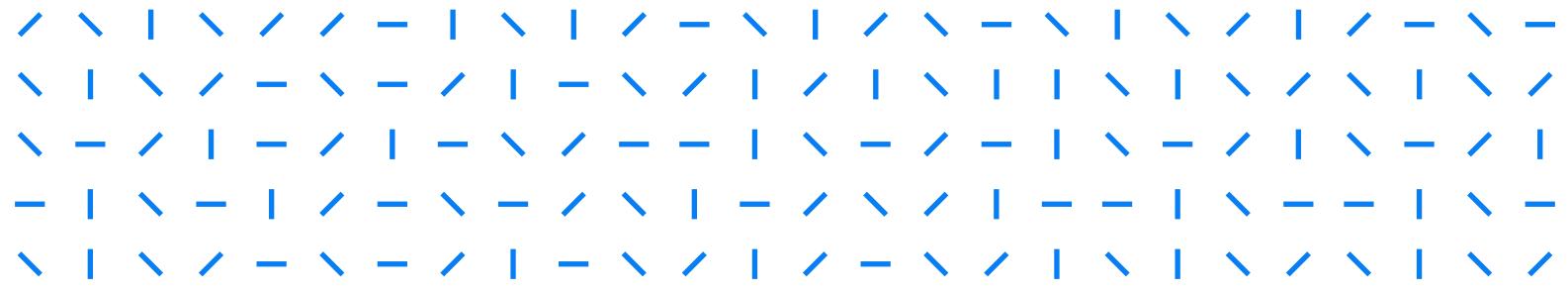




Baltic Centre for
Media Excellence

Policy Paper

Gap-Asset Analysis of Russian Language
Media Skill Set in the Eastern Partnership



RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF INDEPENDENT RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE MEDIA

Recommendations for donors operating in the countries of Eastern Partnership

Objective

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

This is particularly urgent in view of the long-standing dominance of Russian state-sponsored messages and narratives, delivered through Russian national media, their local franchises or subsidiaries, and a significant portion of domestic media consumed by audiences in the region. The problem has been well-researched and some potential solutions offered in 2015 by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) feasibility study on Russian language media¹. The Gap-Asset Analysis of Russian-Language Media Skill Set (GA), conducted by the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence with the support of the EED, offers further proof and recommendations.

If donor governments and EU institutions agree that strengthening Russian-language media is a **shared objective**, and that the recommendations of this paper - based on solid body of evidence delivered by multiple studies and consultations - address this objective, then the inevitably divergent individual national policy agendas need not be an obstacle to an effective and integrated response.

A regional summary of findings and recommendations is enclosed in the package of supporting documents submitted with this brief, along with country reports, the study research template, and data bases of existing donor support and media literacy programs.

Key Findings

Evidence from the GA, the expert panel² and earlier studies point clearly to a number of common themes that this brief will concentrate on, namely, non-existent or unreliable audience research in countries of the region, a shortage of management skills that would allow the media outlets to become financially, and thus editorially independent and a gap in digital skills, vital in today's media environment, both for content creation and business strategies.

As the graphic below illustrates, another common theme across most of the region is a stark need to redesign journalism education, by adding emphasis on practical skills and technology.

