



Monitoring of Russian TV channels | 2015

Executive Summary and Recommendations

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Executive summary

From 1 – 31 March 2015, MEMO 98, a Slovak non-profit specialist media-monitoring organization, Internews Ukraine, a leading Ukrainian non-governmental organization supporting independent media, along with Yerevan Press Club (Armenia), Independent Journalism Center (Moldova), “Yeni Nesil” Union of Journalists (Azerbaijan), Belarusian Association of Journalists (Belarus), and Georgian Charter for Journalistic Ethics (Georgia) jointly monitored eight Russian TV channels to evaluate the level of political diversity in their news coverage of various international and local topics. This monitoring was implemented thanks to the support of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Secretariat (EaP CSF), the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) and the Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji (KRRiT).

The methodology for the media monitoring was developed by MEMO 98 which has carried out similar monitoring projects in some 50 countries in the last 16 years. It included quantitative analysis of the coverage, which focused on the amount of time allocated to each subject, as well as the tone of the coverage in which the relevant political subjects were portrayed: positive, neutral or negative. Qualitative analysis assessed the performance of the media against specific principles or benchmarks – such as ethical or professional standards – that cannot be easily quantified.

Given its comprehensive content-oriented approach, it is specially designed to provide in-depth feedback on pluralism and diversity in media reporting, including coverage of chosen subjects and topics. The main goal was to evaluate if the Russian TV channels provide their viewers with objective and balanced information about important international and local issues. As such, the outcome of the monitoring is a detailed analysis of the quality of selected Russian TV channels’ news programming.

The main findings deriving from the pre-election media-monitoring activity are:

Impact of Russian propaganda in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries

- **Television is the most efficient method of influencing public opinion in the EaP countries. The role of the main Russian channels is more significant in Armenia, Belarus and Moldova, where these channels are freely available, than in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine, where the role of these channels is more limited.**
- **In Azerbaijan and Georgia, Russian channels are only available through cable television, satellite antenna or Internet. In Ukraine, a number of measures restricting Russian media have been introduced recently, including a ban on the selected Russian channels from the cable packages.**

- The main Russian TV channels remain available also through terrestrial transmitters and are the most important sources of information in Crimea and in the territories of self-proclaimed DNR and LNR.
- Russian TV channels are generally very popular, particularly in Armenia, Belarus and Moldova. By contrast, the popularity of these channels in Georgia and Ukraine has been affected by the armed conflicts in 2008 and 2014 - 15 respectively. In Azerbaijan, only a small segment of the population favors Russian TV channels as their information source.
- The national broadcasters in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova strive to provide an alternative to the Russian propaganda and to reduce its impact.
- The current situation with the freedom of media in Belarus and Armenia prevents the national broadcasters from serving as such alternative. Moreover, Russian-speaking media – TV Dozhd and RTVI - which have potential to provide alternative information to the main Russian channels face certain restrictions in these countries and are available only via Internet. In Azerbaijan, the impact of the Russian channels is limited.
- The media in the EaP countries are reluctant to use the same aggressive style of propaganda currently used by the main Russian channels. At the same time, there are clearly differences between the national broadcasters originating from different levels of media freedoms in the EaP countries as well as economic conditions.

Monitoring results

- The main Russian TV channels showed very limited range of views in their reporting of international and local topics and issues, thus depriving their viewers of receiving objective and balanced coverage.
- The principal general trend from the media monitoring is that there is an exceptionally limited range of diversity of political actors in the main Russian TV channels. This was visible in the coverage of both international and local topics.
- The three main Russian channels (First channel, Russia 1, and NTV) devoted extensive prime time news coverage to the activities of the authorities, focusing primarily on the activities of the president and the government.
- There was a clear tendency to cover the activities of state officials extensively, pointing out achievements and successes and neglecting to offer any independent and alternative views or critical reporting challenging the performance of the authorities.

