

Bringing Plurality and Balance to the Russian Language Media Space

Feasibility Study on Russian Language Media Initiatives (RLMIs)
in the Eastern Partnership and Beyond
by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED)

Summary and Recommendations

Overview

The EED consulted more than 150 media experts and professionals to examine the existing and future prospects for Russian language media in the EU's Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and beyond, primarily the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and Russia. The study analyses the audiences, content, markets, laws and security environments in which the media operate. The EED launched the Feasibility Study on Russian Language Media Initiatives (RLMIs) in the Eastern Partnership and Beyond in January of this year, as commissioned and funded by the Dutch government and with a contribution from Latvia.

Premise

Accurate news and information that holds all power to account is a cornerstone of democracy, which is threatened when the choice of media and voices is limited. The Russian language should not be deployed to divide societies. Polarisation, distortion and misinformation dominate the Kremlin-aligned media which reach millions of Russian speakers across Europe and beyond.

Goal

To identify a range of practical solutions to support and strengthen democratic, independent and diverse Russian-language media in the countries of the Eastern Partnership and beyond.'

Context

The dominance of Kremlin-aligned voices in the media space, both in the East and West, has been growing for over a decade. This has been known to media and political experts, who have repeatedly warned about this trend. But it took the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine to bring this divisive role of media into sharp focus for the European leaders and public. The resulting volatility in audience perspectives presents significant challenges – as well as opportunities – for existing and emergent RLMIs.

A range of **co-ordinated, co-operative and cost efficient initiatives** by the existing independent Russian language media outlets themselves, with **co-ordinated support from donors**, are essential to respond to Kremlin-aligned media dominance. Only truly robust donor co-ordination will bring about due recognition of the magnitude of the challenge and the political will to adequately fund the recommended responses that include **news exchange partnerships (a co-operative news agency)**, a **non-news content sharing platform** as well as a **research and training centre**.

Those in turn can ensure the critical mass of quality content that could in time support the creation of a **pan-regional Russian language multimedia distribution platform**. Such co-ordinated action could fill widening gaps in the availability and accessibility of pluralistic and balanced news, as well as high-quality non-news content, such as drama, documentaries, entertainment and satire.

The expert teams propose five “building blocks” (see p.4), each of which can stand-alone and/or serve a more ambitious and integrated structure and vision. These “blocks” are necessary – and collectively have a potential of being sufficient – to stem and reverse the tide of repression and propaganda that is stifling pluralism in Russian-language media today.

Methodology

The Focus

Given the distribution of Russian-language populations across most countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU), the study identified the key shared characteristics of the media audiences across the region. These characteristics are crucial for understanding of mechanisms of Kremlin-aligned media and their influence on Russian-speakers.

The report focuses on television and online media platforms – including mobile – in view of their collective dominance of the market and the opportunities they present for RLMI of all sizes.

This is not to ignore the enduring significance of radio and print media but rather to recognise that most newspapers and radio stations are increasingly looking to digital platforms to consolidate and grow their audiences.

The Inputs

Between February and April 2015, media experts, professionals and NGOs as well as donor representatives provided their expertise during a series of roundtables. Further qualitative data was collected through a range of in-depth interviews with the experts and representatives of media outlets by the authors of the study. Both existing datasets and original research were also procured for this study from a number of research consultancies with established expertise in the sector and/or the region.

The study thus harnesses the collective knowledge of a wide network of contributors, with both thematic and geographical expertise on this broad and complex subject.

Key Findings

A Breakdown of Trust

Much of the television news broadcast from Russia has exhibited a growing tendency to sensationalise, simplify, distort, co-opt and marginalise issues in ways that run counter to the universal values of fair and accurate journalism. Yet, both state-run and independent media outside Russia have not managed to provide an effective counterweight to this, and there are numerous examples of what may be considered “counter-propaganda” rather than fair and accurate news. One of the strongest themes to emerge from our audience research **is a consistent lack of trust in most media outlets** regardless of genres and affiliations.

