



OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2015

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Working Session 1 Statement on Appropriate Response to Propaganda

Freedom House is pleased to make a statement on the issue of propaganda and offer recommendations on how to address its harmful effects. Propaganda is a scourge that must be aggressively confronted by Participating States, the OSCE, the media and civil society, and others to ensure that it does not overpower objective reporting and information, and is not effectively used as a tool for political manipulation and aggression.

In this struggle, we must also diligently protect human rights and democratic development by avoiding draconian restrictions that could result in a decline in pluralism and violations of essential tenets of freedom.

Propaganda corrodes security, democracy, and human rights by manipulating public opinion, obfuscating nefarious actions, and confusing the public with misinformation about current events; in some cases, it may even lead to the incitement of violence and hatred. Freedom House's 2014 Freedom of the Press report noted an increasingly active and aggressive use of propaganda to warp the media environment and undermine authentic, unbiased journalism across the OSCE space. This phenomenon was especially pronounced in Russia, where well-funded, highly coordinated state-controlled media played a major role in preparing the Russian public for war with Ukraine; these outlets and others controlled by the Russian government, also spread their insidious messages through misleading news and programming in Europe, Central Asia, the United States, the Middle East, and elsewhere in order to undermine public debate and bolster Russian policy objectives.

Propaganda is a tool aimed squarely at sowing confusion; creating antagonism and divisions between people and countries; and fostering vitriol and hate for others based on their citizenship, language, religion, or other characteristics. These effects pose a fundamental challenge to all of the countries represented here, which have committed to fostering vibrant and free societies and media spaces in which people can openly and freely express themselves.

Censorship has no place in a democratic society and any response to propaganda should not rely on censorship or restrictions on media content or outlets. Any restrictions should be narrowly tailored to ensure they only target information and outlets that truly threaten democracy with actions such as incitement to war and violence. In most cases, existing laws and frameworks can adequately address these harmful effects.

The response to propaganda should instead focus on building attractive and effective alternatives to encourage media pluralism, factual reporting, and public debate and discussion. To that end, Freedom House makes the following recommendations to Participating States:

- Reject draconian restrictions on individuals and outlets, except those absolutely necessary to address imminent threats of violence and war;
- Support programs to make citizens more informed media consumers, enabling them to identify and scrutinize propagandistic messages on their own;
- Support the training of independent and citizen journalists in investigative journalism and reporting, including through exchanges of experience and knowledge;
- Increase support for existing and new international public service news and information services, including those supported by government and non-government sources, that focus on transparent and objective reporting of current events;
- Support the development of independent media, especially local and community-driven media, to ensure that local-, regional-, national-, and international-level issues are covered consistently, transparently, and from diverse angles;
- Support and enable initiatives that seek to dispel myths and rumors as well as debunk propaganda, especially those led by civil society groups, such as the pioneering Stopfake.org in Ukraine;
- Support new initiatives to bolster demand among Russian speakers for impartial, accurate news, including exposés and investigations of corruption and abuses of power; and creative and educational entertainment, including satire.

There is no single solution to eliminating propaganda and addressing its deleterious effects, but by supporting and enabling open, dynamic, and diverse media environments, we can neutralize the impact of propaganda on our societies.