

# The Media Battles of Ukraine's EuroMaidan

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**Abstract:** In November 2013, mass protests broke out in Ukraine when President Yanukovich chose not to sign a planned Association Agreement with the European Union. Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) became 'EuroMaidan' as huge crowds of demonstrators expressed their anger at the government. This essay examines the part played by journalists during EuroMaidan and the struggles around media resources that were central to these dramatic recent events in Ukrainian politics. Attention is devoted to journalist activism and use of social networks; the emergence of new information sources; and the behaviour of leading national TV channels. Attempts to suppress anti-government narratives are described and their impact assessed. The essay identifies three weaknesses which combined to undermine Yanukovich's position in the 'battle for the narrative': (1) dissent and activism among Ukraine's professional journalist community; (2) the autonomous nature and increasing accessibility of online communication; and (3) the sensitivity of media-owning oligarchs to public and international opinion.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, EuroMaidan, media, oligarchs, internet, television, journalism.

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In late 2013 the decision of President Viktor Yanukovich not to sign a planned Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) sparked the largest mass demonstrations seen in Ukraine since the Orange revolution. News that the deal with the EU had been suspended broke on Thursday 21 November. Within hours, prominent journalists and bloggers were using social networks to rally protesters; around 1,500 people gathered that evening on Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) to express their anger at the government. By the weekend of 24–25 November, many tens of thousands were on the streets, not only in Kyiv but across the country (BBC News 2013). An attempt to disperse demonstrators violently on 30 November only boosted public support for the protest movement when national television and other media broadcast footage of the police brutality. Maidan Nezalezhnosti, redubbed 'EuroMaidan', remained occupied by anti-government crowds until the battle with the authorities culminated in fatal clashes and a major shake-up of Ukraine's political landscape. The consequences are still unfolding at the time of writing.

This essay examines the part played by professional journalists during EuroMaidan and the struggles around media resources which were central to these dramatic recent events in Ukrainian politics. In line with trends observed elsewhere in the world (White and McAllister 2014), ‘new’ and social media were important mobilizational tools used to coordinate demonstrations and challenge the narrative of the state authorities. Yet sympathetic coverage of EuroMaidan was not confined to the internet. For several weeks, most of the country’s biggest TV channels – owned by oligarchs, some with close ties to the Yanukovich administration – enjoyed an unexpected ‘excursion into objectivity’ (Myselyuk, 2014). Rather than downplaying or denigrating EuroMaidan, they boosted their political news output and transmitted powerful live images of the protests to millions of viewers. Indeed, by mid-December Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov found himself complaining that the government’s voice was ‘inaudible’ (ZN.ua 2013), suggesting a quite bizarre role reversal within the regional context. Yanukovich and his team had taken various steps to increase their influence over Ukraine’s information environment since 2010,<sup>1</sup> but for the first few weeks of EuroMaidan they were overwhelmed nevertheless.

How can we explain this breakdown in presidential and governmental control over the news agenda? What tactics did the authorities employ to reassert themselves in the media sphere and to what effect? This essay addresses these questions and identifies three interrelated factors which combined to undermine Yanukovich’s position in the ‘battle for the narrative’, i.e. the battle to determine how EuroMaidan was presented in the media to the Ukrainian public. The factors identified are (1) dissent and activism among Ukraine’s professional journalist community; (2) the autonomous nature and increasing accessibility of online communication; and (3) the sensitivity of media-owning oligarchs to public and international opinion. Political pressure and personnel changes did succeed in bringing some TV coverage back ‘on-message’ for the president, most notably at leading channel *Inter*. However, attempts to neutralise critical voices through intimidation and repression (e.g. use of riot police against reporters and the beating of opposition journalist Tetyana Chornovol by unidentified assailants) ultimately backfired on the Yanukovich administration. The brutality was not only exposed and condemned on the internet; it was also publicized to varying degrees by Ukraine’s established TV channels, whose oligarch owners risked incurring public wrath and possible international sanctions if the media under their control deliberately neglected to report information of public interest that was available online.

The essay begins with a brief introduction to the Ukrainian media environment, its dominant oligarch media proprietors and its evolution during the Yanukovich presidency. The main section then examines and seeks to explain online and offline media reaction which followed the breakdown of talks with the EU. Attention is devoted to journalist activism and use of social networks, the emergence of new information sources and the behaviour of leading national TV channels. Attempts to suppress or counter anti-government narratives (by hacking websites, physical attacks on individuals, personnel changes and legislation) are described and their impact assessed. The essay focuses on the period from late November to

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<sup>1</sup> For example, allocating digital broadcasting licences to pro-government businesses; putting pressure on more critical or independent broadcasters through the courts or revoking their licences (see Freedom House 2012: 10–12).

early February (i.e. before Yanukovich's ousting). It concludes by identifying a number of potential avenues for future research.

