

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

Recommendations for donors and media developing institutions
operating in the countries of the Eastern Partnership

Objective

This brief provides research-based evidence and analysis to assist donors 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.

We repeatedly receive evidence of the fact that democratic societies underestimated the role that media plays in democratic development, security and stability. In the post-industrial age, information appears to be not only a key resource for human development; it is also a weapon, a source of threats and dangers. And first of all, this is about mass-media that ensure public awareness of the processes in their countries and beyond and are able to manipulate the individual and collective opinion. The domination of true narratives (instead of distorted and false) in media discourse is a matter of democratic stability. As the government of the Russian Federation abuses this power of the media most aggressively, it is the Russian-language information and media space that is most affected by fakes and manipulations; this creates threats to security and freedom of speech in countries where the Russian language is most present in media, in particular – the countries of the Eastern Partnership.

Since 2015, the international donor community has been taking steps to mitigate these risks. 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 with the support of the EED in 2017², offered further proof and recommendations.

One year later, the present brief outlines the progress in the condition of the independent Russian-language media in the Eastern Partnership, the accessibility of the most needed services and support, and provides the most up-to-date picture of gaps in donor approaches and programs. 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 databases of existing donor support and media literacy programs.

Beyond the Russian language

Again, and again, both national experts and the interviewed representatives of Russian-language media from the EaP countries point out that it is not feasible to focus support exclusively on

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>

Russian-language media outlets. In general, independent media share the same challenges and have similar needs, regardless of the language they use. Monitoring and research reports on Kremlin misinformation, available so far³, repeatedly emphasize that its propaganda is not limited to Kremlin-controlled media or the Russian-language media segment; its narratives are penetrating and get disseminated through domestic channels in different languages. Furthermore, when communicated in a domestic language, the anti-democratic narratives lose their Kremlin fingerprint and sometimes appear more trustworthy to the local population. That is why, regardless of the language the media uses, their audiences are equally exposed to the destructive Russian state-sponsored messages. For some countries, such as Armenia or Georgia, Russian language media are almost a non-issue.

Key Findings

Evidence from the GA, together with other relevant studies conducted in the Eastern Partnership region in 2017-2018⁴, demonstrate no dramatic changes (positive or negative) in the condition of independent Russian-language media.

Some positive dynamics were ensured by the donors who, following their vision of the needs of these media (GA-2017 has evidently contributed to this vision), offered new types of support. Thus, long-term mentoring (instead of traditional short-term sporadic training) is more and more practiced; a tailor-made approach to providing support has replaced unified policies. The expert country chapter authors stress the fact that the circle of beneficiaries of donor support increased, but slightly; local and community-based media outlets continuously appear to be the focus of the donors' attention, and this was most needed in such countries as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. This is partially due to priorities set by donor support that the media improved their multimedia skills and performance.

Another factor in the positive changes is the independent outlets' own willingness to compete for audiences and grow through better quality and new solutions. The respondents pointed out their efforts in improving their performance in social media, introducing multimedia formats. Some of the interviewed media diversified their content, improved their links and content exchanges with other outlets.

However, these positive changes remain fragile and are accompanied with a more severe economic and political environment, monopolization and slow growth of the advertising market and the lack of purchasing power of the audience.

Though forms of donor support demonstrate 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. The lack of journalism ethics, even though it's the focus of many donors and training providers, remains an issue.

³ See: Anti-Western Propaganda, Media Development Foundation, 2016, available at: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/65>; Words and Wars, Internews-Ukraine, 2017, available at: <http://internews.ua/2017/12/words-and-wars-book-online/>; Kremlin Influence Index, Detector Media, 2017, available at: http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/detector_media_en/reports_eng/kremlin_influence_index/;

⁴ Such as: Local media in the Eastern Ukraine (Government-controlled territories). Needs assessment report. Detector Media, 2017, available at http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/detector_media_en/reports_eng/special_report_evaluation_of_media_needs_in_luhansk_and_donetsk_oblasts_territories_under_control/

Analysis

Business skills

Operating in a severe economic environment and having no other way to survive than to follow a successful business model, independent Russian-language media in the Eastern Partnership, unlike the state-run or oligarch-owned outlets, must develop themselves completely as business entities and feel a sharp need for better business skills. GAA-2018 detected no significant increase in donor services and assistance in this direction. 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.

Donors should definitely invest more in the business planning education of the top media management. The issue is not only the availability of training, but its relevance to the real needs of the local media teams.

