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DIACOMET

„Fostering capacity building for civic resilience and participation: Dialogic communication ethics and accountability“

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Focus Group Country Reports:

INTRODUCTION

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Executive Summary

Deliverable 3.3 encompasses eight country reports providing empirical findings of focus group discussions that shed light on civil society actors' evaluations on the state of media and communication ethics in Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Slovenia, and Switzerland¹. The reports constitute a landmark for the DIACOMET project (*Fostering Capacity Building for Civic Resilience and Participation: Dialogic Communication Ethics and Accountability*) in general, and the Work Package 3 focusing on "actors' perspective to communication ethics" in particular. Rather than concluding the field work and empirical analysis that started in early months of 2024, the reports should serve as basis for elaboration in the form of comparative analysis and policy papers.

Total of 87 focus group discussions were held across Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Over 500 participants took part in these discussions, reflecting on the ethics of public communication and the media environment in their respective countries. The empirical findings are presented in eight separate national reports.

The research setting highlighting the voices of "non-institutional media actors" was developed collaboratively with research teams under the leadership of Tampere University. A shared framework for the study was established around the notion of attention economy. In doing so, it was assumed that the pursuit and commodification of attention have become key logic to contemporary public communication, shaping the dynamics of information dissemination and participation in digital spaces. As public attention is becoming a scarce and unequally distributed resource, the distribution of attention is an ethical issue in itself. In this Work Package the scholarly interest was set on social actors with varying degrees of attention capital. Four analytical categories were established to valorise different positions with regard to public attention: "Attention Magnets", Attention Workers", "Attention Hackers", and "Attention-Deprived".

All the way from the early implementation of the study, each research team took responsibility for launching a research design to fit best to their national contexts. As shown in the country reports the recruitment of participants to the focus group discussions proved to be difficult and laborious. This alone, gave to the research teams insights into the structural, cultural, political, and ethical problems in public communication. Rather being identical for all actors and in all countries, a great deal of contextual differences were revealed across actor categories and countries.

Two different research strategies – and varying combination of those two – were applied to the analysis. In the category-based approach the participants from one distinct actor category (for instance, Attention-Deprived) were convened to reflect upon the state-of-the-art of the media environment, public communication, and ethical values that would contribute to public trust and legitimacy of democracy. In the other approach the emphasis in the discussions was set on ethically problematic cases to encourage the participants to share their experiences of and insights into communication ethics. A selection of cases ranged from the effects of gas extraction in the Netherlands, and the expansion of a military training field in Estonia to Lex CEU that cast the core activities of the Central European University to exile from Hungary.

Despite contextual differences the findings suggest that civil society actors across a selection of small EU countries have mixed feelings – to say the least – about the media and public communication. The media environment is perceived as confusing and prone to adjusting to the logics of attention economy and algorithmic control. In the meantime, social media platforms tend to provide an odd combination of freedom and polarisation, calling for some sort of co-regulation on the part of content creators, media organisations, global internet giants, and states. More details and interpretations may be found in the country reports, which lay the foundation for comparative analyses on shared and divergent communication ethics across Europe.

Finally, on the behalf of the DIACOMET project and Work Package 3, we wish to express our gratitude to everyone involved in making this study to happen. This includes main authors of the country reports, the researchers, the facilitators and organisers of the focus groups, those dealing with recording, transcribing, and coding of the data. Equally importantly, we would like to thank our 500 participants who shared their insights with the research teams, and spared their valuable time to contribute to this research.

ⁱ *The eight country reports are delivered as separate documents in a single zip folder.*