### The Ukrainian media environment under Yanukovich, 2010–2013

For years, the majority of leading national news providers in Ukraine have belonged to rival, privately-owned financial groups associated with prominent oligarchs. As things stood at the end of 2013, the big five media holdings were Inter Media (uaimg.com), 1+1 Media (media.1plus1.ua), Media Group Ukraine (mgukraine.com), StarLightMedia (starlightmedia.ua) and Ukrainian Media Holding (umh.com.ua). The main media resources within each holding and their principal owners are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Ukraine's major media holdings and their owners

	<b>Main owner(s)</b>	<b>TV channels</b>	<b>Publications</b>	<b>Other media</b>
<b>Inter Media</b>	Dmytro Firtash Serhiy Lyovochkin	<i>Inter, NTN, K1, K2, Mega, Piksel, Zoom, Enter-Film</i>		Websites associated with TV channels
<b>1+1 Media</b>	Ihor Kolomoys'kyi	<i>1+1, 2+2, TET, PLUSPLUS, Bigudi, 1+1 International</i>		UNIAN news agency, Glavred, Telekrytyka and websites associated with TV channels
<b>Media Group Ukraine</b>	Rinat Akhmetov	<i>Ukrayina, NLO TV, Futbol 1, Futbol 2 and four regional TV channels</i>	<i>Segodnya</i> mass circulation daily	Websites associated with TV channels and publications
<b>StarLightMedia</b>	Viktor Pinchuk	<i>Novyy Kanal, ICTV, STB, M1, M2</i>	<i>Fakty i Kommentarii</i> mass circulation daily	Websites associated with TV channels and publications
<b>Ukrainian Media Holding</b>	Serhiy Kurchenko	Menu-TV (a cookery channel)	<i>Forbes Ukraine, Korrespondent, Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine, Argumenty i Fakty v Ukraine</i>	Websites associated with publications

Source: Joanna Szostek

These media-owning oligarchs impose limits on editorial policy within which their channels and publications must operate.<sup>2</sup> Often, this has translated into favourable news coverage for the authorities. Some of the oligarchs have particularly close and longstanding ties to Yanukovich. Rinat Akhmetov established his business empire in Donetsk during the 1990s while Yanukovich was governor there; he has been a major supporter of the Party of Regions. Serhiy Lyovochkin headed the Presidential Administration from February 2010 until January 2014; his business partner Dmytro Firtash has also provided the Party of Regions with substantial funds. Serhiy Kurchenko was little known before 2012 and his rise has been attributed to the Yanukovich ‘family’, a group of high-ranking officials who acquired office and wealth through their connections with Yanukovich’s son Oleksandr (Levinskii 2014). Pinchuk and Kolomoys’kyy sat somewhat further from Yanukovich’s inner circle – Pinchuk is known for being the son-in-law of former Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma and has cultivated the image of a reputable international philanthropist; Kolomoys’kyy kept a lower public profile and has backed various political forces in the past. Yet the formal and informal powers concentrated in the Ukrainian executive have always created high incentives for businessmen to fall in line behind the president, because those who defied or challenged the regime ran the risk of missing out in the allocation of state procurement contracts, losing tax breaks or suffering from selective law enforcement (D’Anieri 2011).

Soon after Yanukovich assumed the presidency there were indications of media freedom eroding as the media tycoons aligned themselves with the new political leadership. Journalists at Kolomoys’kyy’s *I+I* TV channel complained in May 2010 that censorship within the company was blocking reports critical of the authorities (Ukrayinska Pravda 2010). The same month, another group of journalists at Pinchuk-owned channel *STB* published an open letter protesting against the imposition of a new, ‘toothless’ information policy (focus.ua 2010). Two years after the presidential election, Freedom House suggested that political and business influence on the media was on the rise along with corruption and the prevalence of ‘sponsored’ (i.e. paid-for) news reports (Freedom House 2012: 10–12). Direct government control over the media was not common but the economic leverage enjoyed by the executive over the biggest media owners created a broadly favourable information climate for Yanukovich. For the most part, negative news coverage of his administration and policies was restricted to outlets with small or medium rather than mass audiences, such as the newspapers *Zerkalo Nedeli*, *Den*, and *Kommentarii*; the magazine *Ukrayinskyy Tyzhden*; the websites *Ukrayinska Pravda* ([pravda.ua.com](http://pravda.ua.com)) and *Livhyy Bereh* ([lb.ua](http://lb.ua)) and cable TV channel *TVi*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In an interview conducted by the author in September 2011, one senior manager at a Ukrainian TV channel explained the situation as follows: ‘You might say [the owner] presses through his interests, or you might say he supports certain [political] forces. You might say lobbies... The channel reflects the interests of its owner in the majority of cases. I stress, in the majority of cases, since it is a media outlet and a media outlet has to be interesting to a much wider circle of people than just the owner. Correspondingly, a number of topics arise which might be uninteresting or sometimes unpleasant to the owner, but they have to be reflected otherwise it will be uninteresting to the viewer... Yes, it’s a business. Yes, it’s a conduit for the owner’s interests. In accordance with this, the editorial policy is constructed.’