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. Tools to exchange their experience and to share the relevant knowledge could reduce their risks and facilitate this process.

Institutionally, sales departments are not always separated, and the practice of concentrating the editorial and sales functions in the same person(s) or unit is still common, especially in local media. However, it is due to the financial health of the outlet (and level of its institutional development) rather than their managerial skills.

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. For independent Russian-language media operating on a national level, this means restricted access to advertisers and sale-houses. And no less importantly, quality audience research could help independent media (especially, on the local level) become closer to their consumers, develop friendlier and the required content and in this way attract an audience. Poor knowledge of the audience (both in the quantitative and qualitative dimensions) is an obstacle to proper strategic planning and developing relevant business models.

Journalism and practical skills training

Authors of the expert country chapter observed only very basic reporting skills in most of the interviewed Russian-language media. Repeatedly, they point out that the level of skill in writing, data journalism, and the use of graphics and multimedia needs to be improved. Basic professional training of incoming young journalists remains highly needed, especially in the light of the deteriorating quality of journalism education. Storytelling skills are demanded throughout. Thematic reporting is commonly underdeveloped; the specialization of journalists remains at a germinal stage of development.

Journalists are gradually improving their skills in still photography and video; more and more, they practice new multimedia formats; however, they still cannot develop a proper layout for their stories.

In comparison with 2017, the need for multimedia production and social media management skills has slightly decreased⁵. In this respect, the media are actively searching for additional training and consultations, hiring experienced SMM specialists and investing in their professionalism. Instead, gaps in security and cyber security are becoming more and more articulated, although few opportunities are available so far to receive the relevant advisory support.

Content production

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. Thus, cases of partnerships between Russian-language media and investigative journalist teams to undertake common investigative projects have been detected in Georgia; the interviewed media in Ukraine offer their content (esp. video) to larger TV-channels (for example, public broadcasting service), in this way increasing their coverage and popularity. (On the contrary, most Russian-language media in Moldova isolate themselves and do not really try to be open for cooperation and exchange.) Along with that, media teams face a lack of skills in filming and design; they benefit from the rare opportunities to exchange the best ideas and formats.

Outdated equipment remains the most difficult problem. The interviewed media demonstrated deep concern regarding a decrease of donor assistance and core support to independent outlets, since the income they generate is far from sufficient to purchase the new digital devices needed to produce modern and attractive content. The less articulated, but nevertheless no less sharp a need is licensed software. Though some opportunities exist to get some software (e.g. Windows, or an Office package) for free or with a discount, media outlets are rarely aware of them.

Changing media development programmes

General context

A Policy Paper published based on the findings of GA-2017 clearly outlined the key patterns of donor assistance to the media during the last decades. Its authors emphasized the widespread practice of adopting media development decisions before a needs assessment; poor incorporation of M&E to governmental decision making. Such an approach, the Paper points out, creates distance between donor policies and the real needs of independent media; and the implementers don't always succeed in overcoming this gap.

Published and discussed, the Paper appeared to a great extent to reflect the common views of the donor community, sharing an accumulated tiredness with the insufficient impact and little fundamental change in the media landscape. A discourse of the international donors' discussion in 2017-18 (in particular, during the Donor Coordination Meeting held by BCME in Riga, January 18, 2018) demonstrates the growing readiness of governments to revise their approach in favor of more evidence-based decisions. Too little time has passed to talk about real shifts in donor practice; however, the clearly articulated need for better research and coordination leaves less room for conservative practice, and GA-2017 has evidently enhanced this new paradigm.

⁵ This is a general trend; however, not applicable for Moldova.

In 2018, an in-depth study of independent media access to donor assistance and services allows one to estimate if the governments were able to introduce changes to their programs due to this new approach which appears more and more declared.

Programme design

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.

Funding models

No significant shifts occurred in the funding models. Re-granting schemes that foresee resource-consuming implementation bodies and a huge bureaucracy (in particular, complicated application, management and reporting procedures), 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: not having grantee experience and proper capacity, they stay away from donor financial support. On the other hand, focusing on developing such capacity, the media often adopt the approaches of typical NGOs, overlooking or completely ignoring sales functions. High donor expectations from internal institutional capacity, and the transfer of organizational standards, typical for NGOs (availability of documented policies, procedures), on media grantees contribute to this transformation.

