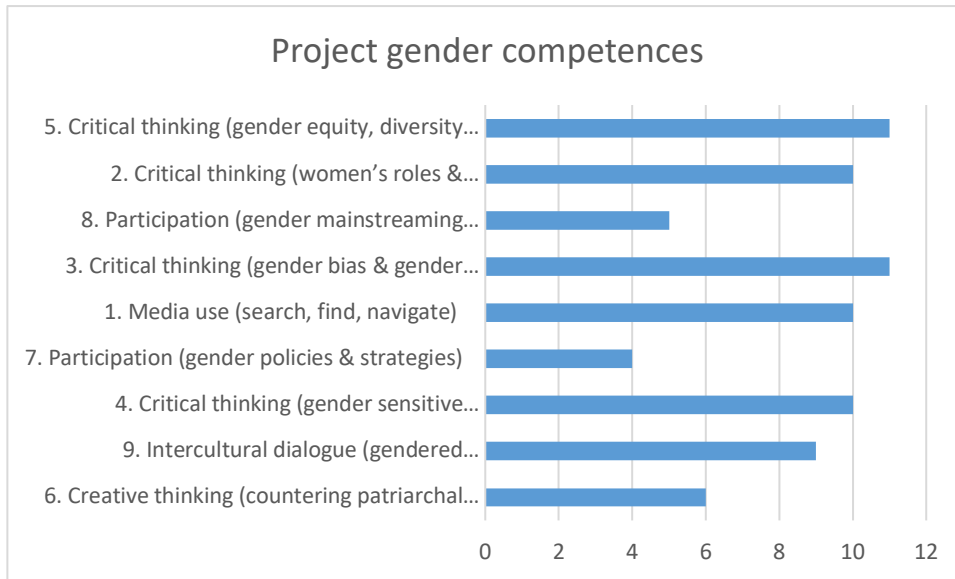


	Preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence	NEMO	CARE for TRUTH	Research of the Needs and Problems of Women in Bulgaria	Not Just Words
PROJECT MIL COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK	1	2	2	0	2



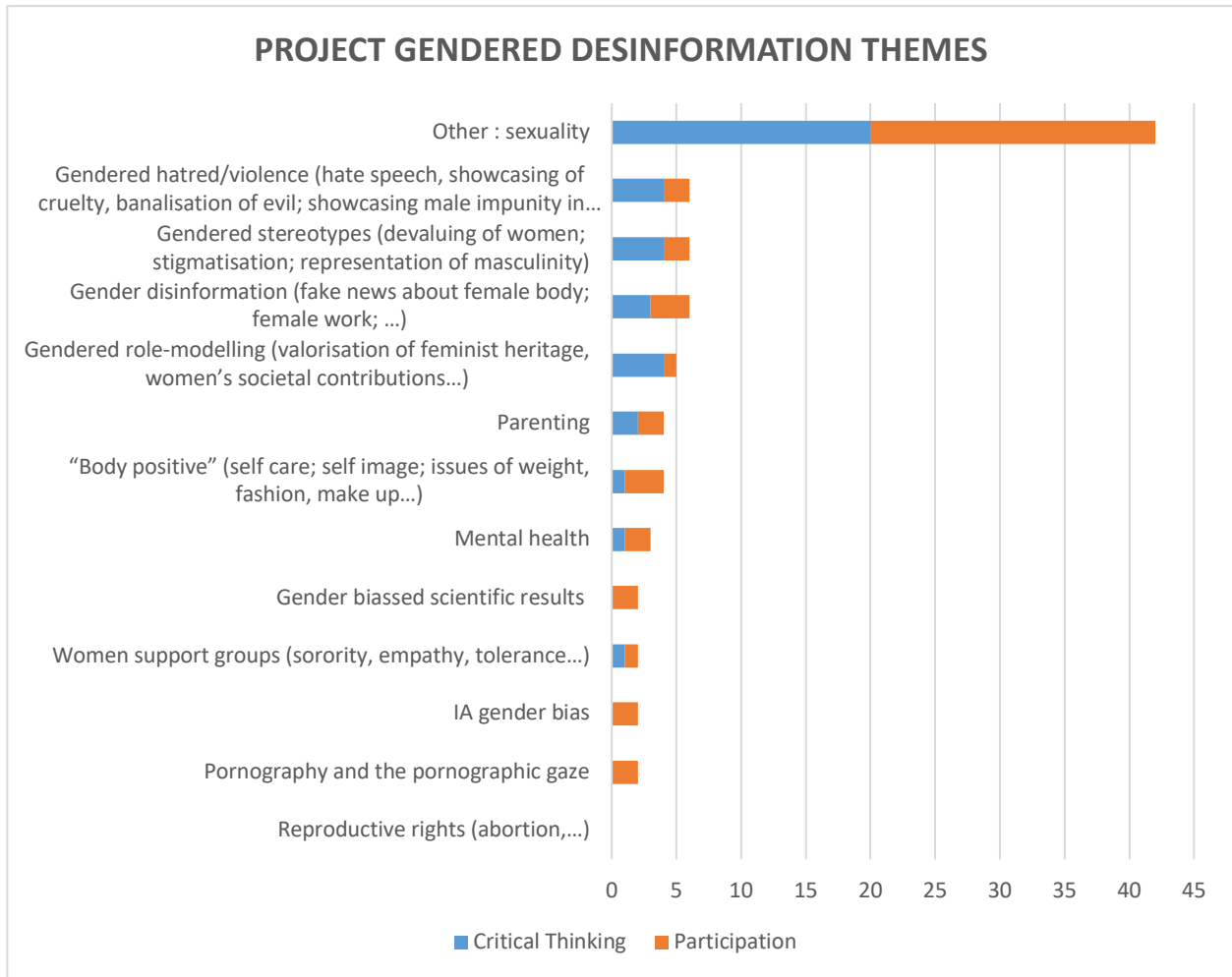
Based on the analysis, the projects only sometimes refer explicitly to MIL and gender competence frameworks. They have not specifically aimed to develop such frameworks, revise existing frameworks or evaluate the implementation of those frameworks in the country.

