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Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 30 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Political Environment: 38 / 40 (0 = best, 40 = worst)

Economic Environment: 26 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Press Freedom Score: 94 / 100 (0 = best, 100 = worst)

Quick Facts

Population: 2,284,000

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Overview

The media environment in Crimea was transformed in February 2014, when Russian forces occupied the peninsula. The occupation authorities quickly engineered a March referendum calling for union with Russia, and Moscow formally annexed the territory, imposing restrictive Russian media laws and taking other steps to control the work of the press. The aggressive efforts by Russian and Russian-installed local authorities to establish control over what had been a fairly pluralistic media landscape made conditions in Crimea worse than in Russia itself. Independent outlets were forcibly shut down, transmissions of Ukrainian stations were replaced with broadcasts from Russia, access to a number of local and Ukrainian media outlets via the internet was blocked for users on the peninsula, and many journalists fled Crimea to escape harassment, violence, and arrests.

Key Developments

- Hundreds of media outlets were unable to obtain registration with Russian authorities by an April 2015 deadline, reducing the number allowed to operate in Crimea from more than 3,000 to just 232.
- Independent outlets serving the Crimean Tatar population, which generally opposes the occupation, were forced to relocate to mainland Ukraine after being denied registration and facing various forms of pressure from the authorities.

Legal Environment: 30 / 30

After the March 2014 annexation, which was not recognized internationally, the occupation authorities began enforcing Russia's constitution and federal laws. A local constitution based on the Russian model was imposed the following month. Although the Russian constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, a variety of restrictive laws and a politicized judiciary curb media independence in practice. Journalists are subject to trumped-up criminal charges for defamation, "extremism," incitement to separatism, and other offenses.

In addition to the restrictions it imposed, the Russian legal system failed to protect journalists, activists, and others from abuses by security forces and paramilitary "self-defense" units, which engaged in unlawful detentions and physical assaults through 2015.

A 2014 Russian law against inciting separatism – Article 280.1 of the penal code – was used to persecute Crimean journalists in 2015. In March, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) searched the family residences of two journalists with the Kyiv-based Crimean news agency Center for Investigative Reporting, Anna Andriyevskaya and Natalya Kokorina. Kokorina was detained and interrogated for six hours, and a colleague, Anna Shaidurova, was similarly questioned in April. The FSB opened a criminal case against Andriyevskaya under Article 280.1, which carries up to five years in prison, based on a story that examined a volunteer battalion fighting with Ukrainian government forces against Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. The Russian authorities claimed that the article contained calls for Crimea to be returned to Ukrainian control; it described the peninsula as "occupied." Andriyevskaya had been working from outside Crimea since 2014.

In the months after the annexation, the occupation authorities harassed pro-Ukraine media outlets, shutting down some and threatening others with closure. All mass media – including online outlets – were given until January 2015, later extended to April, to register with Roskomnadzor, the Russian federal media regulator, and to obtain a license; editors were repeatedly warned by officials that they would not be allowed to register if they disseminated "extremist" materials. After the deadline expired, Roskomnadzor reported that 232 media outlets had successfully registered, down from about 3,000 under Ukrainian rule. Those barred from reregistering included several outlets – television, radio, print, and online – that served the Crimean Tatar minority.

Like other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), journalists' associations and groups dedicated to press freedom and freedom of expression are now subject to onerous Russian laws, including measures restricting foreign funding. Support from mainland Ukraine is hampered by the lack of banking connections between Ukrainian institutions and the occupied peninsula. Almost all human rights and civic activists have reportedly relocated to mainland Ukraine to escape legal restrictions as well as extralegal harassment, detentions, and intimidation in Crimea.

Political Environment: 38 / 40

Crimea featured a relatively pluralistic media environment while under Ukrainian control, but the occupation authorities immediately began cutting off access to Ukrainian news outlets and replacing them with Russian alternatives. Television retransmission facilities were seized by armed men, and the signals of Russian state-owned broadcasters were substituted for those of the main Ukrainian stations. Local cable companies gradually dropped all but a few entertainment-themed Ukrainian channels. After the reregistration process was completed in April 2015, virtually all Crimea-based news outlets carried content that was supportive of the Russian or local pro-Russian authorities.

Meanwhile, after facing official pressure or being denied registration, independent local media organizations and many of their journalists continued to migrate to mainland Ukraine during 2015. For example, the Crimean Tatar television station ATR ceased broadcasting from Crimea at the end of March after failing to secure a registration with Roskomnadzor, then began transmitting

from Kyiv via satellite in June. The Tatar news agency QHA made a similar move. In late 2015, Roskomnadzor began blocking online news outlets based in mainland Ukraine.

Foreign journalists and outlets require accreditation from Russia's Foreign Ministry to enter and operate in Crimea, and occupation authorities apply this rule to outlets based in mainland Ukraine, limiting their access to the peninsula. Family members of journalists working from exile face harassment by the authorities.

Journalists and media workers in Crimea are subject to obstruction, arbitrary detention, interrogation, and seizure or damage of equipment. In January 2015, before ATR ceased broadcasting from Crimea, the authorities raided its headquarters and confiscated equipment while ostensibly searching for footage of a 2014 protest. In March, a Polish television crew was confronted by aggressive members of Crimean "self-defense" units while interviewing a pro-Ukrainian activist and temporarily detained after calling police. ATR cameraman Eskender Nebiyev was arrested in April and charged with participating in a 2014 rally that he had covered as a journalist; he was released on bail after two months in detention and received a suspended prison sentence of two and a half years in October. Also in April, police searched the home of former ATR cameraman Amet Umerov after he allegedly posted criticism of the occupation authorities on a social-networking site.

Economic Environment: 26 / 30

The changes imposed by the occupation authorities since 2014 have left Russian outlets, particularly state-owned television stations, with a dominant position in the Crimean media market. After independent Tatar-language outlets were pushed out of the peninsula, Russian authorities began creating alternatives; the government-funded television station Millet started broadcasting in September 2015.

A flawed frequency tender in early 2015 further concentrated economic control over the radio sector. In December 2014, Roskomnadzor announced that bidding for radio frequencies would take place in February 2015, meaning stations wishing to participate would need to secure Russian registration by the end of January. This effectively excluded any Ukrainian and local Crimean outlets that did not enjoy official support in Moscow, and even pro-Russian Crimean broadcasters criticized the deadline, which favored incumbent Russian companies. As a result of the tender, the rights to frequencies belonging to existing Crimean stations were in many cases transferred to major Russian media holdings or well-connected local businessmen. For example, two dozen frequencies were assigned to six companies owned by a single businessman, Aleksey Amelin.

In addition to the exclusion of most Ukrainian broadcasters, distribution of Ukrainian print outlets has been obstructed by Russian and Russian-backed Crimean officials. In 2014 Ukraine's postal agency announced that it could no longer make deliveries of Ukrainian publications to the peninsula. According to a study by the organization Krymskyy Dim (Crimean House), print publications in Ukrainian, which previously made up about 15 percent of the market, had largely disappeared by the end of 2015.

Russian telecommunications regulators and providers control internet access for Crimean users. In April 2015, authorities reportedly shut down all internet service in a Tatar community during a series of raids to combat alleged extremism.

The broader economic environment in which the media operate has been affected by a variety of other factors related to the occupation, including expropriations by Russian-backed local authorities, Russian government subsidies, obstacles to trade and communications with mainland Ukraine, and international sanctions.

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