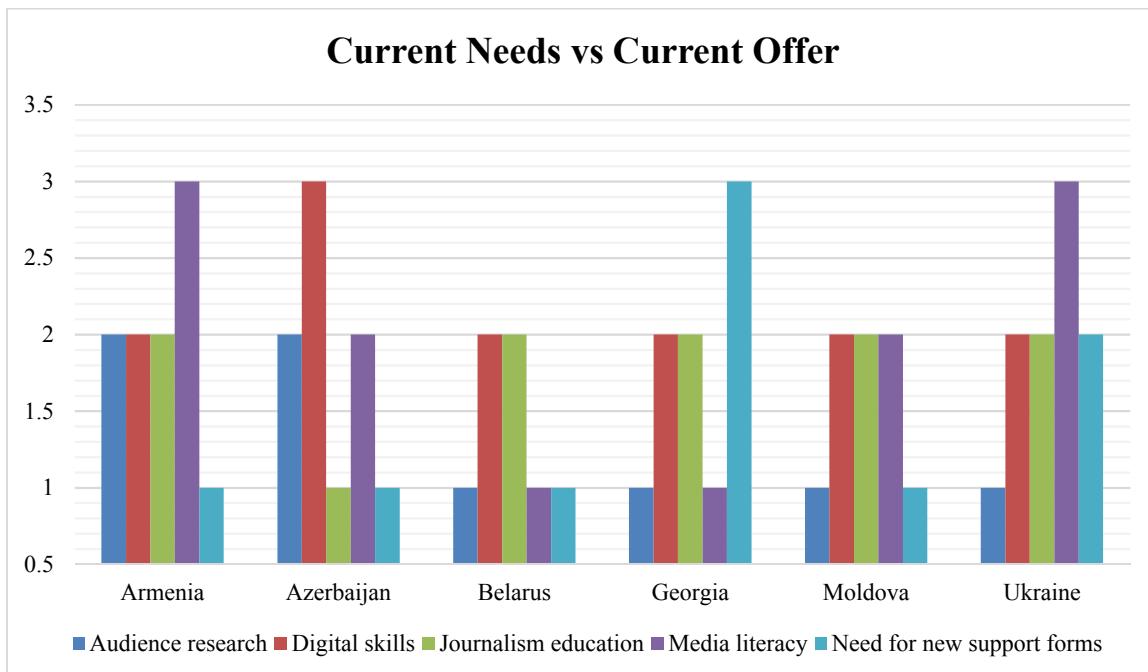
¹ Bringing Plurality and Balance to Russian Language Media, European Endowment for Democracy, 2015, summary available at <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/news/bringing-plurality-1/?ref=search&h=bringing%20plurality>

² Expert panel of donors and implementers discussed the findings of the GA at the launch event on 9 March in Chisinau, Moldova, <http://www.media-azi.md/en/stiri/%E2%80%9Cwhat-do-media-need%E2%80%9D-forum-makes-recommendations-donors-supporting-independent-media>

And media literacy programs, for a wide spectrum of audience groups, call for far more attention and resources.

The expert country chapter authors, and their respondents, also repeatedly pointed out that the traditional models of media support, which had helped them make tremendous progress in the past, are now outdated, cumbersome, often even a crutch that prevents them from finding their market feet.

And perhaps most importantly, there is a pronounced and unanimous conclusion that the support to media in order to mitigate the threat of the domination of Russian state-sponsored messages must not focus on the Russian language only. Often national-language media are covertly supported by Kremlin-aligned organisations or serve as unwitting multipliers or misleading messages due to gaps in media literacy and fact-checking skills.



Source: The authors of the country chapters of the GA were asked to produce the list of the 5 most important needs that exist in their countries, and rate them according to the degree those needs are met by existing media development programs on the scale from 1 to 3. So 1 - not met all, 2 - partially met, 3- sufficiently met.

Analysis

Business skills

This study and others before it, and the subsequent expert panel discussion in Chisinau on March 9th, have provided hard evidence that assistance leading to sustainable, commercially viable media businesses is of primary importance. It has also shown, again not for the first time, that the economies of the countries in question are a long way from sustaining a healthy media market, while at the same time traditional media business models are in crisis in more mature economies as well.

Additionally, the almost complete absence of independent market and audience research in a majority of the EaP countries, and only the most basic efforts at audience engagement via social media, make it impossible to develop business models that respond to audience needs and interests.

This means that basic principles of business planning along the old models is still needed as a core skill set, but exploration of experiments for funding quality journalism needs to be integrated into assistance programs. In a broader context, donor government support and pressure for better economic and anti-corruption policies on a national level, has been cited by at least two of the GA's country researchers as a necessary part of any strategy to support independent media. The latter issue is far beyond the scope of this paper but mentioning it in this context can benefit future policy discussions.

There will be consequences of enhancing market based conditions and strengthening media businesses – for some of the media companies as well as for many of the organisations delivering media assistance, the implementers. Inevitably, the weaker media companies will most likely fail; the media development implementing sector could also shrink as robust media businesses mature. There is an argument to be made that this is a price worth paying in order to wean many media companies off donor dependency, and helping those strongest editorially and most valuable to society survive. It is for this intermediate survival sustaining phase that a range of new approaches of blended donor/market-based financing may need to be deployed. A widely cited model, albeit from a different region, is the case of the Malaysiakini online portal³ in Asia.

Journalism and other media skills training

The above finding does not mean that journalism, content development and media technical skills' training can or should be abandoned. Key skills gaps present an initial "shopping list" for future professional improvement programmes. But the response also signalled a need for greater flexibility, better tailoring to needs of individual organisations and markets, and an update of the design of media support programs. Better integration of content production with approaches to ensure market viability will be essential. Moreover, against the backdrop of the emerging media trends worldwide, such integration is inevitable.

