



Freedom of the Press 2015 - Crimea

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2015 Scores

Press Status : Not Free

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

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

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

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

The media environment in Crimea was transformed in February 2014, when Russian forces occupied the peninsula. The move came after the collapse of the Ukrainian government of President Viktor Yanukovich, which had failed in its attempt to crush a protest movement calling for his resignation, anticorruption reforms, and European integration. The occupation authorities in Crimea 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 meant that conditions in 2014 were worse than in Russia itself. Independent outlets were forcibly shut down, transmissions of Ukrainian stations were switched to broadcasts from Russia, and many journalists fled Crimea to escape harassment, violence, and arrests.

Legal Environment

After the March 18 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," and other offenses. A 2009 Russian law on freedom of information has not been effective in reducing government secrecy and bureaucratic obstructions. Federal regulators have broad discretion in enforcing media registration and licensing rules and blocking online news outlets.

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 during 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 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. Criticism of the annexation or calls for Crimea's return to Ukraine could also be deemed violations of a December 2013 Russian law against inciting separatism, which carries penalties of up to five years in prison.

Media outlets operated by the Crimean Tatar community, which generally opposed the occupation, were the main targets of this harassment. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the chief editor of the Crimean Tatar newspaper *Avdet*, Shevket Kaybullayev, was questioned in June by the public prosecutor's office and received an official warning over "extremist content," based on the paper's coverage of opposition activities and even the use of terms like "occupation." In September, *Avdet*'s office was raided and searched by unidentified members of the security forces, who did not show a warrant. The office was then sealed, and the paper's bank accounts were frozen. The Federal Security Service (FSB) gave Kaybullayev an official warning that he could face five years in prison for extremism if *Avdet* continued to report on calls for a boycott of the September regional elections.

ATR, the Crimean Tatar television station, received an official warning from prosecutors in May after it reported on a Tatar protest. In September, the Interior Ministry demanded a range of documents from the station and said it was suspected of inciting extremism and distrust toward the authorities. An ATR deputy director told HRW that the station received regular calls and visits from FSB agents who applied editorial pressure backed by threats of closure.

Like other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), journalists' associations and groups dedicated to press freedom and freedom of expression became subject to onerous Russian laws, including measures restricting foreign funding. Many human rights and civic activists reportedly relocated to mainland Ukraine to escape legal restrictions as well as extralegal harassment, detentions, and intimidation in Crimea.

Political Environment

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.

Several local media organizations, including the nonprofit Center for Investigative Journalism and the independent television and radio company Chornomorska (Black Sea), reestablished themselves in mainland Ukraine after encountering official pressure in Crimea. Chornomorska was initially forced off the air in March, and the authorities seized its equipment and offices in August on the grounds that the station had failed to pay fees to a state broadcasting agency.

Individual journalists also joined the activists and others who fled Crimea due to intimidation by the authorities and self-defense forces. A popular anti-annexation blogger, Yelizaveta Bohutskaya, left

in September after her home was raided by police, who confiscated equipment and detained her for six hours of questioning about her political views.

Many journalists and media workers were obstructed, detained, questioned, and had equipment seized or damaged while reporting in Crimea, including correspondents for Polish and mainland Ukrainian outlets. Some were also physically assaulted, including multiple employees of Crimean Tatar outlets. In one of the more severe cases, self-defense forces in June stopped Sergey Mokrushin and Vladen Melnikov of the Center for Investigative Journalism on a street in Simferopol for singing an anti-Putin song. The men were detained and badly beaten, then transferred to the police, who eventually released them. Self-defense units generally enjoyed impunity for their actions throughout the year.

Also in June, Ruslan Yugosh, one of the founders of the news website Sobytiya Kryma (Crimean Events), was summoned for questioning by police, but he refused, explaining that he was not in Crimea. The next day, the police instead interrogated the journalist's 73-year-old mother, threatening her with possible repercussions for her son if he continued to damage Crimea's reputation.

Economic Environment

The changes imposed by the occupation authorities during 2014 left Russian outlets, particularly state-owned television stations, with a dominant position in the Crimean media market. In addition to the exclusion of most Ukrainian broadcasters, distribution of Ukrainian print outlets was obstructed by Russian and Russian-backed Crimean officials; Ukraine's postal agency announced in September that it could no longer make deliveries of Ukrainian publications to the peninsula.

The Crimean Tatar outlets, including ATR, *Avdet*, and the news agency QHA, were among the last independent media operating in Crimea at year's end. Others continued to function after relocating to mainland Ukraine, and they generally attempted to reach Crimean audiences via the internet. U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty created a service offering Crimean news in Russian, Ukrainian, and Tatar.

Future access to non-Russian websites was threatened by Russian government efforts to gain control of all internet traffic on the peninsula. The state-owned telecommunications firm Rostelecom installed a submarine cable across the Kerch Strait and began providing service in July. Beginning in August, mobile service from Ukrainian carriers was disrupted, and they were replaced by Russian companies.

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

* Indicates a territory, as opposed to an independent country.

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