

CLOSER LOOK ON ONGOING REFORMS IN EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES¹:

UKRAINE: MAIN TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN LOCAL LEVEL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

(Based on examples of Mykolaiv, Odessa and Kherson region)
March 2018

Summary of the findings.²

Strengthening ability to counter disinformation and understand the need for European integration among the media sector is of utmost importance to ensure fair and balanced reporting on developments in Ukraine. Although the regional and local media is on the frontline in covering the changes brought by the EU integration process and reforms, the development of regional and local media, itself lacks behind.

Main conclusions and challenges

General situation

- In recent years, the level of media freedom has not changed. The level of their dependence / independence on the owners or editorial affection is manifested according to the level of financial success of the media. It often relates only to prioritizing or not mentioning some topics in publications. One can speak of a so-called limited independence when materials are presented with a distorted focus in the interests of the owner or the customer and are not marked as advertising.
- A large number of new mass media (mainly electronic) appeared at the national as well as regional and local levels. Therefore, we can say that freedom of speech has slightly strengthened due to significant diversity of the information agenda. The spectrum of “forbidden” topics has narrowed and the range of topics discussed widened, the access to information for public has also increased.
- The level of compliance with journalistic standards and the quality of materials remain low. Quite often social networks take over the role of the media. The journalists' level of media literacy is extremely low. News reporting has turned into

¹ Based on input and analyses of information collected by ECEAP local civil society/area experts

² Detailed comprehensive analysis report is available at request

publishing posts, there is no intellectual and professional competition. For online media, the main goal is a number of visits, not quality of content. The low level of journalists' professionalism together with the high role of managers organizing work and ordering materials quantitatively rather than qualitatively, as well as uninformed consumers' information requests systematically contribute to the strengthening of incompetent journalism.

- There are problems with journalistic staff and their effective training, both formal (education) and informal (Union of Journalists of Ukraine). There is no journalistic solidarity that could cultivate standards and help protect them even from media owners.

Local media

- Over the years, the regional/local media has adopted the practice and approach of being mostly "translator" of the news and the voice of the regional and local government. It lacks critical thinking, skills for fact-checking and capability for producing independent coverage, often it does not produce its own media content. This has caused degradation of the profession and undermined the quality of the media itself. Lack of competition, of professional requirements, and most importantly, lack of media literacy has created stagnation and has blocked the professional growth of independent media in the regions. This makes Ukrainian local media particularly vulnerable to Russian disinformation and manipulative actions.
- Local media frequently ignores the basic standards for quality journalism, including critical thinking, verification of the sources and seeking of a balanced representation of opinions. It is also often vulnerable to manipulations brought along by information war, including low awareness and understanding of reforms related to European integration. Therefore the audience (public) is exposed to poor-quality, biased materials and are influence by disinformation - majority of the citizens - instead of being conscious media users - have become passive consumers of media product, and the lack of media competence and literacy among the population has enabled the success of the Russian information war: under current conditions it has been very easy to manipulate facts, falsify history and spread disinformation.
- Despite of widespread information among donors that journalists are "over trained" and there are already too many training events for them, the reality is that there remains strong need for proper training programmes in the regions outside the capital.

Influence of Russian propaganda

- Russia has invested extensive financial and organizational resources into the policy of spreading disinformation in Ukraine. As long as there is not enough knowledge and capacity among journalists to recognize and tackle its manipulation tactics and methodology, it is rather easy for Russia to continue with its propagandistic nature and media manipulations.
- In all analysed regions there are areas with no Ukrainian broadcasting due to technical and geographical problems / specifics; that creates space for Russian influenced media outlets.
- Only 70% of Kherson region is covered by Ukrainian television and radio. Therefore, the issue of the Russian propaganda influence on the inhabitants of the region is very pressing. The areas close to Crimea are particularly problematic. It can be argued that there is a well-formed Russian information space. There are no Ukrainian media with pronounced pro-Russian views in the region but online media and radio “Lyubimy Kherson” and online media “Kherson.PRO” do tend to pro-Russian sentiment. There are several propaganda media outlets working from Russia and the materials they publish demonstrate that they have information sources in Kherson. One of them is “Monitor Yug”.
- The Russian propaganda influence in Odesa region is quite tangible. A characteristic feature is Russophile and pro-Soviet sentiments of a part of the region’s inhabitants. The Bessarabia area is especially problematic. Therefore, in experts’ opinion, this region requires developing a special state information policy. The pro-Russian media in Odesa region is an online media “Timer”.
- In Mykolaiv region, the Russian propaganda influence is not too visible, and has decreased in comparison with previous years. There are provocative media and those that sometimes use Russian content to colour their publications. In this context, the “Novosti N” media was mentioned several times. Despite this fact, it is one of the most popular media in the region. In addition, there are several media that contain pro-Russian rhetoric, but they are not significant or influential in the information space of Mykolaiv and have a small consumer audience.