<sup>3</sup> *TVi* has been involved in various controversies since 2010. First it was stripped of broadcasting frequencies following the election of Yanukovich as president, then cable operators began to remove the channel from their basic subscription packages causing its audience to shrink. In 2012 *TVi* faced charges of tax evasion and was

The worry for Yanukovich, however, was that the oligarchs' loyalty might waver when the next election came around. It is not unknown for Ukrainian tycoons to switch political sides (e.g. Kolomoys'kyi's vacillating support for Yuliya Tymoshenko in 2008–09) or encourage their media to adopt a balanced stance, as *Inter's* former owner Valeriy Khoroshkovskyy did in late 2012 (Kabachiy 2012). Awareness of the risks inherent in overdependence on oligarchs presumably motivated Yanukovich's attempts from 2010 onwards to build a media arsenal of his own. The national state-owned channel *UT-1* quickly became a mouthpiece for the Presidential Administration and 2013 saw a number of media assets change hands, with rumours indicating that the Yanukovich 'family' was providing capital for the deals (Ligacheva 2013).

Thus, the Ukrainian media environment prior to EuroMaidan was still pluralistic but subject to high and increasing levels of political interference. Television, used as a source of news 'every day or most days' by over 90 percent of Ukrainians, carried little content that might undermine Yanukovich. Critical journalism was tolerated but largely confined to newspapers and the internet, which in 2011 were sources of news 'every day or most days' for 30 percent and 22 percent of Ukrainians respectively (Broadcasting Board of Governors and Intermedia 2011). With the oligarchs toeing his line, Yanukovich's position on the information front appeared comfortable – but appearances in this case turned out to be deceiving.

### **Journalism during the protests and sources of the president's vulnerability**

The manner in which the EuroMaidan protests began and developed underscored three critical and interlinked weak spots in the state authorities' grip on the Ukrainian media environment. The first was dissent and activism among Ukraine's professional journalist community. The second was the autonomous nature and increasing accessibility of online communication. The third was the sensitivity of media-owning oligarchs to public and international opinion.

At the start of EuroMaidan, popular bloggers and independent journalists demonstrated their capacity to rapidly mobilize the Ukrainian public on a scale not previously seen or expected. As one observer commented, a journalist's Facebook post on 21 November became 'a stone which triggered an avalanche in Ukrainian society' (Savanev'skyi 2013). The post ran: 'We're meeting at 22:30 under the Independence Monument. Dress warmly, bring umbrellas, tea, coffee, a good mood and friends. Reposting would be most welcome!' The journalist in question was Mustafa Nayem, who made his name on TV talk shows but more recently has been contributing to the *Ukrayinska Pravda* website, amongst other projects. Some 1,500 people turned out alongside Nayem for the first evening protest on 21 November (*Ukrayinska Pravda* 2013a). The success of this spontaneous rallying call has been widely attributed to the internet and the power of social networks to spread messages quickly. How-

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forced to repay the government a considerable sum. In 2013 it was the subject of a battle for ownership and a change of management at the channel prompted many of its journalists to quit in protest.

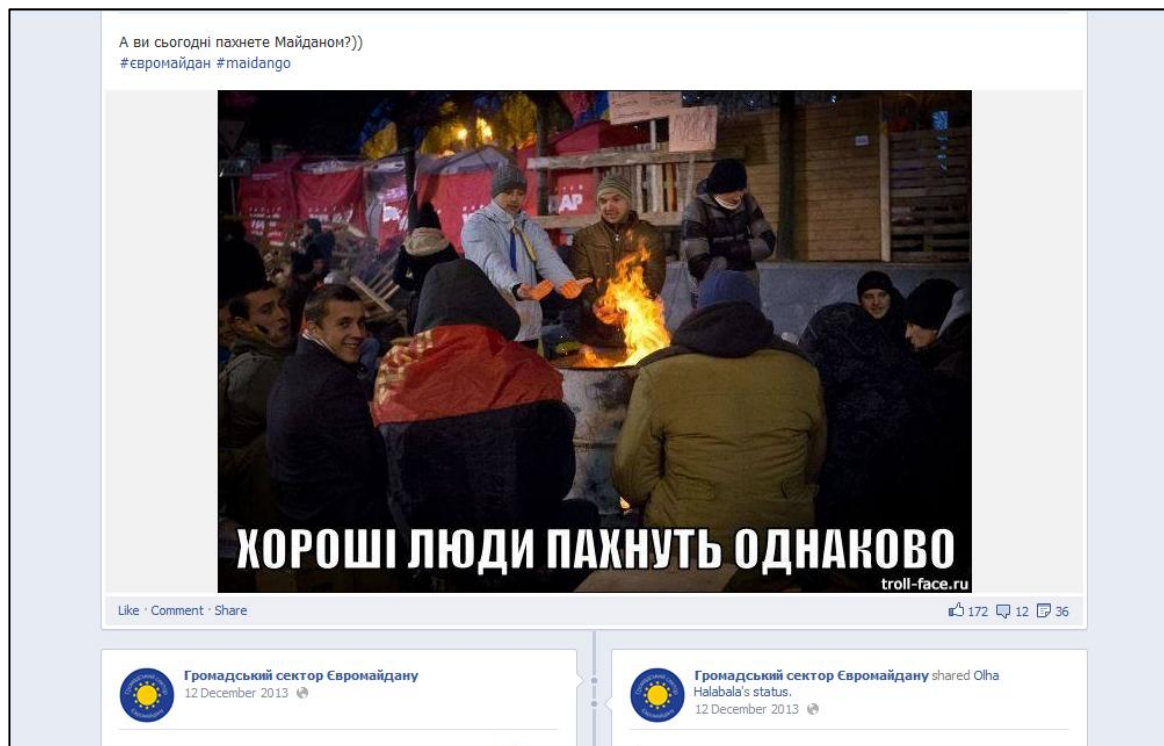
ever, the importance of individual civic activism by journalists and bloggers must also be recognized. Established, high-profile media personalities like Nayem have large numbers of Facebook friends and followers, putting them in a particularly strong position to generate initial momentum for social action. Nayem was reportedly the second most-followed individual in Ukraine on Facebook in April 2013, and the most-followed by February 2014 (Watcher 2014). Nayem spoke from the stage on the second day of Euromaidan, as did other familiar names from Ukraine's online and print media – director of the Institute of Mass Information Viktoriya Syumar, Radio Svoboda correspondent Vitaliy Portnykov and Serhiy Rahmanin from *Zerkalo Nedeli* (Sidorenko 2013). The blurring of boundaries between journalism and activism, between media professionals and civil society, is a striking feature of EuroMaidan. If Yanukovych thought that opposition journalists operating in the 'less influential', lower audience spheres of internet and print media posed little danger to his regime, their role in the events of late November may have changed his mind.

