

# Propaganda by Proxy: Ukrainian oligarchs, TV and Russia's influence

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**L**OCAL ELECTIONS WILL take place in Ukraine on 25 October 2020. The elections will be held in the country's 25 regions (*oblasti*), excluding the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, which have been illegally occupied by Russia since 2014. The elections are being held in the context of the ongoing war in the east of the country, where Russia-sponsored separatists occupy certain districts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The Kremlin's projection of power in Ukraine is not, however, exclusively about hard power, the kind of power that is projected using such means as tanks and military expansionism.

Russia's war against Ukraine – now in its seventh year – has accentuated the position of television as the Russian government's strongest asset in its information warfare. TV news played a vital role in the public's perception in the initial phase of the war, as many in the largely Russian-speaking population watched Russian news. In August 2014, the Ukrainian government blocked 14 Russian TV channels from the cable networks to stop them from spreading war propaganda in the country. Still, Russian propaganda has re-appeared on some of the Ukrainian TV channels owned by Ukrainian media groups. These media outlets are controlled by oligarchs through a legion of companies, and viewers are often unaware of who owns and manages the editorial line of the different TV channels. In addition to banning the broadcast of Russian channels, in September 2015 the Ukrainian parliament, *Verkhovna Rada*, passed a law introducing new rules of ownership for television and other broadcast companies. The law also stipulated new financial disclosure requirements for owners in order to increase transparency and prevent foreign influence in the domestic information space.

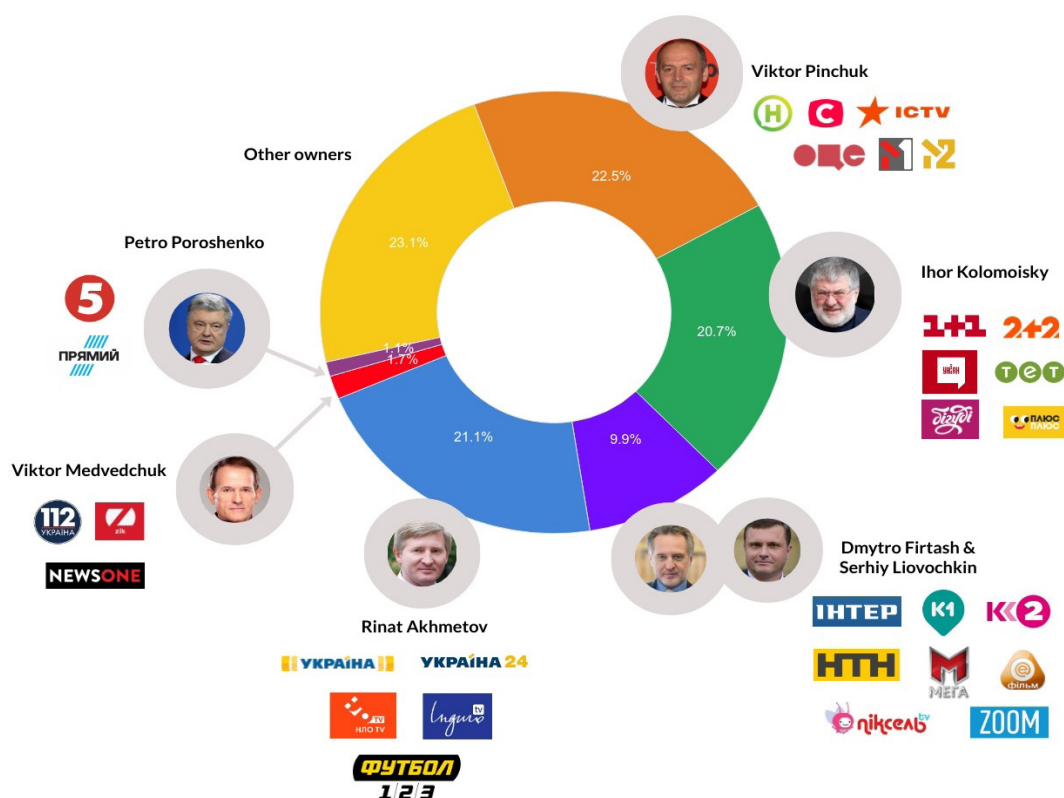
## OLIGARCHS IN UKRAINE

The issues of media ownership and Russian propaganda messaging remain an ongoing concern in Ukraine. Of the top 20 most-viewed TV channels in the country, almost all belong to the same people who top the list of Ukraine's wealthiest oligarchs – Rinat Akhmetov, Viktor Pinchuk,

Dmytro Firtash, Serhiy Liovochkin, Ihor Kolomoisky, Petro Poroshenko and Viktor Medvedchuk – some of whom have close contacts with Russian political power (Figure 1).