### 3.3 Project gender competences that mention social media and/or MIL



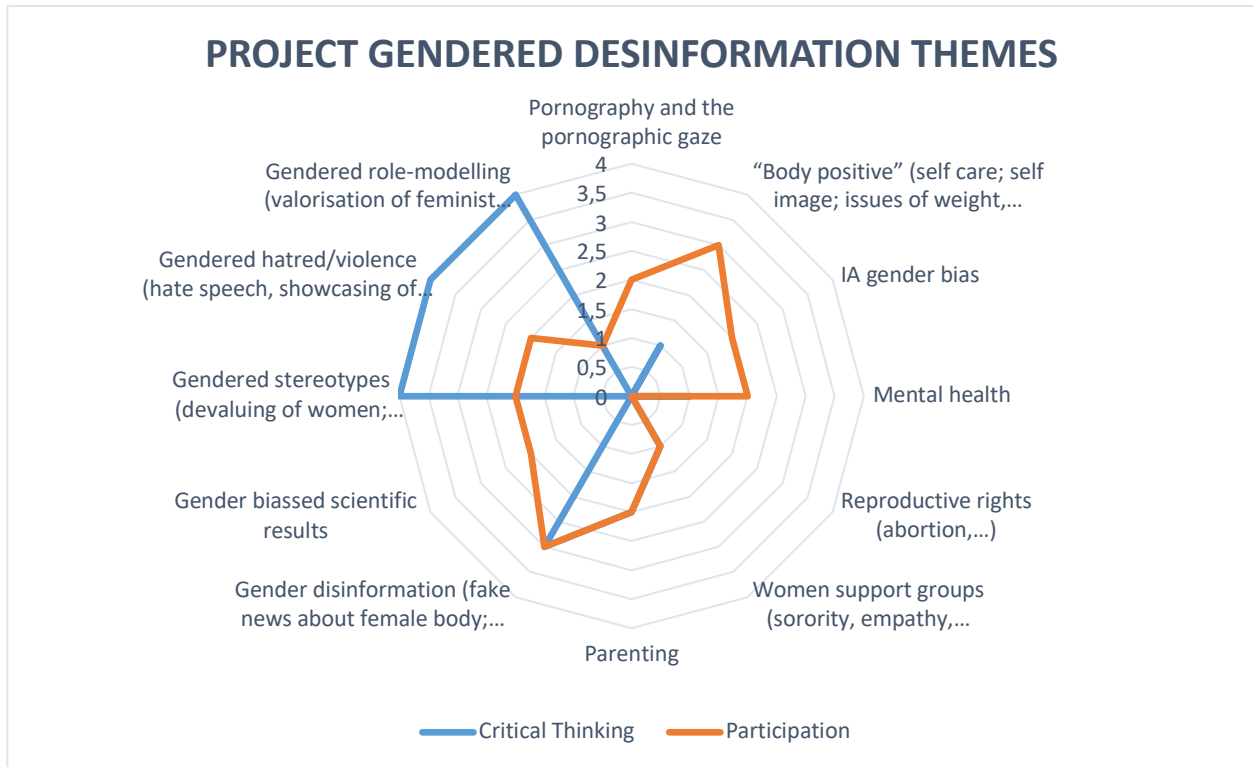
As indicated in the chart above, the two competences mentioned most often in the projects include Critical thinking (gender equity, diversity & visibility) and Critical thinking (gender bias & gender categories) followed by Critical thinking (women's roles & competences) and Critical thinking (gender sensitive language use). However, none of the projects has carried out a formal assessment of the levels of awareness and use of the competences of the project target groups.

### 3.4 Project gendered disinformation themes



The chart above indicates that critical thinking and participation are almost equally reflected in the gendered disinformation themes covered by the project. Gendered stereotypes, gendered hatred, gendered role-modelling have a prevalence, and critical thinking skills are pointed out as necessary to address the disinformation themes.