Once the protests were in progress, the internet predictably continued to serve as a crucial resource for the anti-government demonstrators in a multitude of ways. The inability of Yanukovych and his circle to effectively stem or control online communications constitutes the second important weakness in their information defences. Social media helped to diffuse basic logistical information about the protests to potential participants. In one survey, 40 percent of respondents said they had learned when and where to go from Facebook messages, although TV was credited by 48 percent (Onuch 2014). When violence was perpetrated against the protesters, social media were utilized to identify the individuals responsible and hold them to account (e.g. Facebook 2013a). Opposition community-building and creativity flourished online (BBC Monitoring 2013c). Dozens of groups supporting the protests were established on Facebook, as well as the Russian social networking sites VKontakte and Odnoklassniki.<sup>4</sup> Some were used to share protest slogans, placards and stickers (examples include [www.facebook.com/strikeposter](http://www.facebook.com/strikeposter) and [www.facebook.com/hrom.sektor.euromaidan](http://www.facebook.com/hrom.sektor.euromaidan)). A group of film directors, cameramen and script writers shot dozens of short videos about the protests and uploaded them to YouTube, where they garnered many thousands of views (#Babylon'13 2014). Protest songs went viral. One of the most popular musical compositions of EuroMaidan was 'Vitya Ciao', a 'farewell song' for Viktor (Vitya) Yanukovych with lyrics denouncing Ukraine's corrupt courts and brutal riot police (Golovetskiy 2013). The video clip was created with the help of a correspondent from Channel 5 TV, showing once again the overlap between journalism and activism.

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<sup>4</sup> Anti-protest groups were set up too, but these were in the minority (see <http://vesti.ua/strana/36022-samoj-antimajdanoj-socsetju-okazalis-odnoklassniki>). It is worth mentioning that VKontakte experienced changes in ownership in January and March 2014, with Kremlin-friendly businessman Alisher Usmanov and his associates gaining a controlling stake (see [www.vedomosti.ru/companies/news/21849681/pavel-durov-prodal-svoyu-dolyu-vo-v-kontakte-ivanu-tavrinu](http://www.vedomosti.ru/companies/news/21849681/pavel-durov-prodal-svoyu-dolyu-vo-v-kontakte-ivanu-tavrinu); [www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-03-18/mail-ru-boosts-vkontakte-stake-to-52-as-usmanov-tightens-grip.html](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-03-18/mail-ru-boosts-vkontakte-stake-to-52-as-usmanov-tightens-grip.html)). This does not appear to have led to any instances of censorship. However, founder of VKontakte Pavel Durov revealed in March that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) had asked the company to disclose personal details of the 'organizers' of Euromaidan support groups (see <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/17/04/2014/918521.shtml>). Durov refused to comply. He linked his sale of shares in VKontakte to this 'process', but did not elaborate in detail.