This calls for solutions that promote values associated with independent and watchdog journalism, as well as news that addresses issues at the local, national and international level.

Fragmented and Captive Audiences

The Russian-language audiences are as diverse as the varied cultural, social and political environments that they inhabit. This suggests that a single pan-regional solution on its own would not be sufficient to address the different needs and demands of these audiences.

Much of the Kremlin-aligned media offer is inherently commercial. Audiences are attracted to their high production values and persuasive emotional narratives (which in turn lead them to news bulletins). Among older audiences, a deep sense of nostalgia for the Soviet past drives engagement with these media. “Historic” films and documentaries create a mythic past and a sense of “victimisation” among Russian-speaking audiences, especially outside Russia.

Building Audiences

The critical challenge is both to cultivate potential demand for independent media and to respond to existing demand among those sections of the audience which are already predisposed to, or actively seeking,

alternatives. This suggests the need for **innovative content strategies and formats including cutting-edge documentary and satire**, which are largely absent from the television menu offered to Russian-language audiences.

On the one hand, it calls for strategies that **promote independent media exposure, access and literacy** among the wider audience. On the other hand, the study highlights the need to **help RLMs target the “leading edge” of audiences** as a way into the market, and to ensure that their stories are not only told, but adequately heard.

This also requires more in-depth and ongoing collection of market and media consumption data than is currently available for the Russian-language audience.

The Local Gap

In many markets **more content that engages audiences on both a domestic and a local (city or regional) level** is needed. News and current affairs programming from Russian federal television channels and state-run internet sites is focused on international stories, with the Kremlin at their centre and dominated by the Ukrainian conflict. At the same time, national and local programming outside Russia offers scarce coverage of domestic and local issues.

This suggests placing greater emphasis on support to media outlets that **produce and distribute locally relevant content**, both in news and non-news formats. This would help to build trust in independent media outlets, and also fill crucial gaps in the offer of Kremlin-aligned media.

The Survival Challenge

Although independent media exist throughout the region, many struggle on extremely limited resources. That, in turn, prevents them from acquiring or producing high-quality content and reaching critical mass audiences. Commercial opportunities for new or existing independent media initiatives are limited at all market levels and across all platforms. In some countries, markets are distorted by restrictive government policies towards independent media.

This does not mean that new initiatives should dismiss commercial opportunities altogether. But the conditions for sustainable, exclusively commercial operations are relatively under-developed in most regions and contexts. Furthermore, foreign investment in media across the region has declined over recent years. Although several donors support independent media directly or via media development NGOs, this support lacks consistency. The study therefore identifies a need for **better co-ordination and a longer-term approach in support for independent media across the region**.

Ensuring Security

Some states – including Russia – exert significant and increasing control over all media, and independent journalists are under daily threat of harassment, intimidation and imprisonment, as well as cyber and violent attacks. This report identifies measures that could be taken (in conjunction with the main recommendations) to enhance protection for journalists through specialised training and the development of security protocols. Above all, the study points to the need for the **development of a network that can, in various ways, resist targeted attacks and foster greater international solidarity in exposing repression**. This will make it considerably harder for authorities to “silence” independent media through repressive measures.

Connecting the Dots

Past experience suggests that large-scale investments in standalone channels pose significant risks in light of market constraints and political instability. At the same time, **approaches that are piecemeal and not sufficiently joined up are unlikely to deliver a pluralism that is sustainable over the long term**.

It is for this reason that our recommendations are geared towards greater co-operation of existing and emerging media initiatives. The collaborative solutions suggested by this study can operate across markets and platforms, supporting high-quality content production and distribution for both global and local audiences.

Despite the significant “pull” of Kremlin-aligned television, there is indeed evidence of demand for alternatives, especially in the online sphere. We do not suggest that our recommendations will provide an immediate or “total” solution to the problems identified, but they will have a significant impact on reconnecting with audiences and rebuilding their trust. This is best achieved by providing fair and accurate information and balanced perspectives through engaging and accessible formats.