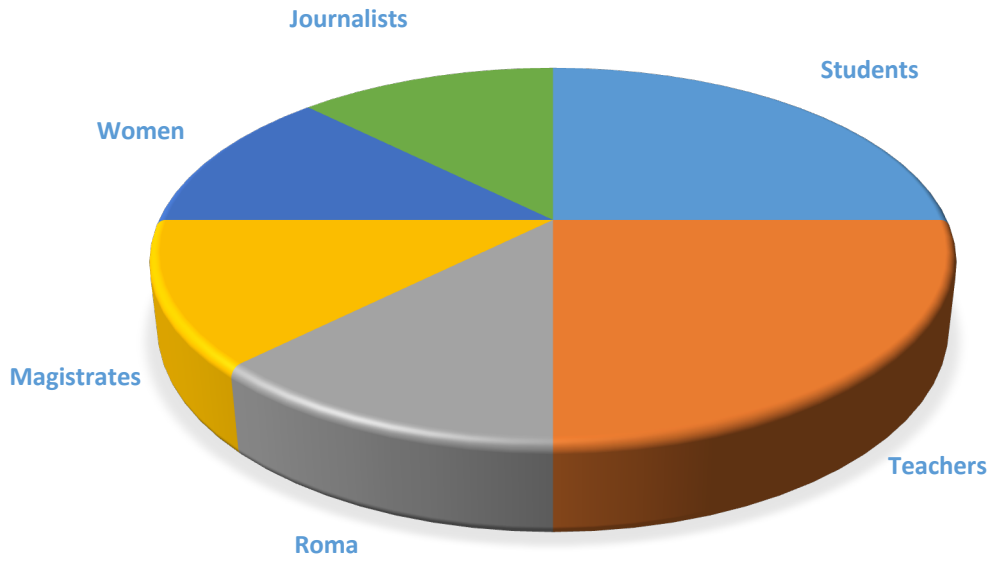




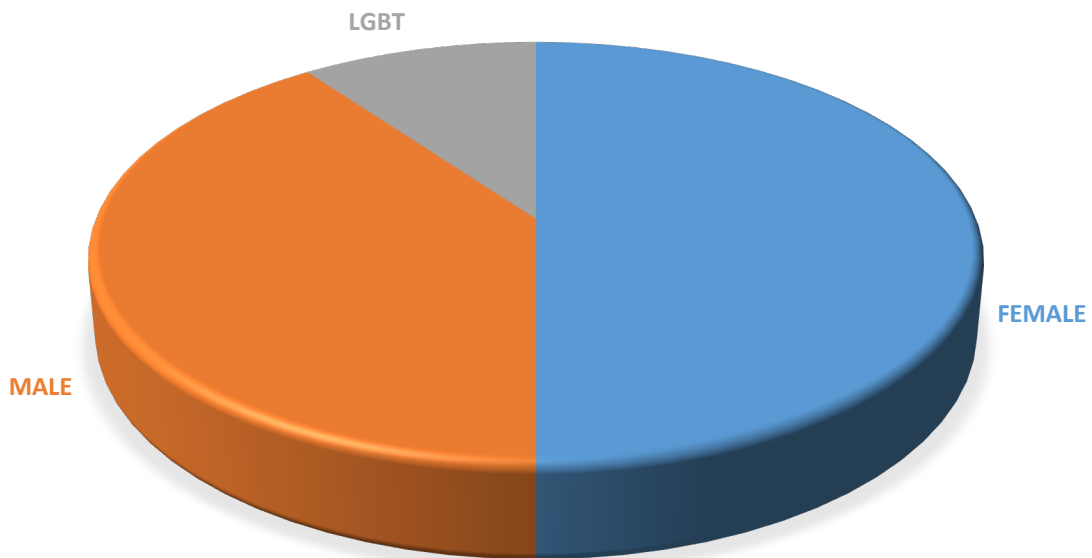
The blue zone within the radar are themes treated in the project from a "critical thinking perspective", the yellow area embraces the active participation in all themes. Participation appears as important in themes like mental health, reproductive rights, etc. There isn't enough empirical data to sustain that distinction, though, and it would be wrong to infer that some themes require critical thinking only while others participation only. On the other hand, the results seem to indicate that certain (perhaps more traditional) themes (such as gender role-modelling, gender hatred/violence and gender stereotypes) draw more interest from an analytical (research) point of view, whereas participation (or civic activism) is more easily mobilized for new and emerging topics (such as reproductive rights).