- The primetime programs on the three channels lacked meaningful agenda setting debates involving genuine public discussions over some pressing economic, social or policy issues, such as the falling price of oil and its impact on the Russian economy. If mentioned, then it was presented in a way that no sanctions and no decrease of the crude oil prices could get Russia on her knees, as these are only temporary difficulties that will make the country stronger and consolidate Russian people.
- The monitoring of topics revealed the main Russian channels have been used as instruments of propaganda in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, diverting attention from important domestic issues and challenges and instead focusing on the conflict in Ukraine.
- Instead of serving as facilitator of discussion on public policy issues, the three channels openly demonstrated bias in breach of media ethics and principles of impartial and objective reporting, showing explicit sympathy for one side and distaste for the others.
- The monitoring of topics showed that half of the coverage on the three channels was devoted to foreign affairs (primarily Ukraine) whereas topics such as social issues received only a very limited coverage.
- As for the coverage of subjects linked with the conflict in the Eastern part of Ukraine, representatives of the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republic (DNR and LNR) obtained extensive and overwhelmingly positive and neutral coverage on the three channels. In sharp contrast, official Ukrainian authorities and institutions were portrayed in a very negative way.
- As a rule, only to the representatives of separatists had opportunity to speak directly on camera while official Ukrainian representatives were almost completely ignored. As such, the coverage of the conflict was one-sided and heavily biased. Even in those reports which were said to be prepared from Kiev, there was no diversity of opinions, as virtually all interviews were done with experts or politicians loyal to Russia.
- A significant level of hostility towards specific actors was perpetuated invariably on the three channels and Russia Today. In particular, the Ukrainian authorities were presented as the ones guilty of the disastrous situation in the Eastern part of Ukraine while the US administration was presented as being interested in maintaining the conflict in the region and trying to persuade the Western Europe and EU to sanction Russia.
- The qualitative analysis further revealed that the main Russian media attempted to show the failure of Ukraine as an independent state, they wanted to expose "the aggressive plans of the West, particularly of the USA," and tried to justify the struggle of Russians in Ukraine for the "ancestral Russian lands".

- A significant coverage was devoted to speculations on a possible Western plot against Russia with viewers being presented with a picture of the West trying to attack Russia. The story of *World War II* was also used to stigmatize the population with the possibility of a war and the need of Russia to protect itself against the enemy.
- The main channels conducted an information campaign against US and Ukraine with the aim to demonize US and Ukrainian authorities and to portray Russia as a protector of Russian citizens in the conflict zone. Almost all materials covering US and Ukraine included statements or reporting prejudicial against the US and Ukrainian administrations.
- A number of reports focused on developing the idea of a large-scale anti-Russian conspiracy and fostered an atmosphere of threat to Russia. At the same time, virtually every program contained stories about Russia's readiness for such situations - usually these stories are accompanied by aggressive rhetoric towards "the enemy".
- The qualitative analysis revealed that almost all news reports were unbalanced and very subjective, quoting a lot of sources that supported only one point of view – that of the Russian authorities. Only in a few cases both sides were presented, but the length of direct speech was evidently disproportionate, the pro-Russian sources being given much more prominence. As a rule, the media selected their sources in a way to present only one position that is the position of the Russian authorities.
- The conflict in Ukraine was an omnipresent topic not only in the news programs but also in the selected other information programs. Talk show hosts and presenters were heavily biased which was obvious from their views, body language and gestures. In most cases, the hosts and presenters mixed facts with opinions and in some cases they even behaved as if they were the experts, presenting their own opinions as facts. Quite often, irony and sarcasm was used when referring to the events in Ukraine and their official representatives who were almost always ignored as sources of news despite the number of allegations and negative stories against them.
- In the coverage of the conflict in Ukraine, Russia is presented as a peacemaker, and the message of the need of Russia on permanent basis in the region is propagated. In addition to Ukraine, other Eastern partnership countries (EaP) were mentioned too, but to a much more limited extent.
- Almost all reports promoted the idea of legitimacy of separatist regions. The same cannot be said about the Ukrainian authorities that were sometimes referred as a fascist junta that came to power thanks to a coup organized by the West (primarily by USA).
- The qualitative analysis identified that different manipulations techniques were used by the main Russian TV channels, including: manipulative use of

images and sound, pseudo-diversity of opinions, mixing comments and opinions, appeals to fear, scapegoating, demonizing the enemy, lack of transparency and credibility of sources, selective coverage, omission of information, manipulative search for sympathizers, labeling and stereotyping, vagueness, repetition and exaggeration, inaccurate reporting and lies etc.