**Image 1.** A screenshot from the Facebook page of 'Hromads'kyi Sektor' on 12 December 2013 (photo is captioned 'Good people smell the same')



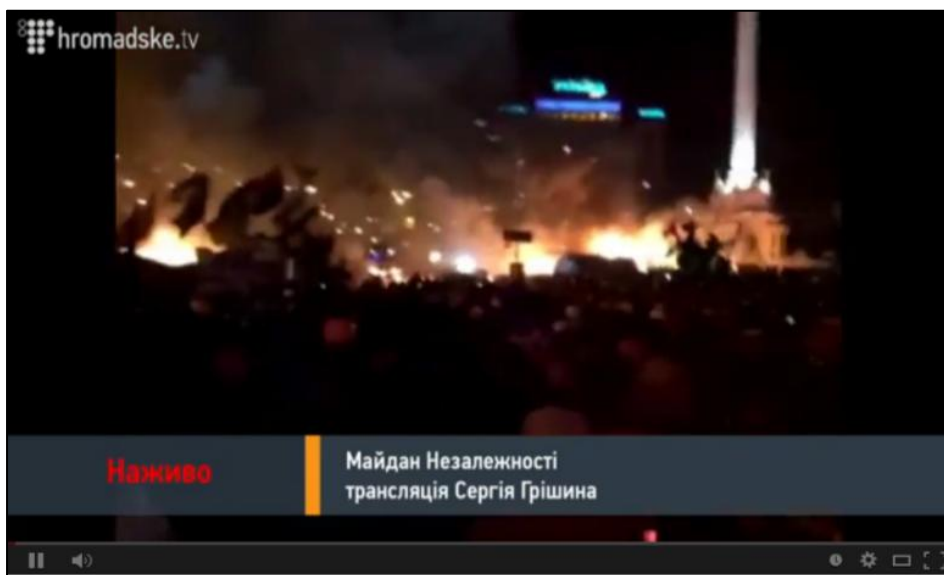
Source: [www.facebook.com/hrom.sektor.euromaidan](http://www.facebook.com/hrom.sektor.euromaidan) (accessed 14 April 2014)

Of course, the internet was also an important platform for continuous news reporting during EuroMaidan. At times of political turmoil and instability, consumption of news generally increases as citizens seek information and an understanding of events (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976). This tendency was certainly evident among Ukrainian internet users during the protests, with traffic to the country's online news resources reaching 'unprecedented' levels (Savanevs'kyi 2013). By the end of January the average number of daily visitors to Ukrayinska Pravda, Ukraine's most popular and long-established web publication, had topped 750,000 – roughly double its pre-protest readership (Liveinternet 2014). One survey found that for people aged 18 to 54 living in urban areas (cities of 50,000+), the internet was the main source of information about the protests – 83.7 percent of respondents were following developments online, while 81.2 percent were following via TV programmes (Comments.ua 2014).

Large numbers of Ukrainians turned to recently created online news sources, most notably, low-budget internet broadcasters which used mobile devices to stream live footage of EuroMaidan to viewers. The most prominent project of this type was hromadske.tv, launched in summer 2013 by professional journalists including Mustafa Nayem, Dmytro Hnap, Serhiy Andrushko, Danylo Yanevskyi and Roman Skrypin (Lopatina 2013). Most of Hromadske.tv's founders have extensive experience of working at major established channels; a core contingent used to work for *TVi* before its change in management. They set up Hro-

madske.tv to challenge the hold of the billionaires over Ukraine's TV airwaves – an aim which sounded far-fetched back in summer, but EuroMaidan generated a surge in demand for independent reporting on which Hromadske.tv successfully capitalized. By February it had over 150,000 YouTube subscribers and its uploaded videos had been viewed over 21 million times (YouTube 2014). The channel functions on a very limited budget. As of January it had received grants from the U.S. embassy, the Dutch embassy and the International Renaissance Foundation totalling roughly \$140,000, but otherwise it was dependent on public donations and volunteers working for no pay. The amount of money it spends in a month is comparable to the amount spent by *Inter* or *I+I* on one evening news bulletin (Vorona 2014).

**Image 2.** A screenshot from hromadske.tv's live coverage of Maidan on 18 February 2014



Source: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dh3\\_1L9XO60](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dh3_1L9XO60) (accessed 14 April 2014)

Besides Hromadske.tv, various other websites provided low-budget TV coverage of EuroMaidan (Mandryk 2014). Spilno.tv was similarly set up prior to the protests as a non-commercial 'public television' initiative; it relies on donations and subscription fees for its funding. News channel Espresso.tv was launched in 2013 by Mykola Knyazhyts'kyy, MP from the opposition Bat'kivshchyna party and former director of TVi. Ukrstream.tv was established by journalists to show live images of Independence Square without any commentary (Korkodym 2014). Online video coverage of EuroMaidan by U.S.-funded Radio Sloboda proved popular; it had reportedly been accessed over 19 million times by 6 December (RFE/RL 2013).<sup>5</sup> Thus, Ukrainian internet users who wished to watch what was going on in the centre of Kyiv had no shortage of options. A small army of 'strimery' ('streamers') fed live video back to these websites from smartphones and tablets that was almost impossible for the authorities to censor (Mel'nikova 2014).

<sup>5</sup> It is unclear how many of these viewers were Ukraine-based and how many were based elsewhere.