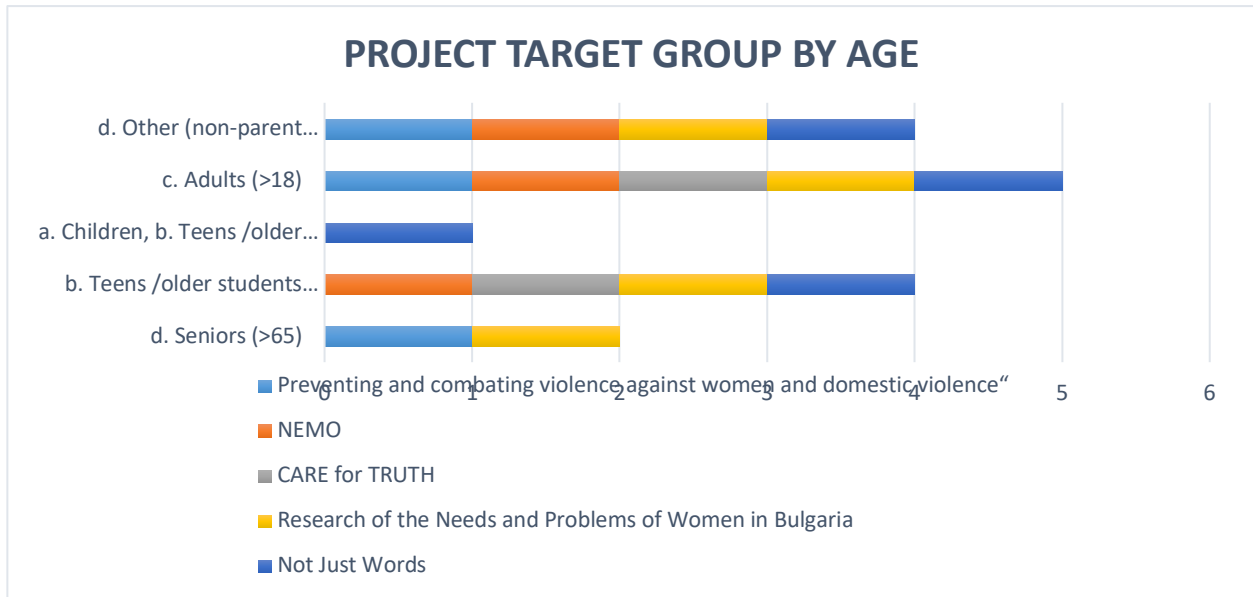
### 3.5 Project target public

### PROJECT TARGET GROUP BY STATUS



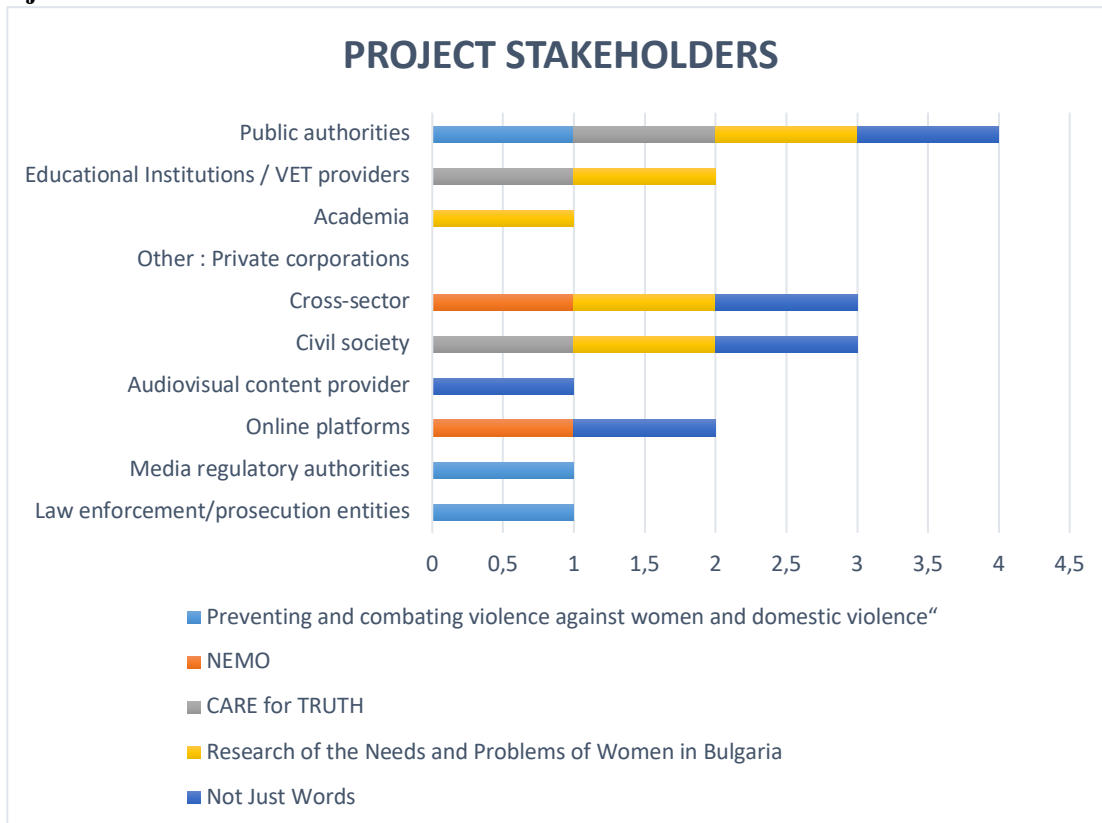
### PROJECT TARGET PUBLIC BY GENDER





The selected projects have a variety of target groups and end users. Most are geared toward adults (professionals such as teachers, journalists, magistrates) and some also list students as the intended audience. Women make up almost half of the target groups by gender.

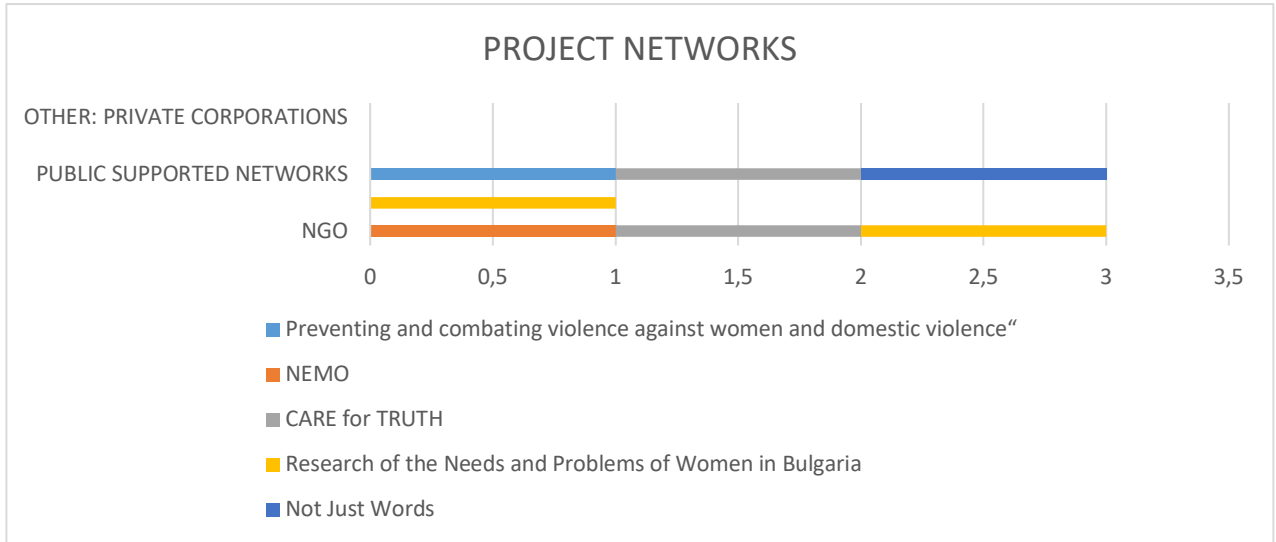
### 3.6 Project Stakeholders



Public authorities and civil societies are the most important stakeholders referred to in the projects, followed by educational institutions. Online platforms are listed as stakeholders in two of the projects. The chart indicates that the