Those trends now require skills that merge business and content creation on digital platforms. They coincide with the skill set gap that the GA researchers across all countries identified as lacking and in most urgent need of improving - digital skills in content creation, management and security measures.

Changing media development programmes

General context

For more than two decades now, media development activities for the most part have followed certain established patterns. In the case of government grants this has often meant that a political entity defines a program to be funded, based to a large extent on certain key foreign policy objectives. After that, a call for proposals goes out, and various implementing organisations bid for the project funding.

Frequently the implementers go to great lengths to accommodate the objectives articulated by political entities, while at the same time incorporating ways to address real needs on the ground known to them. Those do not necessarily have to be in conflict, but often are disconnected. Generally, only when the grant is awarded is a detailed needs assessment conducted, and design for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) established. The needs assessment is usually a narrow one, focused on the concrete programme objectives framed through the policy making entity's

³ Advancing independent journalism while building a modern news business: the case of Malaysiakini , CIMA, 2015, <http://www.cima.ned.org/publication/advancing-independent-journalism-while-building-a-modern-news-business-the-case-of-malaysiakini/>

lens, and the country or region which the grant targets. The M&E regimen is too frequently aimed at assessing quantity, not quality and lacks long-term impact evaluation schemes.

Business and management skills training has seldom been a principal objective of such programmes.

The BCME GA study (and to a certain extent, the EED study before it) is leading a different and much-needed approach by making the setting of priorities by key stakeholders – the actual media communities and platforms that are to benefit from future programs – the first step in this process. The regional scope is also rare. This is why this study, and any resulting drilling down into the data, is ground-breaking. Perhaps most importantly, it pinpoints those who can ultimately be targeted for customised support among previously less visible groups, such as Russian language independent media, but also other minority language media, and regional media as a whole.

Program design

Respondents of the GA have repeatedly cited the shortcomings of current assistance program design and the absence of programs customised to the needs of independent outlets is one. Projects that are executed in short, frequently two or three-day workshops have limited impact on long-term performance. These were well suited to an earlier stage of media development in the region. They served beneficiaries well, when even basic journalism skills were in short supply. In the current stage, advanced reporting, traditional technical (such as audio-visual skills) as well as digital skills are in greater demand – and delivered by means of extended mentorships rather than one-off seminars, to ensure immediate application of the acquired skills and long-term effect on the media outlet's performance.

Funding models

Re-granting schemes and Western implementer facilitation tend to slow down implementation and divert much-needed funds from beneficiaries to the intermediaries' administration costs. Consultations conducted during the EED study process and feedback from the country researchers for the GA yielded formal and informal expressions of frustration with current models. Media reported devoting disproportionate amounts of time and resources to chasing and documenting grants and, as a result, operated like NGOs, not regular media outlets.

Seasoned human capital and professional capacity exist in most countries of the region now to make facilitation of grass-roots initiatives and partnerships, cooperative efforts, and convening professional knowledge-sharing - an effective form of support. Where those are still lacking, as in Belarus and Azerbaijan, 'training of trainers' programs can be introduced. That also allows for laws barring foreign aid, if trainers can be trained abroad, and then it is for the domestic organisations to deploy them.

Journalism education and media literacy

These are partially two distinct areas for possible interventions, but there is also an overlap. The weaknesses of journalism education are practically universal across the entire post-Soviet space, short on educators with practical experience and long on theory. There are a number of exceptions that can serve as best practice models. A centre of excellence like BCME, with appropriate funding, can act as a broker for creating partnerships between those exceptional schools, as well other international institutions, and those in the EaP region that demonstrate the capacity and openness to change.

Media literacy initiatives have been cited as a much needed remedy in almost all studies done on this subject to date⁴. They should target a range of audiences: youth, starting in schools, but also university students, and not just of journalism. Hence the overlap with higher education. But beyond education programs, society at large has to develop the tools and habits of critical thinking, and now where to find trustworthy alternative sources of information, and this is not a challenge that exists only in this region.