Efforts were made to hamper the opposition's online communications. The e-mail and social network accounts of opposition figures came under attack from hackers spreading false information; victims included UDAR party leader Vitaliy Klitschko and his deputy, the press secretary of Bat'kivshchyna MP Yuriy Lutsenko and the press secretary of jailed opposition leader Yuliya Tymoshenko (Bulhak 2013). The latter, Maryna Soroka, complained that fake anti-EU e-mails were being sent from her address (Interfax-Ukraine 2013). The official website of UDAR was hacked too and the Ukrainian servers of news website Censor.net were reportedly completely destroyed. In early December news websites Ukrayinska Pravda and Livyy Bereh were both forced temporarily offline; the websites of *Zerkalo Nedeli* and *5 Kanal* TV faced similar difficulties (Telekrytyka 2013a, Ukrayinska Pravda 2013b). Precisely who stood behind these attacks cannot be determined but media speculation linked them to 'specialists from abroad, probably Russia' hired by the law-enforcement and security forces (Byk 2013). For the sake of fairness it should be mentioned that the cyber warfare was not one-directional: the websites of the Ukrainian president, cabinet of ministers and Interior Ministry were briefly disabled by unknown assailants in the first week of the protests.

Yet trying to curb oppositional internet activity was futile given the volume of information and huge numbers of web-users involved. Little that happened on or around Maidan could escape being captured and disseminated, visually or verbally, by the giant 'public eye' created by thousands of smartphones. In this context, Ukraine's established national broadcasters could not ignore or misreport the protests without being recognised as government stooges. Their first reaction was to report fairly instead. The rally late on 21 November received generous coverage in the next day's news bulletins on all the leading oligarch-owned channels – *Inter*, *1+1*, *STB*, *ICTV* and *Ukrayina*. Only state-owned *UT-1* ignored the protesters, choosing to focus instead on Prime Minister Azarov's speech advocating closer ties with Russia (BBC Monitoring 2013a). When much larger demonstrations erupted on the weekend of 23–24 November, the oligarchs' channels again ran lengthy reports on the story, making no attempt to downplay the scale of the protests or denigrate the participants. In contrast, *UT-1* suggested that the protest camps were being 'abandoned' due to rain and bad weather (BBC Monitoring 2013b). It seemed, somewhat surprisingly, that Firtash, Lyovochkin, Akhmetov, Kolomoys'kyi and Pinchuk were allowing their respective news providers to report EuroMaidan in a balanced way, without a pro-government or anti-opposition slant.

The weekend of 30 November – 1 December saw the first violent crackdown by riot police. *Inter*, *1+1*, *STB*, *ICTV* and *Ukrayina* all broadcast footage of the police brutality and condemned it. For example, *Inter*'s flagship evening bulletin on 30 November showed protesters being beaten with batons by law enforcers in riot gear, as well as interviews with the bleeding and bandaged victims (Podrobnosti.ua 2013). The following Sunday, 8 December, *Inter* drew attention to the authorities' failure to reach out to the protesters, start talks or punish those responsible for the violence. Its primetime evening bulletin was devoted almost entirely to the mass demonstrations and related developments, with coverage reflecting both official and opposition viewpoints (Podrobnosti.ua 2013). In one lengthy report roughly halfway through the 70-minute programme, *Inter*'s Moscow correspondent Larisa Zadorozhnaya examined the distorted news coverage of EuroMaidan produced by Russian television, exposing its heavy bias against the protesters. A few days later, employees from Pinchuk-

owned *ICTV* were pictured online preparing sandwiches for ‘revolutionaries’ on the square (Facebook 2013b). Throughout December, the protesters were portrayed in a largely sympathetic light by all the oligarch-owned channels. News reports emphasized the festive, non-violent atmosphere and community spirit on the square.

**Image 3.** A screenshot from the 20:00 *Podrobnosti* news bulletin on *Inter*, which showed the violence of Berkut riot police against protesters in a negative light (the photo is captioned ‘That’s how they defend their country’)



Source: <http://podrobnosti.ua/videoarchive/2013/11/30/6787.html> (accessed 14 April 2014)

However, some of the oligarch-owned channels came in for criticism during the final two weeks of December for being unduly supportive towards the authorities’ position. *Inter*, *1+1* and *ICTV* were all accused of ‘lulling viewers’ with reassurances in their 15 December weekly news roundups (Shapoval 2013). A week later, *Ukrayina*’s reporting of the economic assistance deal signed with Russia was described as a ‘panegyric to Putin’ (Dovzhenko 2013). On 28 December the respected weekly broadsheet *Zerkalo Nedeli* reported that the oligarchs had been forced to ‘retract their claws’ because Maidan had failed to achieve tangible results (Mostovaya 2013). The message now emanating from the big commercial channels, as well as *UT-1*, was a message of pacification which largely avoided the attribution of blame, diluted the essence of the protesters’ demands and omitted key details that might undermine the authorities (Kuziyakin 2014a). For example, *Inter*, *Ukrayina*, *ICTV* and *1+1* all reported a brutal attack on opposition journalist Tetyana Chornovol on 25 December, yet they failed to explain clearly that she had been filming the estate of Interior Minister Zakharchenko the day before the incident. Later the same week, *UT-1* and *Inter* gave credence to Interior Ministry claims that suspects in the case had links to opposition parties.

