

RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF INDEPENDENT RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE MEDIA: 2018

Brief policy paper

Objective

This paper provides research-based evidence and analysis to assist donors and other stakeholders in taking decisions and setting priorities on the types of interventions and funding modalities to **strengthen independent media in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, in particular Russian-language media**. The final goal is to provide citizens of these countries with unbiased news and information, and a greater plurality of voices, free from commercial and political influence.

This brief paper is developed based on the updated GA produced by BCME in February-March 2018 (see the Executive Summary of GA findings), and discussion between donors and independent media from the EaP that was held by BCME in Riga in June 14-15, 2018.

Background

After the escalation of international tensions in 2014 caused by number of aggressive actions of Russian Federation against democratic Western and West-oriented countries, the problem of wage weight of Kremlin narratives in the information field appeared in the spotlight of political discussion. Strengthening independent balanced Russian-language media as an alternative for biased Kremlin-controlled ones, is considered to be one of the strategic solutions. Since 2015, the international donor community has been taking steps in this direction. The key shapes of the strategy for a common response were outlined in 2015, following the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) feasibility study on Russian language media¹. Among other measures, development of independent Russian-language media outlets was recognized as crucial to ensure internal resilience within the EaP states. The Gap-Asset Analysis of the Russian-Language Media Skill Set (GA), conducted by the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence (BCME) with the support of the EED in 2017², offered further proof and recommendations.

Condition of independent Russian-language media

Independent Russian-language media in the EaP still exist in unfriendly political and economic environment that is characterized by fragile democratic institutions, risks to freedom of speech, monopolization and slow growth of the advertising market and the lack of purchasing power of the audience. Such environment makes media extremely vulnerable against government pressure or owner censorship.

¹ Bringing Plurality and Balance to Russian Language Media, European Endowment for Democracy, 2015, summary available at <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/news/bringing-plurality-1/?ref=search&h=bringing%20plurality>

² Gap-Asset Analysis of Russian-Language Media Skill Set in the Eastern Partnership, Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, 2017, available at <https://baltic.media/in-focus/unique-study-maps-strengths-and-gaps-of-independent-media-in-eastern-partnership>

Under conditions like that, the only way to survive is to follow a successful business model. Here, little progress is observed, and donors could not offer the sufficient solution in this regard. Media managers rely on their own intuition and experience, and benefit from the domestic stories of success rather than from training and donor-supported exchanges. Just like in 2017, an audience analysis remains unreachable for independent media in the region and international donors did not succeed in filling this gap. In some of the EaP countries, independent market and audience research is almost completely absent. This creates a strong obstacle for attracting advertisements, and does not allow the outlets to correspond the demands of their audience in better way.

Again, based on their own knowledge and bearing risks, independent media in the region strive to diversify their sources of revenues, exploring native advertisement, crowdfunding and establishing affiliated media in other countries with a bigger advertising market. However, although separate successful cases are there, there is no ground to report about improvements in the independent media landscape in general.

Aiming to deliver better service to their audiences, the independent Russian-language media in the EaP countries are exploring new formats: combining video with traditional reporting online; recording podcasts; producing new video programs dedicated to the hottest topics in the society/community. They also cooperate more actively with other media to produce or share their content. However, journalists and managers repeatedly point at their lack of quality content, and request for donor support to content production. Strong demand on new, modern equipment and software (as well as skills how to use them) is still there.

Need in basic practical skills is frequently articulated, such as filming, multimedia, writing, storytelling, data journalism etc. Comparing with 2017, independent media improved to some extent their performance in social media and multimedia production. However, the new trend is their demand for security (skills, policies, equipment, software), in particular – digital security. Also, legal support is required.

Donor support approaches

In line with GA-2017 recommendations, slight, but worth mentioning, changes in the donors' media assistance program design have been observed in EaP countries. Customized assistance plans tailored to the needs of separate media or groups of media outlets do not prevail over the generalized approach yet, but are practiced more and more. Individual training and consultation sessions for separate media teams, as well as extended mentorships are taking their place in the media development toolbox. However, these trends should not be overestimated; still, old-style short-term training and needs-distanced services with a limited impact constitute a large part of the services received by the independent media in the EaP.

No significant shifts occurred in the funding models. Re-granting schemes are able to partially cover the needs of the independent media, but far not enough. There is evident lack of donor strategy regarding Azerbaijan. The only financial tool to support media development is core support that is able to satisfy only very limited number of beneficiaries, while others receive only short-term project funding.

The existing funding programs still involve resource-consuming implementation bodies and a huge bureaucracy still prevail. Working with donors requires a special kind of capacity from media outlets. On the one hand, this is a strong barrier for market-oriented (and often quite successful) teams. On the other hand, focusing on developing such capacity, the media

often adopt the approaches of typical NGOs, overlooking or completely ignoring sales functions.

Conclusion

No Both the GA and the discussion in Riga in June 14-15, 2018 manifested that, dramatic changes (positive or negative) in the condition of independent Russian-language media are detected. Tthrough forms of donor support demonstrated some evolution, they got only slightly closer to the needs of the independent Russian-language media in the Eastern Partnership. The key gaps remain the same, such as: no access to audience research for independent media; a shrinkage of management skills; poor practical skills (writing, still photography, data journalism); outdated equipment and software; lack of quality content; limited development budgets. No dramatic changes (positive or negative) in the condition of independent Russian-language media are detected compared with 2017. Performance in social networks improved slightly; however, some new needs are detected (such as security, and legal consultations). Repeatedly, both the research respondents and the Riga event participants, point at their most urgent needs, which are financial support for content production and development, and better business models.

Policy Recommendations

Investment into skills and financial sustainability

- Invest in the **marketing capacity of the donor-financed media**. Donor core support must never replace sales (with possible exception for Belarus and Azerbaijan).
- In training programs, stronger emphasis should be made on **long-term mentorship and tailor-made consultations**.
- Convene a group of experts to develop **media business training modules** to enable best practice training. This must include veterans of the private media sector.
- A comprehensive wide-ranging program of **digital media skills training**, harnessing an ad hoc task force from academia and the private sector.
- A program to ensure risk assessment, advisory support and training for independent media with regards to **digital security**.

Investment into media intelligence

- Provide resources for **audience research** (both qualitative and quantitative).
- Establish a tool to provide **free legal support** to independent media in the EaP countries.
- **Facilitate partnerships between top journalism schools** in the region and those in donor countries to improve journalism curricula.

Donor programme redesign

- **Increase the circle of beneficiaries** of financial support. To launch an education and advisory support project to stimulate and support business-owned independent media to approach international donors. To offer simple and user-friendly aggregator of calls for proposals for local media in the EaP.

- Together with long-term core support, to establish a mechanism for small and medium ad-hoc development grants.
- Where national legislation allows, support through **market-based mechanisms** would be more beneficial: low interest loans, refundable grants, investment, seed money, venture capital.
- **Support of content production** is vitally needed. Availability of sufficient diverse content should be a target; support to both innovative and traditional formats should be provided.
- Overhaul the reluctance of donors to provide funding for the **purchase of equipment and software**.

Coordination and exchange

- **Improve (or establish) platforms** to coordinate the efforts of donors and other institutions delivering media assistance at the international and national levels. The existing formats should become more inclusive and engage NGOs and educational establishments, delivering training and financial support to independent media to ensure more synergy and a common vision.
- Ensure the **availability of methodologies** of media needs assessment and audience research of different kinds.
- Enhance the **cross-border exchange between media** to condition the regionwide media space.

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