It is equally important to pursue innovative distribution mechanisms that can get to audiences beyond the reach of existing RLMIs; to develop critical thinking among audiences through media literacy and education initiatives; and to enhance training, infrastructural and financial support for both new and existing RLMIs from the ground up.

Recommendations

Plurality Building Blocks

Recommendations revolve around five building blocks of a co-ordinated strategy that calls for:

1. A **regional news hub** for the Russian language **that embodies the values of fairness, accuracy and watchdog reporting**, and builds a network of partners to leverage high-quality news content to wider audiences across platforms. This would fill an important gap left by the effective closure of the Russian news agency RIA Novosti in 2013.

As well as facilitating and encouraging the sharing of news content, such regional news hub could play an integral role in supporting collaborative investigations, rights clearance and access to new video library material, and fact checking and translation. It could also act as a proto news agency in the collection of citizen journalism and stringer material. It should work with other existing news agencies and independent media – on a membership or affiliate basis – to deliver and exchange local and international news stories.

2. A **content sharing platform (“content factory”)** to encourage the production and distribution of high-quality programming on television and online, with particular emphasis on **content that reflects local issues and local lives**.

Like the news hub, it should function primarily as a co-operative enabling the sharing and co-production of content, but with a focus on documentary and factual entertainment formats, as well as film, drama and social reality programmes. It should also engage in both commissioning and acquisition, and help to facilitate a content market for the Russian-language media space.

3. A **centre for media excellence** in the Russian language that co-ordinates the work of governments, NGOs and educational institutions in ongoing market research and media monitoring, media literacy programmes, professional training and peer-to-peer exchanges.

4. *Alongside* the three main building blocks, a **basket fund** should be established to provide a critical mass of funding for the building blocks. With a mix of governmental and non-governmental sources, it should ensure a joined-up approach among donors and NGOs working in the region. But, it does not have to limit its support to new initiatives.

5. *On top* of the three main building blocks should sit a **multimedia distribution platform** that guarantees a degree of “buy in” and ensures content generated by the news exchange and content factory reaches the widest possible audience. It should consist of a pan-regional brand that fronts both a **linear channel** of television output across various platforms, as well as **content segments** available for consumption on demand.

Beyond Platforms

From an audience perspective, the “multimedia distribution platform” will look much like a **pan-regional television plus internet brand**. Built on co-operative partnerships of existing players, it will however not require the scale of investment of setting up a conventional television channel. It will be available to consumers on many different digital platforms, applying the cost-efficiency, market logic and co-operative principles that digital technologies allow. In other words, the “channel’s” programmes will be made available wherever there is a potential “new” audience – be it **via mobile apps, streaming, broadcasting or partner outlets** – with a view to building a brand that can ultimately compete alongside existing Kremlin-aligned channels.

A Solution that works for and with Existing Russian Language Media

The model proposed here addresses the concerns of those who are sceptical – as well as those who are supportive – of a pan-regional channel solution. In particular, a range of co-operative measures would be adopted to ensure that the brand associated with the “multimedia distribution platform” does not compete – but complements – existing outlets, by creating added value through co-operation, cross promotion and brand association, at various levels.

The Flexibility of Building Blocks

Although maximum impact would likely be achieved by co-ordinated, multilateral action aimed at launching the building blocks in concert, each element of the strategy can also be built out gradually and organically – the news hub into a news agency; the content factory into a commissioning and acquisition platform; and both elements into a multimedia distribution platform and pan-regional channel. In the meantime, these elements can collectively supply funds and content across platforms, regions and genres.

These initiatives can take hold almost immediately, with **initial steps requiring minimal resources and set-up time**, but providing the needed momentum, possible to initiate within one year. Such steps could involve establishing a small news exchange network of the three or four of the most robust partners in the region; a content “hub” among only a handful of independent producers, and perhaps a single commissioning editor who will start building a portfolio of high quality content; and finally, the creation of a small research team that will begin the work of consolidating research and training needs across the region. ■