When the protest movement regained momentum after the New Year holidays, editorial divergence between channels owned by different oligarchs became increasingly apparent. Sunday 12 January saw the first mass rally of 2014 with crowds estimated at around 50,000 (Polityuk and Zinets 2014). On Kolomoys'kyi's *I+I* and Pinchuk's *ICTV* the rally was the top news story that evening and both were sympathetic towards the demonstrators – *ICTV* described them as fighting for their 'right to a decent life' (BBC Monitoring 2014a). In contrast, *Inter* gave the rally just a brief mention halfway through its bulletin and *Ukrayina* ignored it entirely. On 16 January a repressive package of laws was adopted by parliament. *Inter* and *Ukrayina* responded with reports that focused on the successful adoption of the 2014 budget during the same parliamentary session (both channels showed cheering supporters of the Party of Regions welcoming 'economic stability'). Opposition MPs were portrayed in a negative light, brawling and blocking the work of parliament (Sobytiya.tv 2014, Podrobnosti.ua 2014). *ICTV* and *I+I* also led with news about the budget, but their coverage was less tendentious and raised more questions about the controversial new restrictions on the right to protest (fakty.ictv.ua 2014, TSNa 2014). On Sunday 19 January another mass demonstration was held on Maidan. This time, serious clashes broke out as large crowds tried to reach parliament via Hrushevskyy Street, blocked by riot police. The violent unrest lasted for days and EuroMaidan suffered its first fatalities. *Inter* laid the blame at the feet of 'ultra-right activists'; one media observer suggested that *Inter*'s coverage was starting to resemble that of the Russian-state controlled channels (Kuziyakin 2014b). Kolomoys'kyi's *I+I*, on the other hand, accused the police of deliberately targeting journalists (TSN 2014b). *Ukrayina* and *ICTV* took a more careful, less overtly partisan line. Both broadcast shocking footage of Berkut riot police abusing a naked man in the snow on 23 January, as did *I+I*, whereas *Inter* (like *UT-1*) ignored the incident (BBC Monitoring 2014b). At the end of January, a graphic appeared on the internet which sorted Ukrainian news sources into 'black' (distorted reporting) or 'white' (fair reporting). *Inter* and *UT-1* were on the blacklist; *I+I* was among the 'white' media; while *Ukrayina*, *ICTV* and *STB* were not mentioned – apparently their behaviour was too ambiguous to categorise (ZIK 2014).

During the first two months of EuroMaidan there was thus inconsistency in the editorial stance of all Ukraine's oligarch-owned channels. For roughly three weeks, *Inter*, *I+I*, *ICTV*, *STB* and *Ukrayina* offered little overt support to the authorities and received praise for being atypically 'objective'. Towards late December they all showed signs of being 'reigned in' and trying to appease their viewers. The escalation of violence in January saw their editorial lines diverge markedly: *Inter* backed the state, *I+I* supported the protesters and the others vacillated somewhere in between.

This erratic behaviour reflects conflicting pressures to which the channels were subject during the protests and the varying reactions of their owners. Certain analysts have argued that after becoming president, Yanukovich alienated most of Ukraine's established oligarchs by 'steamrolling too many too fast' in favour of his core loyalists, 'the family' (Åslund 2012). It has also been suggested that the oligarchs 'collectively' wanted the EU Association Agreement to be signed (Robinson and Polityuk 2013) and objected to Yanukovich choosing to keep Yuliya Tymoshenko in jail at the expense of the deal with Brussels (Åslund 2012). Yet the oligarchs and their interests do not lend themselves easily to generalizations. Among

the main media tycoons, Kolomoys'kyi certainly came into conflict with 'the family' (Tyzhden.ua 2013), but Akhmetov and Firtash did extremely well for themselves under the Yanukovich presidency. *Forbes Ukraine* keeps a tally of the value of state tenders won by different businessmen since the start of 2012; Akhmetov tops the ranking of beneficiaries, just ahead of Yanukovich's son Oleksandr, with Firtash some way behind in third place (Forbes.ua 2014). The claim that Akhmetov and Firtash might have been closet pro-Europeans is undermined by the fact that both tycoons controlled large numbers of deputies in the Ukrainian parliament, estimated at around 50 and 30 respectively (Lutsevych 2014), who on 21 November failed to support legislation to release Tymoshenko, thus effectively scuppering the Association Agreement. The only media-owning oligarch to back the EU deal unequivocally was Petro Poroshenko (Poroshenko owns *5 Kanal*, which is a popular news channel but has a much smaller audience share than *Inter*, *1+1*, *Ukrayina* and *ICTV*). It therefore seems rather unlikely that the fair coverage given to EuroMaidan from late November to mid-December was some kind of oligarchic revolt against Yanukovich's U-turn on Europe. A much more likely explanation is that the oligarchs were 'buying themselves insurance for the future' by providing an information platform for the opposition (Robinson and Polityuk 2013). Distorting news coverage of the protests would not have been risk-free, and at times of instability it is sensible to hedge one's bets.

