

Ukraine: pro-Russian TV channels closed down

Sławomir Matuszak

On 2 February, President Volodymyr Zelenskiy signed off on a decision taken the same day by the National Security and Defence Council (NSDC) to impose sanctions on the parliamentary deputy Taras Kozak and his media enterprises, primarily three TV news channels. The sanctions will apply for a period of five years, and include the blocking of assets, limiting the companies' commercial operations, and revoking their license to operate media. Kozak is a member of the pro-Russian Opposition Platform-For Life party, and is a close associate of Viktor Medvedchuk, who according to media reports is the real owner of these channels. The broadcasters have been cut off from their terrestrial signal, but are still available on YouTube and possibly some cable networks. In a joint statement, the TV channels called Zelenskiy's decision a war against free speech and declared that they would continue to operate; the Opposition Platform party has said it will initiate impeachment proceedings against the president.

Commentary

- The stations affected – 112, ZiK and NewsOne – are among the most popular news TV channels in Ukraine; they have a combined audience share of up to 4%, which accounts for approximately 45% of this market segment. Their coverage focuses on criticising the actions of both the current government and its predecessors, and openly promotes pro-Russian content regarding the armed conflict in Donbas, Kyiv's relations with Moscow, and the participation of Medvedchuk in the negotiation process with Russia. The NSDC's decision will most likely be appealed in court, because there will be legal concerns regarding the imposition of sanctions on Ukrainian citizens and companies registered there. However, both the content and timing of the final judgement are difficult to predict at the moment, although we should expect them to arrive after a lengthy trial.
- The formal basis for the NSDC's decision, which was received in Ukraine with considerable surprise, was a resolution by the previous parliament from October 2018, calling for the introduction of sanctions against channels that conduct a pro-Russian information policy. The then-president, Petro Poroshenko, decided not to take such a step; he now claims that he did not want to shut down opposition TV stations on the eve of the presidential campaign. It seems that the main motive behind the NSDC's decision-making process was the desire to block the media base of the Opposition Platform, which is beginning to catch up with the ruling Servant of the Nation party in the polls.
- The closure of the three channels, which act as the Opposition Platform's main propaganda mouthpiece, will make it harder for it to influence public opinion. At the same

time, attacking the pro-Russian channels – but not the TV stations controlled by Poroshenko (Channel 5 and Priamiy), which are no less critical of the current government – may paradoxically give a boost to the political message of this party, which is positioning itself as the government's main opponent.

- It is an open question as to how Russia will take advantage of the situation. Medvedchuk has a very close personal relationship with President Vladimir Putin, who is his daughter's godfather. He also has many enterprises in Russia, although these are formally registered in his wife's name. One signal of which direction the Kremlin's actions may go is the commentary made by Dmitri Peskov, Putin's press secretary; he criticised the sanctions as a sign of a fight against freedom of expression, and announced that this issue should be considered by international organisations, in particular the OSCE. The closure of the TV channels may also be controversial for Kyiv's partners in the West as being prejudicial to freedom of expression, although Zelenskiy has explained his decision in terms of the need to combat propaganda financed by a state that is *de facto* at war with Ukraine. Meanwhile, however, Mykola Tochytskiy, the head of Ukraine's delegation to the EU, has stated that the decision to impose the sanctions has the unofficial support of the European Commission and the European External Action Service.