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Reform of State- and Municipal-Owned Press in Ukraine: Hard and Slow Process Dynamics in Media Experts Assessments

The report considers the fundamental reform of the print media system in Ukraine, namely the state denationalization, which started on January 1, 2016 and has to finish by the end of 2018. The “tectonic” significance of the reform and its stagnation are demonstrated in the variety of leading media experts’ opinions.

Ukraine has been witnessing the implementation of a fundamental reform of the whole print media system, inherited from the Soviet era of total media ideologization, for the third year in a row. A quarter of century after declaring its independence, Ukrainian state has set a goal for itself to get rid of print media, which are funded by the government and local authorities and therefore are fully dependent on officials of this or that level. A broad scale all-Ukrainian reform of state- and municipal-owned media started on January 1, 2016, when the Law of Ukraine on Reform of State- and Municipal-Owned Print Media came into effect, and has to finish by the end of 2018.

“Without any exaggeration, a landmark event happened in the public life of Ukraine. Unfortunately, it was appreciated not enough not only by the society as a whole, but even by professional – journalistic – environment,” Vira Cheremnykh, media expert, emphasizes a “tectonic” significance of the reform. “Finally, after 15 years of talks, discussions, after a bunch of rejected bills, the President signed the law.” [6]

Not everybody liked announced system changes in Ukrainian media landscape. “After ten years of deliberate delays and bureaucratic obstacles that the authorities created on the way to denationalization, it is difficult to believe that the process is really under way. Because those who want to bring it to a standstill for an indefinite time are both among officials and politicians, accustomed to using tamed, managed media, and among media workers, who are afraid to get off the state-funding needle,” Svitlana Ostapa, media expert, states assessing the chances of successful implementation of the announced reform [5].

About 1 billion hryvnias is spent on maintaining state- and municipal-owned print media in Ukraine every year. Mykola Tomenko, the co-author of the law, gave an example stating that only in 2015 35 million hryvnias from Kyiv municipal budget were spent on municipal media. This number for all regions of Ukraine constitutes hundreds of millions, which are basically spent on propaganda of local authorities’ and their officials’ activities. Viktoriia Siumar, the head of the Committee on Freedom of Speech and Information Policy, spoke in favor of the law, while demonstrating the Parliament magazine “Viche”, as budget money measured in millions of hryvnias is spent annually to maintain it.

The reform was divided into two stages: the first stage of denationalization (it was designated to 2016) – voluntary, the second stage (2017-2018) – voluntary-

compulsory: all publications that did not agree to change their status in the first year have to be reformed. It is indicative that the editorships of the newspapers “Holos Ukrainy” and “Uriadovyi Kurier” chose the second stage, as most state and institutional mass media, as well as the metropolitan “Vechimii Kyiv” and “Khreshchatyk” did. According to Halyna Chyzyhk, media advisor to the Center for Democracy and Rule of Law, these publications want to stay on budget funding for as long as possible. “For the most part, this is the main argument, even if it is not voiced aloud,” she says. “The need to independently analyze the needs of the audience and attract advertisers scares editors, who are not accustomed to the fact that their income depends on the circulation. Also, not all authorities are ready to let their media float freely.”[5]

All statistical information on the press reform is accumulated in the State Committee for Television and Radio-Broadcasting of Ukraine, which became the main body of executive line responsible for denationalization pursuant to the law adopted. Nowadays, when there is only a short time left until the completion of the reform, the figures show too little impact on the pace of denationalization of print media financed from the budget. Moreover, it can be stated that the planned pace of reform actually turned out to be out-of-reach for the conservative system of Ukrainian media. This is evidenced by the latest statistics data.

“Pursuant to the requirements of the Law of Ukraine on Reform of State- and Municipal-Owned Print Media, the State Committee for Television and Radio-Broadcasting of Ukraine continues to keep and update the Consolidated List of Reform Objects, and to monitor the reform process. According to the data of the State Committee for Television and Radio-Broadcasting of Ukraine, as of May 1, 197 out of 731 municipal- and state-owned print media were reformed, 13 of which are state-owned and 184 are municipal-owned media. The leaders of the reform process are Mykolaiv oblast (53% of the number of publications), Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts (50%). The reform process is going on slowly in Kyiv oblast (only 2 out of 39 publications were reformed), Lviv oblast (2 out of 42 were reformed), Donetsk oblast (2 out of 18 were reformed). In Zakarpattia oblast, none of 17 publications has been reformed yet.”[2].