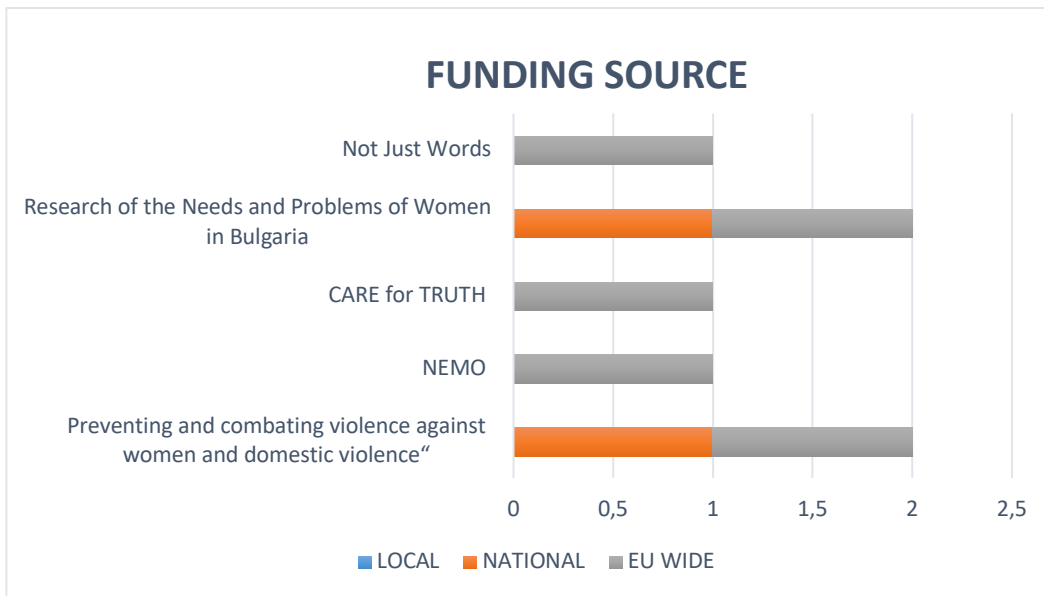
inclusion of quadruple or quintuple helix stakeholders is a challenging task for the project implementers; most notable is the absence of any private sector actors.

### 3.7 Project networks



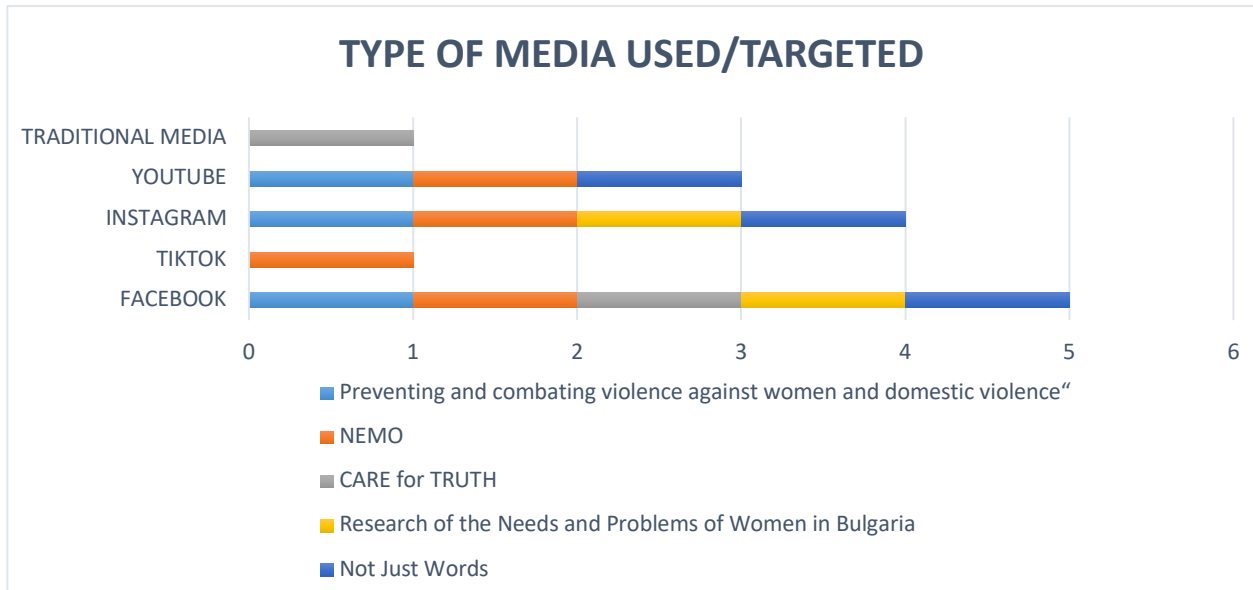
The same observations hold when it comes to networks established or supported by the projects. Civil society organizations and public institutions are included in such networks; private actors are missing.