However, the TV channels subsequently came under pressure to change their reporting of the protests. For example, secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council Andriy Klyuyev reportedly instructed their chief editors to reduce coverage (Ib.ua 2013). At *Inter* a new chain of command was introduced. On 16 December former governor of Sumy Region Yuriy Chmyr was appointed to the newly created position of deputy head of the Presidential Administration responsible for 'humanitarian development and communications issues'. Head of the Presidential Administration and minority *Inter* shareholder Serhiy Lyovochkin was thus effectively side-lined and his resignation was accepted on 17 January.<sup>6</sup> Media reports claimed Chmyr would report to media consultant Aleksandr Gurbich who had created an 'information umbrella' for Yanukovich when the latter was still governor in Donetsk (Mostovaya 2013). Gurbich in turn was said to answer to Yanukovich's son Oleksandr (Kamenev and Nikolaenko 2014). By the end of December the senior management at National Information Systems, the company which produces *Inter*'s news, had been replaced (Telekrytyka 2014). Several journalists left as well, and in January the entire editorial team behind Sunday night news programme 'Podrobnosti Nedeli' was asked to resign (Ryabchun and Sakova 2014).

The personnel changes at *Inter* were effective in bringing the channel's news coverage back 'on message' for Yanukovich. The \$15 billion loan deal with Russia signed on 17 December may also have influenced the oligarchs' decision to reign in their media as it appeared to strengthen the president's position. However, attempts to silence critical voices through repression were far less successful and indeed backfired on the authorities. For ex-

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<sup>6</sup> Lyovochkin first offered his resignation on 30 November after riot police attempted to disperse protesters on Maidan violently. His resignation was not accepted at that time. Lyovochkin was a long-term rival of Andriy Klyuyev, head of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council, who was rumoured to be behind the violent crackdown (although those rumours themselves were rumoured to come from Lyovochkin).

ample, when dozens of journalists were badly beaten by riot police on 30 November – 1 December, shocking images of their bloodied, bandaged heads and broken limbs were widely disseminated both on TV and online (Censor.net.ua 2013). Far from cowing anyone into submission, such violence only added momentum to the protest movement. Almost 70 percent of those on Maidan identified the authorities' use of force as a reason for demonstrating (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2014). The attack on investigative journalist Tetyana Chornovol on 25 December similarly prompted public outrage. On 16 January parliament passed repressive laws which included a series of measures to control the media: prison terms were introduced for disseminating 'extremist' material (with the definition of extremism so vague as to cover almost anything); websites were required to register as mass media (and would face hefty fines and closure if they failed to do so); the president and parliament were given the right to replace members of the national broadcasting regulator without any explanation (Sidorenko 2014). Yet these laws, which also limited the right to protest, lasted only two weeks. Their adoption helped to trigger an escalation in violence on the streets, including the first fatalities, so that by the end of January parliament was forced to repeal the laws in an attempt to calm things down. International pressure may also have played a role – the Americans reportedly threatened Rinat Akhmetov that all his U.S. and European assets would be frozen unless the laws were overturned (ZN.ua 2014). Akhmetov's group in parliament accordingly backed their annulment.

### **Summary and avenues for future research**

Prior to EuroMaidan, presidential control of the Ukrainian media environment still suffered from three important weaknesses. Dissent and activism was common among the professional journalist community; online communication was both accessible and autonomous; and media-owning oligarchs were far from indifferent about their public and international reputation. These three factors interacted with each other to undermine Yanukovych's position. The autonomy of the online sphere gave opposition-minded journalists multiple platforms to disseminate criticism of the government and calls for action to large numbers of people. Widespread access to independent online news sources meant that any traditional broadcaster which deliberately omitted important information could be recognised as a stooge of the regime. The oligarchs – fearing international sanctions as well as their own political and economic fate if Yanukovych should fall – did not want to be seen as pro-regime propagandists. Therefore, they allowed Ukraine's leading national broadcasters to present the protesters in a sympathetic light, at least for the first month, and to transmit images (including images from the internet) which Yanukovych would rather have suppressed. The president and his supporters used various tactics to reassert their grip over the news agenda, from cyber attacks to physical attacks to personnel changes and repressive legislation. Personnel changes at *Inter* were somewhat effective, but attempts to stem the tide of anti-government communication online proved futile. Moreover, use of violence against journalists and the introduction of 'dictatorial' laws only fuelled public outrage and brought more people out onto the streets.

This essay has provided a preliminary discussion of media developments during Euro-Maidan, but many of the issues raised here require more extensive research. In particular, the extent of convergence/divergence between the established broadcasters and new online TV projects merits investigation – this could be assessed through more detailed analysis of media discourse. The essay touched only briefly upon ‘citizen journalists’ and the online creativity of grassroots activists; further study is required to understand their significance for political dynamics. Analysis of the Ukrainian case in a comparative context could aid the development of theory about the media’s role at times of radical political change. Finally, it should be noted that this essay has focused only on domestic media developments. A more thorough study would also need to consider the information campaign waged in and against Ukraine by the Russian media.

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