

AEJ MEDIA FREEDOM REPORT 2014: Media Freedom rises up the agenda of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership

In the countries bordering Russia, some voices now advocate sanctions against aggressive propagandists in the Russian media, as part of the ongoing struggle for free and fair media in eastern Europe.

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Media freedom has always played a big role in the Civil Society Forum (CSF) of the European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP), but Vladimir Putin's resort to military force and virulent propaganda to stop Ukraine and the other EaP countries from moving towards the EU has put the issue into sharp focus.

The CSF which brings together non-governmental organizations from Ukraine and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova was set up with EU support five years ago as a way of bringing pressure on governments in the region to reform and adapt their countries to bring them closer to the EU model.

Many of the NGOs were and remain supporters of pro EU policies in their countries and it is NGOs which played an important role in the struggle to maintain Ukraine's pro-western and pro-democracy orientation after the then Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich's abrupt withdrawal from signing an association agreement with Brussels last autumn. In Georgia and Moldova, the NGOs belonging to the Civil Society Forum also support pro EU policies while in Armenia, the CSF national platform forms a nucleus of opposition to the country's recent turn towards Moscow.

Up till last year the CSF's main activity was monitoring progress (or the lack of it) in reforms in the EaP countries and providing expert advice to the European Commission on related issues. In the media field monitoring was the main activity. The CSF media group produced an annual media freedom report but rarely strayed into advocacy on media matters.

The mood in the CSF has changed radically since last year's Ukrainian crisis and the accompanying Russian pressure on Georgia and Moldova to abandon their long-standing pro-EU stance. Now, every meeting of the Forum is marked by vigorous debate about what the NGOs should be doing to resist this pressure, and how to beef up the EU's response. This mood has spilled over into the media freedom field. The informed and liberal-minded members of the Forum now see the issue of Russian media manipulation and the sending of a stream of aggressive propaganda into their countries as a top concern.

This runs together with concern in Brussels and urgent discussions taking place there on what to do about Russia's propaganda drive towards the countries of its 'near abroad', which is spearheaded by Russia Today; (RT) and the inflammatory effect that Russian language stations are having on public opinion in former Soviet countries, including on Russian living in the Baltic states.

Last summer the Ukrainian authorities banned 14 Russian TV stations from Ukrainian cable networks, accusing the stations of “inciting hatred and discord among our citizens”. In Armenia the CSF National Platform came out this month against “the unprecedented manipulative impact of Russian TV channels transmitted in Armenia”. The Platform says the Russians are putting out “unacceptable propaganda for xenophobia” and it has accused the Armenian authorities of failing to “address the threats to the information security of the country”.

These demands naturally raise concerns that Eastern Partnership states may be seen as resorting to censorship in the name of national security or ‘information security’. It could be argued that countries have the right to broadcast what they like, on the basis that one man’s free speech is another’s propaganda. But there is ample evidence that the kind of distorted and hate-filled messages that the Russian state-owned and state-controlled media are now putting out has prepared the ground for, and helped to sustain, armed aggression against their neighbours. The unabashed mendacity of the Russian broadcasts have also served to cement domestic public opinion behind President Putin’s aggressive policies. It may be recalled that ultra-nationalist and racist media messages played a similar role in Serbia and elsewhere in the Balkans in the 1990s, fueling the murderous Balkan wars.

In the Russian case sanctions against TV chiefs are now being actively proposed by some. The CSF annual meeting in Batumi at the end of November will see a motion tabled for the US and the European Union to impose individual sanctions on the heads of Russia’s TV channels 1 and 2 as well as Life News, a tabloid operation, and NTV, which is seen as a mouthpiece for the Kremlin.

The issue of Euronews’ Russian language service, which has already been banned in Ukraine and is widely seen in the EaP countries as evidently pro Russian will also be considered. The Russian TV and Radio broadcaster VGTRK owns 16 per cent of the EU station. Experts say the Russian language channel of Euronews exercises a large degree of editorial autonomy, and uses that to put out news content and analysis that is significantly different from its English language channel, amounting in effect to Russian state propaganda.

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