### 3.8 Project funding



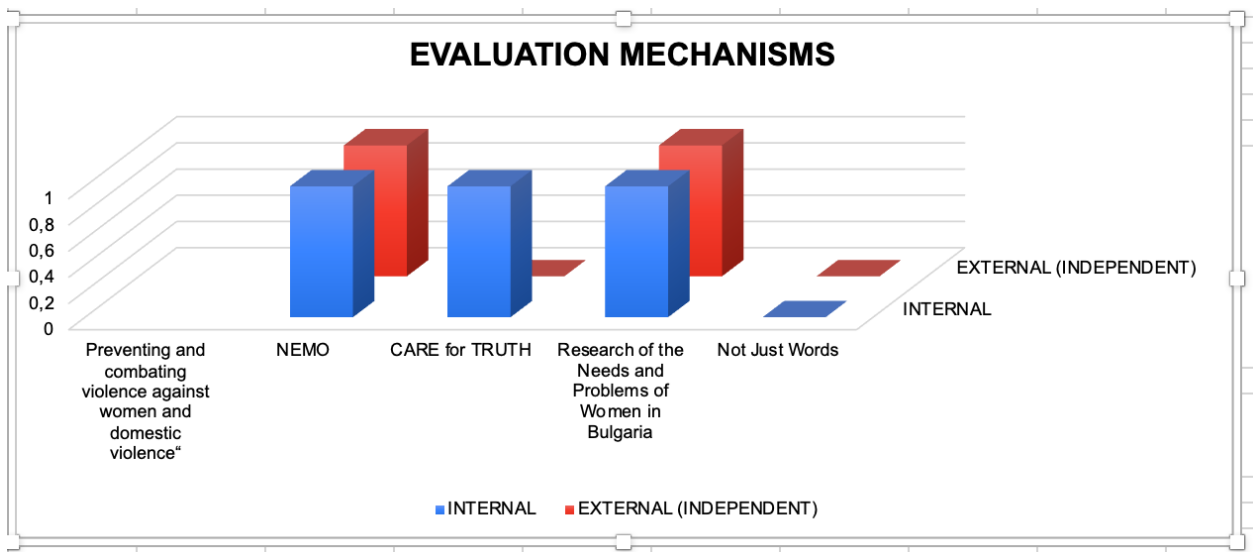
The projects are funded predominantly by EU programs and donors. It is worth mentioning that the EEA Norway grants program and its national support scheme for civil society (i.e., the Active Citizens Fund) is among the most important donors to small- and medium-size projects in such thematic areas. There is no dedicated funding on national level.

### 3.9 Type of media used/targeted



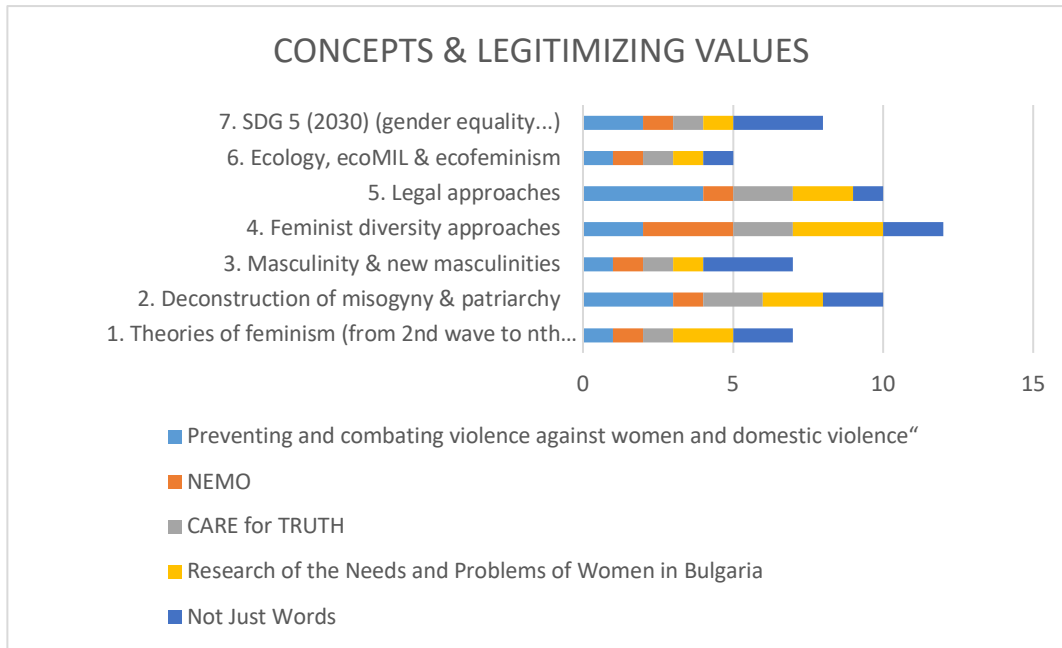
Among the media most frequently used for communication and dissemination purposes by the projects are websites, Facebook and Instagram. YouTube is also mentioned in three of the projects for uploading information and awareness-raising videos.

### 3.10 Evaluation mechanisms (inside and outside project)



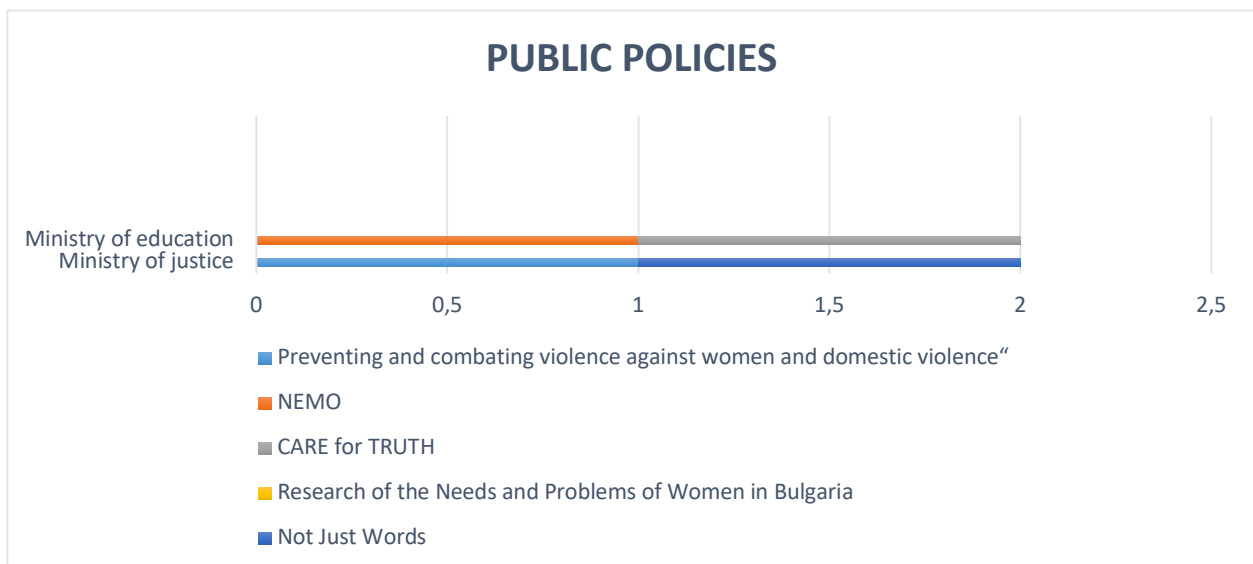
In terms of project impact assessment, only two projects have had external evaluation. For small projects the cost of external evaluation is sometimes too high to cover, which explains the choice for following only internal evaluation and monitoring mechanisms.