The same people who dominate the media in Ukraine also fund political parties and individual politicians. Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's richest man, supports the Opposition Bloc, the successor of the Party of the Regions, which was the party of President Viktor Yanukovych, who was ousted in 2014. The Opposition Bloc entered the parliament in 2014, but did not overcome the 5% barrier in 2019. Viktor Pinchuk is accused of being occasionally involved in politics, supporting whichever politician or party that seems most beneficial for him at any given moment. Ihor Kolomoisky often supports several political projects at the same time and can even have his agents in forces that are publicly opposing his political interests. Dmytro Firtash, commonly described as a "Kremlin influence agent in Ukraine," together with his business partner Serhiy Liovochkin (former chief of staff under Yanukovych), is affiliated with the party Opposition Platform – For Life. This party is openly pro-Russian and led by another infamous oligarch, Viktor Medvedchuk, often referred to as a grey cardinal of Ukraine's politics and the main Kremlin voice in the country. Nonetheless, the common trend for the oligarchs in media is that they use their own media outlets to back up their political influence, and political influence helps them to safeguard their positions in business. For this reason, they invest heavily into their media outlets.

According to polls, television remains the central news source for 74 per cent of Ukrainians and the most active voters watch TV. Therefore, from the point of view of political leverage, the interest in TV channels is quite logical. The oligarchs' economic interests are in some cases tightly connected to specific regions; Akhmetov's, for example, are connected to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions; and Kolomoisky's, to the Dnipropetrovsk region. Consequently, the influence of their respective channels could have a large impact in particular regions in the local elections on 25 October 2020.



**Figure 1:** Oligarchs' control over TV

**Source:** FOI based on [www.bigdataua.com](http://www.bigdataua.com) (August 2020 – per cent of TV viewership share)

In recent years, perhaps the most influential pro-Russian Ukrainian oligarch has been Viktor Medvedchuk, who is a close friend of Russia's president, Vladimir Putin (who in fact is also the godfather of Medvedchuk's daughter). In 2018-2019, Medvedchuk purchased three TV channels through lawmaker Taras Kozak, a business associate and political partner, and thus increased his political presence inside Ukraine. Together, the three channels, 112, News One and ZIK, account for more than 28 per cent of the Ukrainian news channels' viewers (see Figure 2). Additionally, the three channels also produce 18 of the 40 most popular information programs.

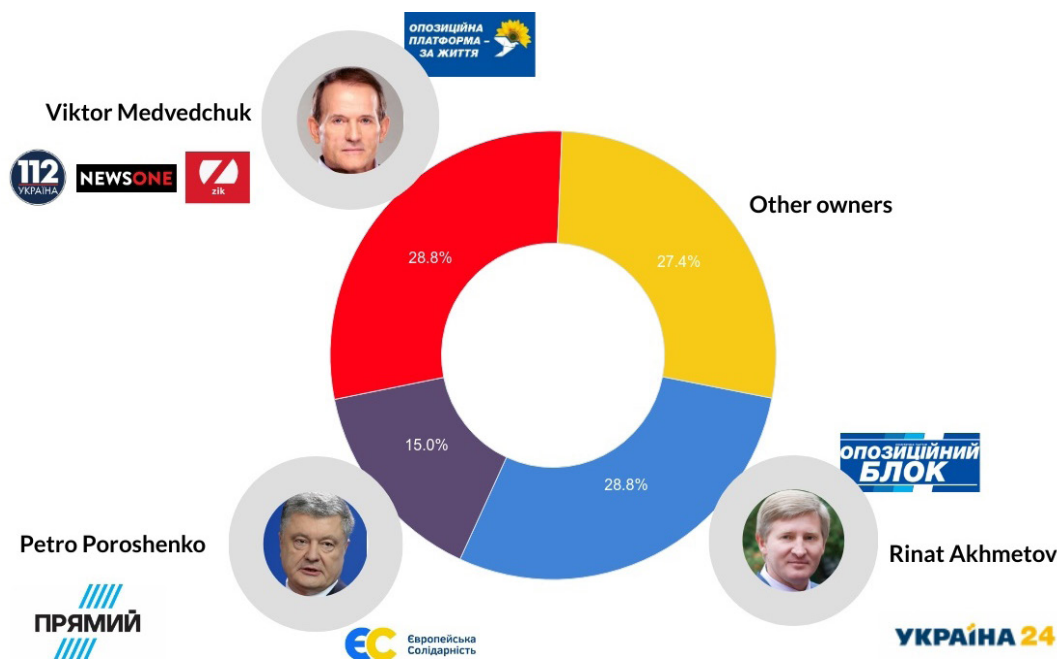
These three channels are actively involved in spreading the Russian views and supporting pro-Russian political parties. This is particularly the case for Medvedchuk's own party, Opposition Platform – For Life, an offspring of the Opposition Bloc, which received 13 per cent of the votes in the 2019 parliamentary elections and holds the position as the second-largest fraction in the current Verkhovna Rada. Part of the party's popularity may come from the support of these TV channels. Opposition Platform – For Life also receives major support from channels owned by

Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Liovochkin, as their political TV agenda is identical to that of Medvedchuk.