Beyond the Russian language

Experts and study respondents across the board cautioned that this is not practical to limit support to Russian language media only. Most of the economic and skills challenges faced by Russian language media are invariably shared by national-language and other minority language media. Their audiences are also exposed to the destructive Russian state-sponsored messages, which are strategically placed and distributed across all platforms. For some countries, such as Armenia or Georgia, Russian language media are almost a non-issue. Paradoxically, in Georgia, it is a number of national-language media, controlled by Kremlin-aligned Russian entities, that are the main purveyors of Kremlin narratives.

Policy Recommendations

Investment into skills and financial sustainability

- Redesign calls for grant proposals so they reflect the need to **embed external trainers**, or seasoned journalists and media managers in media organisations for tailored and lasting impact. They need not be expensive trainers – a corps of working or retired journalists from public service media outlets can be recruited to act as volunteers, or seconded from partner media organisations, if still employed.
- 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.

Investment into media intelligence

- As business strengthening is cited everywhere as a key need, and reliable audience research is a vital pre-condition to developing business strategies, a project to support a professional, independent and **reliable audience research** study, consistent across the region and conducted according to international standards.
- Facilitate **partnerships between top journalism schools** in the region and those in donor countries to improve journalism curricula (such as the Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management in Georgia and the Media Centre of the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga – both BCME member organisations, and enlist Journalism Department of London’s City University – these could be strong concrete starting points).

⁴ Edward Lucas, Peter Pomerantsev, Winning the Information War, CEPA, 2016,
<http://cepa.org/reports/winning-the-Information-War>

Donor programme redesign

- Donors need to develop new blueprints for calls for proposals, thus stimulating the design of **new models of support**: secondments, longer term (minimum two months) coaching and mentoring in individual media outlets, placements in foreign news organisations – for editorial, technical and management staff. These will inevitably require private-public partnerships (possible models – the News Corp Fellowship Programme⁵, or the Knight International Journalism Fellowships⁶).
- Overhaul of funding mechanisms, in particular the reluctance of most donors to provide core and seed funding. Where national legislation allows, support through **market-based mechanisms** would be more beneficial: low interest loans, refundable grants, investment, seed money, venture capital (the Media Development Investment Fund with its unique model delivers the most effective assistance of this kind with a demonstrable record of success⁷, a partnership or subsidiary of the Fund for the region would be a shortcut to swift action as opposed to creating a new entity).

Implementers

The BCME is unique in its potential as an institution and facilitator of these activities. Among its core team expertise, it combines decades of knowledge in international journalism, media management and education, with local and regional cultural fluency, and trust among media professionals.

The established Western media implementers with their own decades' long record in media development (such as the IWPR, IREX Europe and the Thompson Foundation) approach BCME regularly to enlist it as a partner. This is a result of its notable competence and record to date.

BCME, in its short lifespan, has assembled member organisations from among highly competent players in the EaP region, to add to its notable array of founding members from the Baltics. The EaP members include the Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management, and key media NGOs such as Detector Media in Ukraine and Independent Journalism Centre in Moldova, among others.

BCME has demonstrated the capacity to swiftly design training modules, and is in position to scale those up, be it in management or digital skills, provided appropriate funding becomes available, preferably core funding, to allow it to grow. It also has the network of contacts to develop and administer such programs, with its existing group of partners, and can convene an ad hoc task forces of experts to assist.

If scaling up for the purpose of swift action and the build-up of resources are required, it can and is a position to join/initiate a consortium with an institution/institutions that are proven brands in international media development and through their own reputations and contacts can harness additional partners who will add required competencies, such as market and audience

⁵Media fellowships, ICFJ, <http://www.icfj.org/our-work/news-corp-media-fellowship-indian-journalists>

⁶Knight International Journalism Fellowships, ICFJ, <http://www.icfj.org/our-work/knight/overview>

⁷ Media Development Investment Fund , <https://www.mdif.org/>

research, an established think tank record and brand, or the convening of professional gatherings, which offer tangible opportunities for exchange of knowledge and networking, particularly important to the region as few media can afford to send their staff to large international media conferences.

It is precisely because it is small and agile that BCME can regroup quickly and redeploy or scale up existing projects. This and the combined reputation, knowledge and media contacts its core team, mean that like-minded partners and experts can be enlisted for ad hoc initiatives.

Gap-Asset Analysis

The link to the BCME Gap-Asset Analysis of Russian-Language Media Skill Set in the Eastern Partnership

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B116V5fuA7UEVGU1VELwU3JpYUU>

The study materials are available in a secure format. Should you require a printable version kindly contact EaP programme assistant Diāna Hodulīna diana.hodulina@baltic.media

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