### 3.11 Main concepts and legitimizing values/concepts



In terms of legitimizing concepts and values, feminist diversity approaches, deconstruction of misogyny and patriarchy and legal approaches emerge as most relevant in the context of the five projects. Of less relevance are concepts related to theories of feminism, new masculinities, ecofeminism. No information is available on how these concepts intersect with gendered disinformation issues.

### 3.12 Public policies on Gender/Media



Three of the projects refer to relevant policies, more specifically, policies of the ministry of education and ministry of justice. One project (Research on the Needs and Problems of Women) mentions specific contribution of the projects to policy development and efforts to strengthen the women’s role in politics. The project on preventing domestic violence has enhanced the competence of Bulgarian magistrates to implement more effectively prevention-based policies to reduce domestic and gender-based violence.

### Conclusion

The findings indicate that gendered disinformation has not been addressed as a single or cross-cutting topic by either public institutions or civil society organizations. Related issues and themes such as gender equality, gender discrimination, violence against women continue to be in the focus of civil society in Bulgaria. Two projects focused on disinformation from the perspective of hate speech and discrimination based on ethnic origin and sexual orientation, while a third explored the rise in domestic violence against women and gender-based violence.

The topic of domestic violence against women has recently gained a lot of public and media attention, in the wake of a case with a young woman in 2023.<sup>25</sup> Since then, important changes have been made in the Protection from Domestic Violence Act. The changes aim to expand the services available to victims of domestic violence, to speed up the investigation process and all administrative and legal procedures to bring the perpetrators to court.

With the new law in force, it is expected that it will promote also significant changes in the social and cultural patterns of behavior of women and men to eradicate prejudices, customs, traditions and any other practices based on the idea of inferiority of women or stereotyped roles for women and men.

Nevertheless, the strong backlash against the Istanbul Convention could explain why gender-related themes continue to be a very polarizing and politicized issue.<sup>26</sup>

No major trends or emerging issues related can be identified regarding MIL and gender competences. This may be because comprehensive education programs for media and digital literacy (whether formal, offered in schools or informal) are still lacking (see footnote 11 *supra*). Civil society organizations continue to lead the efforts to develop and implement media literacy programs, often without additional support from public bodies.

Several media monitoring studies have confirmed the high levels of propaganda and disinformation propagated by online media and social media in the country. These studies have also stressed the lack of institutional capacity for strategic communication and tackling disinformation in an effective and consistent way, coupled with a lack of political will to sanction public figures and political party leaders who have continued to spread false information on gender issues. The challenges Bulgaria faces in terms of political polarization, concentration of media ownership and editorial independence, powerful technological influence on information consumption habits, geopolitical context and its position as a country with low trust in media also shape the public perceptions of gender-related issues.

Although not reflected in the mapping as not directly linked to GenderEd priorities, it is important to mention a new initiative that has recently started and aims to support fact-checking of online media publications. The US-based Poynter Institute and its digital media literacy initiative, MediaWise launched in October 2023 activities for a \$900,000 grant supporting media literacy efforts in Bulgaria.<sup>27</sup>

The grant supports several projects, activities, Bulgarian partners and services. The two-year comprehensive program will support media literacy education for youth, adults, educators and hard-to-reach populations across Bulgaria, and will empower participants with skills to analyze, evaluate and safely engage in the information ecosystem. The online news outlet Mediapool.bg, the Bulgarian chapter of Teach for America, the American University in Bulgaria and others will collaborate in this initiative. The project runs until September 2025.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://womenlobbybulgaria.org/domestic-violence-law-amendments/>

<sup>26</sup> At the time of writing this report, Bulgaria is looking at its 6<sup>th</sup> snap parliamentary elections for the past four years. Issues related to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, perceived threats of a ‘gender ideology’ and ultra-liberal Western influences are key sparring points between centrist, left-leaning and nationalist parties.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.poynter.org/from-the-institute/2023/bulgaria-mediawise-poynter-media-literacy/>

The analysis of the mapped five projects clearly indicates the need for streamlining MIL and gender competences, as well as for integrating them in school curricula and extracurricular training and information activities, targeting both young people and adults.

#### 4. Public policies recommendations

The main recommendation derived from the report is the development and implementation MIL and gender competence framework, as the basis of specialized qualification programs for professionals (educators, journalists, social media activists) both to improve their digital skills and to develop and periodically measure their media and information literacy skills. The ministry of education and gender equality bodies should be actively involved in developing and implementing such programs. Relevant public institutions should also consider making such programs and specialized training required for public officials in gender equality and anti-discrimination bodies.