- The qualitative analysis also revealed that some talk show hosts used inflammatory language when referring to Ukraine (primarily the official representatives), USA, EU, and the West in general. In addition, talk show hosts presented uniform position virtually on all important topics and issues, vehemently supporting the official line pursued by the Russian authorities on global and national issues.
- The monitoring team observed a tendency by the main Russian channels to invite the same people to the talk show programs whose role was to pursue the official line supported by the Russian authorities. Talk show hosts provided a uniform position virtually on all important topics and issues, also supporting the position of the Russian authorities. They demonstrated open bias, aggressive style, inflammatory and hostile language towards their opponents and people with different opinions.
- The coverage of Boris Nemtsov's murder on the three main TV channels was also one-sided, reflecting only the official line and generally failing to follow on the allegations that the authorities were involved.
- Russia Today demonstrated a pattern of political favoritism towards the incumbent Russian authorities, but showed a slightly different approach to that of the three above-mentioned channels. This is due to the fact that it Russia Today mainly targets international viewers, particularly in USA and in the European Union. As such, the bulk of the channel's coverage was devoted to the above-mentioned international topics and subjects, primarily USA and EU that were heavily criticized. Ukraine did not receive as much coverage as on the main Russian channels but the tone of the coverage was also critical towards the Ukrainian authorities.
- The one-month long monitoring confirmed that the identified problems in the main Russian channels were not results of short-term anomalies but reflect real trends. In particular, such a problem includes the fact that the interests of the current Russian authorities and not the interests of the readers or viewers determine the editorial policy of these channels.
- TV Dozhd showed a very different approach to that of the four above-mentioned channels controlled by the Russian authorities as it was more focused on the local Russian affairs than on the conflict in Ukraine or the Russia-West relations. Moreover, the coverage of topics and subjects related to Ukraine was generally balanced.

- **Similarly, the Russian language version of Euronews offered a very different picture of the international and local issues related to Russia and Ukraine. While the channel also devoted to the bulk of its coverage to USA and the European Union, this coverage was predominantly neutral.**
- **TV RBK allocated most of its coverage to the activities of the Russian government (one hour and twenty six minutes) and the president (thirty four minutes). While the coverage of Mr. Putin was mainly neutral and positive, some of the government's coverage was also negative. RBK did not focus on the conflict in Ukraine so intensively as the main Russian channels. First Baltic Channel focused mainly on the local issues related to Latvia.**

Recommendations

EaP countries

Public service broadcasting

- The existence of independent, vibrant and competitive media landscape is essential for providing a variety of news and views in different languages coming from different countries but with a priority given to a high quality programs produced in national languages. The national media enjoying high level of trust and popularity in the EaP countries would serve as a good tool against the Russian media propaganda. In this respect, the existence of truly independent public service broadcasters that would develop impartial editorial practices is essential.
- It is therefore important for the authorities in the EaP countries to strengthen mandate by public service broadcasters so it reflects public interest and it is based on independence, editorial freedom and non-interference by authorities or political parties. The reporting by these broadcasters should be balanced and factual, including when covering activities of the authorities, in line with international good practice.

Foreign and international media actors

- Given the overall lack of high-quality reporting in the EaP countries, consideration should be given to supporting activities aimed at raising professional standards, including adherence to internationally recognized ethical codes and standards for balanced and objective reporting and news presentation. This should include support to already existing media outlets (both local and foreign) that provide alternative information to the one presented by the main Russian channels.
- Existing international and local media outlets transmitting via cable, satellite or Internet should receive more support to provide high-quality reporting in languages more accessible to viewers and listeners in the EaP countries.