Oleh Nalyvaiko, the Head of the State Committee for Television and Radio-Broadcasting of Ukraine, reported at the broad board of the institution earlier this year that less than a quarter of editorial offices had undergone the reformation in two years, which means that more than half of editorial offices will not have time to formalize their new status by the planned finish of press denationalization reform, and will be left outside the reform process.

“Reform of print media lasts from January 1, 2016, but in fact it began in November 2016,” Oleh Nalyvaiko states. “The results of the monitoring carried out by the State Committee for Television and Radio-Broadcasting of Ukraine demonstrate that today 133 state- and municipal-owned print media have been reformed with preservation of their name, purpose, language of publication, thematic orientation – out of 244 participants of the first stage of the reform, included in the list approved by the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. Taking into account the participants of the second stage, 158 print media and editorial offices were reformed. We now expect that this indicator will increase in a

more dynamic manner. After all, by the end of the year, all state- and municipal-owned print media have to be reformed.”[1]

The State Committee for Television and Radio-Broadcasting of Ukraine reminds that state- and municipal-owned print media which do not have time to re-register in the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine before January 1, 2019 will automatically lose their right to print, as their old state media registration certificates will become invalid. “There is no time for delay, as the procedure of transforming the state or municipal enterprise into another business entity, the process of re-registration of print media may last in separate cases for more than six months,” the Committee notes. Information and legal support to reform participants is provided by the State Committee for Television and Radio-Broadcasting of Ukraine, the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine, media advisors working under the Freedom of Media in Ukraine project with the assistance of the Council of Europe and the European Union, the Ukrainian Association of Publishers of the Periodicals [3]. However, the unwillingness of editorial offices to change their status blocks the process despite any support.

Summarizing all provided data, analyzing the too hard and slow denationalization process dynamics, one can fully agree with the conclusion of Vira Cheremnykh, media expert, that the reform of the state- and municipal-owned press “is stuck in one place and it is practically unreal to complete the process by January 1, 2019. We have to admit that the time for denationalization of the press has been irretrievably missed. When the periodical was on the rise ten years ago, the most active newspaper workers were looking for opportunities to get rid of the dictates of power, the publishing business was getting its footing, old printing houses were being retrofitted and new ones were opened, when there were active conversations about the own paper industry, opponents of real freedom of speech and supporters of dependence on Russian imports won. And now we have what we have. And what, actually, do we have? Today, most of the publications, which are ready for reforming, have already been denationalized and are trying to survive on their own (or with the support of sympathizers) in the unfavorable sea of publishing business. Now, the process of denationalization is almost at a standstill: there are almost no new leaders, and outsiders are confidently trailing behind and are not concerned with that.” [7]

What awaits those a few hundred publications throughout Ukraine that will not undergo the process of denationalization within the specified time? 33% of municipal publications in Ukraine will survive without state funding, says Oleksandr Buhtatyi, the secretary of the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine, chief advisor of the main department of information policy of the Presidential Administration. Respectively, 67% will disappear from the Ukrainian media landscape. However, the practice of transforming journalism into a state-sponsored press service and a system of PR agencies that propagate activity and support the image of individual officials and local institutions will be stopped.

Denationalization of the press is, without any exaggeration, the key media reform of modern Ukraine, which should result in ensuring the independence of the press from the state and local authorities, changing the status of journalists who have to act as PR-managers for pro-government persons, and establishing fair competition

in the Ukrainian media market. The reform is of irreversible nature. Its weak dynamics and even sabotage by certain circles of officials and editorship have to be overcome, and in order to do that, as numerous experts in the field of denationalization note, it is necessary to synchronize efforts aimed at eliminating any obstacles to the reform.

It is also not to be forgotten that reforming the press is an international commitment of Ukraine to the Council of Europe. European international institutions are closely monitoring Ukrainian reforms. “The reform of state- and municipal-owned print media is one of the commitments Ukraine has undertaken under the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. And to provide citizens with the opportunity to access information that is honest, objective and free of influence from the state so that they can make informed decisions is one of the key commitments undertaken by Ukraine as an OSCE member state, and this commitment is enshrined in corresponding international agreements,” [4] – Jeffrey Ehrlich, Senior Project Officer for the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine, reminded when opening the hearings on “Reforming the state- and municipal-owned print media: experience, obstacles, solutions” in the Committee on Freedom of Speech and Information Policy, during which the situation was studied and it was decided to make some amendments to the law, which should improve the quality of the reform.

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