It is also important to provide funding, training, access to data and tools and knowledge sharing aimed at improving researchers and the very limited fact-checking capacity available to Bulgaria.

Empowering users, researchers and fact-checkers is a vital component of strategies to analyse and tackle disinformation in Bulgaria because of the specific vulnerability of Bulgarian discourse on various topics.

#### 5. Appendix: Projects' description

##### 5.1 Preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

5.1.1 URL link: <https://www.nfm7-nij.bg/en/home/>

5.1.2 Project summary: The project is implemented by the National Institute of Justice; Start date – 12 February 2020; Duration – 48 months; Funding – Justice Program of the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2014-2021. Aim: Enhancement the professional knowledge and skills of the Judiciary, law enforcement and administration to handle domestic and gender-based violence cases as well as at improving the framework for institutional interaction and coordination. Thirty-six judges and prosecutors from district level took part in the hybrid training organized by the National Institute of Justice on the topic "Infringements against the person in the online environment in the scenarios of domestic and gender-based violence". The training aimed at upgrading the knowledge and skills of law enforcement agencies for identification, investigation, prosecution and prevention of criminal attacks against the person committed in an online environment in cases of domestic violence and violence against women and children, protection of victims and improvement of inter-institutional cooperation and interaction in this area.

Experts from the Directorate "Cybercrime" of the Directorate General Combating Organized Crime presented the specifics of the work and good practices in this structure of the Ministry of Internal Affairs for the investigation and detection of crimes related to violence against women and children on the Internet, emphasizing the difficulties in gathering evidence in online environment and the key role of international police cooperation for the effective investigation and detection of said criminal offences.

##### 5.2 “NEMO – Using the New Media in Education to Overcome Migrant Discrimination Online”

5.2.1 URL link: <https://project-nemo.eu>

5.2.2 Project summary:

Budget Donor: EU Commission/AMIF 2017/Integration of third countries nationals

Duration: 01/02/2019 – 31/01/2021

Leading organization: Arci Solidarieta (Italy)

Partners: Unitov (Italy), Ares 2.0 (Italy), Sudwind (Austria), Radio Afrika TV (Austria), Center for Sustainable Community Development (Bulgaria), Urban Prod (France), Afrikaert (Hungary), CRWB (Bulgaria)

Beneficiaries: Students (in schools), teachers, student's families, schools, institutions, migrants and refugees. The project aims to combat stereotypes against third-country nationals (TCNs) focusing on the multiplying role played by



online information and communication through an awareness raising and training process addressed at young people approaching the online environment to guide them to the conscious and balanced use of online communication and information about the migratory phenomenon and TCNs. Two communication campaigns were organized: the first one targeted teenagers, based on a video spot (single-subject). The second communication campaign addressed education stakeholders and political decision makers leveraging on a huge evidence-based and informative direct marketing activity.

### **5.3 CARE for TRUTH – Challenging Anti-Gypsyism by Roma Empowerment for Counteracting Disinformation and Fake News in Bulgaria**

**5.3.1** URL link: <https://cega.bg/%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%8F%D1%89%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%B8/care-for-truth/>

**5.3.2** Project summary: CARE for TRUTH proposal struggles to strengthen the fight against the overwhelming wave of anti-Gypsyism through empowering both the leadership and change-actors at local level in Roma communities to counteract to disinformation as generator of anti-Roma attitudes and prejudices in Bulgaria, by:

- Developing methodology and building digital/media literacy and skills of 80 key change-players to detect and challenge disinformation and anti-Roma discourse;
- Expanding the capacity to challenge anti-Roma disinformation with at least 1400 Roma people, and 1000 children reached out by a school-based model.
- Proposing strategic national policy measures against anti-Gypsyism in the context of detecting disinformation and fake news under the new Roma Integration Strategy after 2020.
- Empowering 15 strong Roma speakers and overcoming the Roma absence in media and public debates on anti-Gypsyism.

### **5.4 Research of the Needs and Problems of Women in Bulgaria**

**5.4.1** URL link: <https://eeagrants.org/archive/2014-2021/projects/BG-ACTIVECITIZENS-0136>

**5.4.2** Project summary: The lack of in-depth research of the problems and needs of women in Bulgaria makes it difficult to make sustainable and efficient efforts in regard to gender equality. The absence of in-depth sociological studies of the problems and needs of women in Bulgaria makes it impossible to implement targeted and consistent policies promoting gender equality. The latter can be seen in the proposed draft National Strategy promoting Equality between Women and Men 2021-2030. Reliance only on the statistics from the National Statistical Institute and Eurostat fails to reflect the daily challenges, regularized inequalities and intersectional discrimination the women across the country we work with everyday face. The project duration was 24 months and was followed by a second project for 18 more months with the same donor. The idea was to do research, but also create a network of communities in 11 towns where the specific issues would be studied in the local context and then organize talks with women community leaders to raise awareness and generate discussions about equality, stereotypes, disinformation etc. The project also created many resources which were used for trainings and further scaling of the idea.

### **5.5 Not Just Words**

**5.5.1** URL link: <https://glasfoundation.bg/en/not-just-words/>

**5.5.2** Project summary: Not Just Words (Building a national movement against hate speech that triggers Antisemitism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and other forms of intolerance)

Main goal of the project “Not Just Words,” funded by the European Union’s Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020), is to improve collaboration between communities, that are affected by hate speech and to create a national movement of allies to prevent and combat antisemitism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance. Strong focus of the project will be the inclusion of youth in this process. Targeted work with journalists to build counter-narratives, which stop the dissemination of hate speech, resulting in a follow-up media campaign.