- Consideration should be given to promoting a direct exchange of a high-quality media content between broadcasters in the EaP countries.
- Consideration could be given to strengthening protection of national airways against hate speech and state propaganda that breaches the law. At the same time, if applied, restrictions to the freedom of expression should not be disproportional in scope and should not be arbitrary and politically motivated to limit the expression of alternative positions.
- Media regulators should monitor *ex officio* broadcasters' compliance with legislation and contractual license conditions and in case of their non-compliance they should apply appropriate sanctions. Sanctions should be clearly defined and commensurate with the gravity of the violation committed. The establishment of systematic media monitoring based on credible methodology would assist the regulators in identification of legal violations (including hate speech & propaganda) and in taking prompt and adequate corrective action.
- The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) should play a more active role in monitoring compliance by its members with the EBU's statutes, particularly promoting and developing the concept of public service media and their values such as universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability and innovation, as referred to in the EBU Declaration on the Core Values of the Public Service Media.¹

Media regulation

- Authorities in the EaP countries should ensure (both in legislation and in practice) the political and operational independence of the broadcast media regulators, in line with the OSCE, EU and Council of Europe's recommendations.²

Professionalism & media literacy

- Consideration could be given to further enhancing the existing and creating new platforms for discussion, trainings, studies and self-reflection on the media, including in the regions, to enhance the current level of journalistic profession and explain the unhealthy aspects of journalism, such as propaganda. This would help journalists, managers and students to increase their professional capacity and would also improve the current level of media literacy. Access to various educational resources, such as books, databases, methodology, research magazines, as well as a chance to exchange experience through international media networks and journalistic associations would also help in achieving these efforts.

¹ See the EBU statutes at:

https://www3.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/About/Governance/Statutes%202013_EN.pdf

² See the Council of Europe's recommendation on the independence and functions of regulatory authorities for broadcasting sector at

http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/doc/cm/rec%282000%29023&expmem_EN.asp.

- The enduring monopolization of the media market by state or powerful groups has deprived the audiences in the EaP countries of an effective variety of sources of information, and has thereby weakened the guarantees of pluralism. Such undue concentration of media ownership should be prevented through appropriate measures. Instruments could be applied to improve competition, to motivate the old players to get rid of excess concentration, and to encourage new players to invest.

Russia

Media independence

- State authorities should always refrain from any attempt to influence or censor media content or interfere in any other way in activities of the media and journalists as it undermines their independence. Interference with the activities of journalists and media personnel should not be tolerated and any allegations of such should be promptly and efficiently investigated.

Public service broadcasting

- State-owned and state-controlled media are easy targets for any state authorities willing to use them as propaganda tools. As such, the authorities should move ahead promptly with plans to transform state-controlled broadcasters into an independent public service media that will provide citizens with impartial and politically balanced information on global and local events and issues.

Media professionalism

- The media should refuse all open or furtive expressions of intolerance and will consider thoughtfully if publication of such expressions is not conducive to defamation and ridicule based on sex, race, color, language, faith and religion, affiliation with national or ethnic minority or ethnic group, social difference, political or other opinion.
- The media should avoid broadcasting a message based on unverified information, rumours and with an intention to arouse a scandal or for propaganda purposes. If it decides that such a message is somehow important, despite the fact that it can't be verified, it should broadcast it with a warning saying that the message is not verified. An important criterion is to separate facts from comments that shouldn't be part of the news-providing section of a newscast.
- The media should not manipulate picture or sound so that the choice of words or other means of expression, change in tone, shift of stress or editing will not deliberately displace the meaning or value of the message.
- The media should ensure that every piece of news contains only facts corresponding to reality and whose veracity will be verified by independent sources quoted therein.
- The media should avoid adjusting data and facts in a manner that would distort reality and

in determining the order of importance of the individual pieces of information it should impartially and objectively provide, distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information.

- The media will avoid adjusting data and facts in a manner that would distort reality and in determining the order of importance of the individual pieces of information it will impartially and objectively provide, distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information.
- Journalists, editors, producers and proprietors should spare no effort to make the distributed information correspond with truth and conscience. The facts should be mediated without any distortions and in their respective contexts. If a flawed message is published it should be followed by an immediate apology.

The full report and the media monitoring results are available at: <http://eap-csf.eu/en/home/>. For more details, please contact Rast'o Kužel at mobile +421905 493 591 or e-mail kuzel@memo98.sk; or Boris Navarsadian at mobile +37491206937 or e-mail boris@ypc.am