Gender awareness

- There is overwhelming lack of awareness and understanding of the gender equality issue among local journalists. This understanding is often limited to well-known personalities among women in power and the cases of violence against women.

- The research revealed that only about 30% of respondents participated in the events of different formats devoted to gender equality issues. Up to 70% of the respondents believe that the regional journalists' level of knowledge on the gender equality issues is partial, and a quarter of respondents tend to believe that their knowledge is inadequate. About 40% of respondents believe that this topic is pressing. They note that this is especially important in the European integration context.
- There is a lack of adequate, practical and interesting trainings on gender equality for local journalist. The few trainings what have been organized have been too academic and theoretical, not designed specifically for journalists and a lot of available information on this topic is communicated by the authorities in legal language, and it concerns changes to the legislation and journalists do not see relevance for everyday life.
- Therefore, the full spectrum of gender sensitive topics should be presented to this target audience in a simple and interesting format.

Donor projects and programs provided by international actors.

Even though there is no doubt that most of the training workshops, roundtables and seminars organized by international/donor programmes have positive impact on local journalist and strengthened their professional skills, international programming would benefit from some improvements according to the feedback of local journalists:

- The provided information was not always sufficient and exhaustive.
- The events often lacked striking into the subject.
- One-time activities usually give no way of fixing the effect. The activities result in communication with colleagues rather than in clarification of the subject.
- The topics suggested for the discussion were not interesting.
- More realistic take on the audience is needed (local media is often reluctant to change, often depends on the position of the editor).
- Fail to communicate that such programmes exist, no awareness of various events and projects, especially among residents of the districts.
- Not all proposals within the framework of the projects are focused on real needs and problems of media, and not all coaches and experts are real professionals.
- The focus of grant programs on NGOs instead of media or editorial teams.
- Lack of international donors' interest in cooperation with communal media, the founders of which are local authorities.

Key recommendations for international actors

- Include in programmes on development and support of independent media capacity building of local journalists in the regions.
- Prioritize enhancing quality of professional education, including raising the level of qualification of teachers at journalist-training institutions/universities. Underline importance of ethical standards in journalism when interacting with those responsible for training of journalists.
- Organize professional trainings of journalists: trainings on modern layout, increasing journalistic standards, work in social media; trainings in anti-crisis and advertising management; workshops on updating the printed media design, assistance in coping with modern technologies.
- Give consultations of international experts and specialists (based on peer-to-peer approach), in particular, practical tips for establishing sales and advertising policies, assistance in filling the content for the media (in particular, through the participation in press tours and visits abroad), support for journalistic investigations, assistance in preparing materials on topical issues.
- Develop programmes focusing on increasing professional knowledge of regional and local journalists and advanced media students through the workshops and roundtables related to the implementation of the EU/Euro-Atlantic integration reforms in different sectors
- Aim to create in each region a pool of knowledgeable and skilled journalists with capabilities of independent media, critical thinking, increased awareness of democratic values
- Increase media literacy in the regions of Ukraine on Russian information war, incl. ways to understand and tackle it.
- Organize good quality, easily understood and practical trainings on gender equality with particular relevance to journalistic work/responsibility
- Include gender equality matters in all training events, workshops and roundtables so that its relevance to every day work is understood by journalists
- Help with trainings of staff and modernization of equipment. Professional training of editorial staff (both journalists, layout designers and accountants) in journalistic standards, anti-crisis and advertising management. Modernization of both the equipment and content – creation of websites or modernization of those existing, redesign of printed media.

- Make available fellowships programmes in EU countries which will result in positive changes in mentality and attitudes towards EU, improve quality and regularity of the reporting of journalists in their own domestic outlets, as well as in a greater understanding and diversity of voices in the coverage of European integration, democratic processes, local development and its challenges
- Support in-country internship programs. Establishing interaction and healthy competition between the media, including through the introduction of internship programs in other media.
- Advise on development of rules and legal assistance. Adjustment of rules and requirements for online media, ethics of reciprocal quoting and reposting, recognition of new genres (especially for the Internet media). Providing legal assistance and legal advice to the media.

