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Oligarchs on the Airwaves

Ukraine's top TV channels are controlled by powerful business interests — and they aren't shy about making sure the coverage goes their way.

By Iryna Fedets

November 11, 2015

Monday, October 19, turned out to be the last day of work for Roman Sukhan, who for years had worked as a TV anchor for Channel 5, one of Ukraine's top news stations. "I'm fired. For what? I have no idea," Sukhan wrote on Facebook on the same day, making his frustration with his former employers public. Not stopping there, he used the opportunity to accuse the channel of several unsavory practices.

According to Sukhan, while working at the station — which is owned by Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine's president — he received under-the-table money transfers to his private bank card

every month in addition to his regular salary. Unofficial salaries are widely used in Ukraine to evade taxation. It's no wonder the country's shadow economy is almost half the size of the official GDP, according to government estimates.

More damning for Ukraine's media industry — and perhaps, the future of its democracy — is Sukhan's other accusation: that every show on Channel 5, except for the straight news programs, airs content for money. He did not provide specific examples, but described the practice using the slang word "jeans," which in Ukraine denotes one-sided stories that promote particular people, business interests, or political parties — who have paid for the privilege. Ukrainian journalists and media experts have learned to recognize jeans by a common set of features: they cover trivial events, such as ribbon cuttings; they fail to present opposing points of view; and they often feature quotes from dubious "experts" with little relevant experience.

Channel 5's editor in chief has denied Sukhan's allegations, citing unsatisfactory performance as the reason for his firing. But this incident has once again drawn attention to corruption in Ukraine's television channels and other media outlets — and the impact of Sukhan's public claim is strengthened by the fact that the channel is owned by the country's president.

Television is pervasive in Ukraine — it is the dominant factor in shaping public opinion.
Television is pervasive in Ukraine — it is the dominant factor in shaping public opinion. In a 2015 poll conducted nationally, 94 percent of respondents said they get their news from television, and while 42 percent also get information from the Internet, the remaining 52 percent rely solely on TV. A pre-election poll conducted in October found that, after leaflets and billboards, television is the most important source of information about political candidates. Particularly as the country undergoes a painful, still-uncertain democratic transition, the compromised integrity of such a predominant source of politically relevant information threatens to undermine the ability of Ukrainian voters to exercise their democratic rights.

President Poroshenko's Channel 5 — the channel that fired Sukhan — was the first TV station in Ukraine to devote 24 hours a day to news and political talk shows. It gained substantial public trust for being the only station to give the floor to the opposition during the 2004 Orange Revolution, at a time when few Ukrainians had access to online media. Today, though, Channel 5 is better known for its laudatory coverage of the government. The channel airs positive stories that personally feature Poroshenko and frequently produces uncritical items about the president's routine activities, such as statements issued by his office or details of his travels, leading media monitors to conclude that it is "slowly turning into Poroshenko's press office."

It's no wonder that Poroshenko did not sell Channel 5 after being elected president in 2014, all while promising that his channel would be independent. The channel is hardly a moneymaking asset, but in this it is not alone. According to some commentators, even some of the country's top TV stations are subsidized by their owners. But the advantage of having a personal media outlet isn't profit — it's gaining leverage in the power struggle among big business players, all of which, in a country as corrupt as Ukraine, have ambitious political agendas. And in this regard, Poroshenko (who is worth over $900 million) has serious competition.

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Of these top ten channels, three are controlled by Viktor Pinchuk, three by Ihor Kolomoisky, three by Dmytro Firtash, and one by Rinat Akhmetov. All four of these men, who are among Ukraine's richest and most powerful, use their media might to advance their business and political interests. As Ukrainian media monitors have shown, most of the country's top TV channels air political advertising promoted as "news." This was especially obvious ahead of the local elections that took place on Oct. 25.

Channels controlled by Pinchuk, for example, are known for their aggressive coverage of the oligarch's charity foundation and for promoting political parties linked to deposed pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych. The 1+1 channel also promoted political parties linked to its owner, Kolomoisky, by covering local election news favorable to these parties on a national level, failing to provide critical analysis or commentary, and neglecting to give voice to alternative opinions. The channel also targeted Mikheil Saakashvili, the head of the Odessa regional administration, who has publicly clashed with Kolomoisky.

Dmytro Firtash has been a long-time partner of Russian state oil company Gazprom and number 17 on Forbes' latest list of the wealthiest Ukrainians. His most popular channel, Inter, has been repeatedly caught broadcasting one-sided positive coverage of the Opposition Block, a pro-Russian political party. The channel has also attacked Kolomoisky, Firtash's political foe and his key competitor on the media market, "associating" him with a controversial mayoral candidate in Kharkiv and attacking his airline as profiting from flights to Russia.

And one TV station among the top ten, the "Ukraine" channel, belongs to Rinat Akhmetov, the country's richest person. Akhmetov enjoys ties to Ukraine's ex-president Viktor Yanukovych, who was ousted from his post by the Euromaidan protests in 2014. Ahead of the local elections, this channel aired the views of particular politicians and public officials unchallenged in "straight" news stories.

A related problem in the Ukrainian media is a confounding lack of transparency about its ownership. Big business owners manage media outlets through numerous companies, and viewers are often unaware who owns — and controls the editorial line of — a given channel. In the 2015 poll cited above, 51 percent of respondents said information about the ownership of TV channels is "completely" or "mostly" inaccessible. A new law on the transparency of the media that entered into force in October aims to resolve this problem. The law requires all state-licensed media outlets to submit information about their ownership structure and ultimate beneficiaries to the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council of Ukraine, a state body, to publish this information on its websites.

There are bright spots in Ukraine's media landscape — but they aren't on the television.
There are bright spots in Ukraine's media landscape — but they aren't on the television. In 2000, Ukrainska Pravda became the first major online publication to cover political news. The site provided an independent web-based alternative to the conventional TV and printed media that were loyal to the government. Since then, Ukrainska Pravda has earned a reputation as an impartial investigative media outlet that uncovers corruption involving government officials,

sheds light on oligarchs' business interests, and serves as a popular blogging platform for prominent activists and politicians.

Kyiv Post, Ukraine's leading English-language newspaper, has been under serious political and financial pressure during its 20 years of circulation. Nevertheless, it has maintained its independence and continues to publish investigative stories and editorials that are critical of the government. And Hromadske.tv, an online TV startup launched in 2013, is funded with donations from foundations and individual contributors. The channel is known for hosting upfront talks with political and civic activists in a simple studio and for livestreaming critical events such as the Euromaidan protests.

Often, it is these less well-funded but independent media outlets that produce Ukraine's best and most effective journalism. In the wake of the Euromaidan revolution, investigative reporters associated with independent outlets revealed Yanukovych's dishonestly obtained riches to the public, exposing the massive scale of the corruption in his government. Data journalism has revealed corruption in public procurement deals worth billions of hryvnyas, stoking popular outrage that could not be simply dismissed by the authorities. If they can figure out a way to compete commercially with the mainstream media, Ukraine's independent outlets may inspire the public to demand higher reporting standards.

That would be a positive change from the current media environment, in which media outlets are primarily tools of political power. Addressing these problems publicly, as Roman Sukhan and other Ukrainian journalists and media experts have done, will help Ukraine's TV viewers understand how their daily news shapes their political choices.