Partially, this is why we have media outlets, oriented on donors exclusively, and media oriented completely on the market. Preserving such a situation will lead to zero sustainability of the first and discrimination of the second, while we should extend the third group – media with diversified funding, using donor support for their growth and success as business entities.

Journalism education and media literacy

There are no noteworthy signs of improvement in journalism education in the EaP. As in 2017, it is to a great extent characterized by little practical experience of educators and outdated curricula irrelevant for modern journalism. More and more, a journalism diploma appears depreciated; the trend of growth of civic journalism is observed throughout the region. However, there are a number of exceptions which 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 as other international institutions, and those in the EaP region that demonstrate the capacity and openness to change. However, since journalism education is a part of a state-governed higher education system in the post-soviet countries, this work will require changes in government policy and should go hand in hand with proper lobbying and advocacy.

Media literacy is considered one of the recipes to improve the condition of independent media. It is true that only an educated consumer, capable of distinguishing quality reporting from manipulations, and appreciating truth as a value, will choose the independent source of information instead of the biased one. In this area, there is no proper coordination, exchange and an almost complete absence of research in the EaP. In all of the countries in the region, the infrastructure of promoting media literacy is underdeveloped; governmental policies remain at a germinal stage; projects that are being implemented are to a large extent intuition-driven, without proper assessment and clear estimated results. Though this issue is beyond the scope of

this paper, mentioning it in this context is important to stimulate proper donors' solutions in this dimension.

Policy Recommendations

Though some minor positive changes in donor policies and approach are observed, still they are not enough to make a visible influence on the condition of independent Russian-language media in the Eastern Partnership. Therefore, some recommendations formulated based on GA-2017 remain actual; however, changing reality and the needs of independent media outlets create new priorities to be recommended.

Investment into skills and financial sustainability

- Invest in the **marketing capacity of the donor-financed media**. Donor core support must never replace sales. Here, the exception may be made for media in Belarus and Azerbaijan.
- Redesign calls for grant proposals, so they reflect the need to **embed external trainers**, or seasoned journalists and media managers in media organizations for a tailored and lasting impact.
- In training programs, stronger emphasis should be made on **long-term mentorship and tailor-made consultations**. **Internships** for journalists and managers in other media outlets (in particular, abroad) should be more actively practiced.
- 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

- There is still a project needed to support a professional, independent and **reliable audience research** study, consistent across the region and conducted according to international standards. In addition to audience measurement, media outlets should be encouraged and supported to order **qualitative research** about their audiences.
- To establish a tool to provide **free legal support to independent media** in the EaP countries. This support should cover a wide range of topics like legalization issues, copyright, protection of journalists' rights, representation of the media in courts etc.
- 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 the Chisinau School of Advanced Journalism and the Journalism Department of London's City University – these could be strong concrete starting points).

Donor programme redesign

- The donors should still explore **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.
- **To 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 (basic project writing, implementation, reporting skills, design and distribution of donor maps). 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. These may be limited amounts to satisfy very concrete needs on request; however, these needs should be important for further development (like design of a web-page; purchase of special training or consultation services; purchase of software; audience research; conduct internal assessments, design of internal policies and guidelines etc.). Such an approach will make donor support, to larger extent, needs-oriented and customized. The experience of the Ukrainian *NGO Marketplace*⁶ may be taken as an example;
- 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);
- **Support of content production** is vitally needed. The efforts of EED's Creative Content Support Fund should be highly estimated and promoted and may be taken as a model for further donor interventions in this direction.
- To overhaul the reluctance of donors to provide funding for the **purchase of equipment and software**.

Coordination and exchange

- To **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 (like the BCME-hosted Donor Coordination Meeting, or donor coordination groups in Ukraine and Moldova) 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. The

⁶ See: <http://www.ngomarket.org.ua/>

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

existing public formats (like Media Forum in Moldova, Lviv Media Forum etc.) should be better focused at coordination and synergy between media developers;

- To ensure the **availability of methodologies** of media needs assessment and audience research of different kinds.

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 the 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 the 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, which allows 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 force 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 in 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 the required competencies, such as market and audience research, an established think tank record and brand, or the convening of professional gatherings, which offer tangible opportunities for the exchange of knowledge and networking, which is 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 of its core team, mean that like-minded partners and experts can be enlisted for ad hoc initiatives.

National reports

The national reports are available in a secure format. Should you require a printable version kindly contact the EaP programme assistant Diāna Hoduļina diana.hodulina@baltic.media

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