### RUSSIA'S PROPAGANDA NARRATIVE IN UKRAINE

Russian propaganda against Ukraine generally works in two directions: the domestic one (aimed at the Ukrainian audience) and the international one (aimed at creating an image of Ukraine and events there for the international audience). One of the most actively used Russian narratives in the political discourse in Ukraine involves the necessity to support/protect the Russian-speaking population, while another underlines Ukraine's "East-West division." Other often used themes are traditional values – shared and propagated by the Russian political leadership (Church, traditional family) – while "European values" (LGBT, gender equality) are presented as dangerous and alien to Ukraine.

In recent years, but especially after the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine, anti-Western and anti-democracy messages have become increasingly more widespread in the country's information space. They are traditionally disseminated by Russian and pro-Russian



**Figure 2:** News channels and affiliated political parties

**Source:** FOI based on [www.bigdataua.com](http://www.bigdataua.com) (August 2020 – per cent of TV viewership share)

information actors, but have now been joined by Yanukovich-era “revanchist” politicians and their affiliated media outlets. TV channels associated with Medvedchuk play a prominent role in the campaigns to discredit Ukraine’s reform agenda and promote various malign narratives. The oppositional TV channels tend to give airtime to pro-Russian politicians and “experts” who promote Ukraine-related fake narratives. These messages mostly centre on the domestic agenda, depicting Ukraine as a “failed state” with an ineffective government leading the country to total collapse. Medvedchuk’s media empire frequently parrots Moscow’s narratives claiming that pro-European reforms are aimed at selling the Ukrainian economy to the West, that Ukraine is a pawn in geopolitics and, more recently, that the coronavirus has proven liberal democracy to be ineffective. Other popular narratives depict the incumbent government’s inability to fulfil the Minsk agreement and restore order in the eastern part of the country. In conjunction with the upcoming local elections, Medvedchuk’s channels have repeatedly demanded that elections should be held for the Donetsk Oblast Council and the Luhansk Oblast Council, in the Kyiv-controlled territories, as their

functions are currently being performed by civil-military administrations, appointed by the president. These recurrent narratives portray Ukraine as a ruined country whose only option for survival is to negotiate with Russia.

### POLITICAL BIASES IN THE LOCAL ELECTIONS

Ihor Kolomoisky and his affiliated TV channels actively promoted Zelensky and his party in the 2019 elections, but have since then shifted focus to promoting the For the Future Party instead. The head of the party, Ihor Palytsia, the former governor of the Odesa oblast and a close ally of Kolomoisky, is a frequent studio guest and the rhetoric of For the Future is openly oppositional. Rinat Akhmetov’s TV channels appear to have divided loyalties, in which Poroshenko’s European Solidarity Party, Yulia Tymoshenko’s Fatherland Party, Zelensky’s party, Servant of the People, as well as Oleh Lyashko’s Radical Party, are all present.

Pryamyi Channel, allegedly controlled by Petro Poroshenko, the former president, has an explicit positive bias towards the ex-president himself. Most of its airtime is devoted to his associates and the parts of the current

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government that are loyal to him. Popular narratives in his channels revolve around pro-European messages, patriotic appeals, and frequent defamation of President Zelensky and his party, Servant of the People. Pryamyi Channel even broadcasts a whole package of programs customised to promote black PR against the government.

For the first time in almost 10 years, Ukraine's ruling party does not have its own TV channel. Representatives of the Servant of the People party are repeatedly forced to comment on someone else's agenda, and regularly find themselves in a minority position, where even the hosts play along with their opponents. With neither their own media outlet, nor the predominant loyalty of any large media group, the situation is unfavourable for the ruling party. Pro-Russian forces accuse Zelensky and his team of destroying Ukrainian institutions and leading the country to final decline, while the party propaganda of the

pro-Western opposition works in the same direction, only with a slightly different argument.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Highly consolidated media ownership remains a consistent feature in Ukraine, as 75 per cent of the total television viewership is controlled by a handful of individuals. Biased coverage means that voters in the upcoming local elections receive inaccurate and partial information. Given the country's heavy reliance on the use of TV, the media can to a great extent determine how reality is presented and perceived. The way TV channels frame certain events plays a decisive role in the formation of public opinion. Therefore, the concentration of ownership of the information space is being problematic both for Ukraine's democratic system and its national security. ■

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