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# Zelenskyy has consolidated Ukraine's TV outlets and dissolved rival political parties

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Heard on All Things Considered



EMILY FENG

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President Zelenskyy has consolidated all TV platforms in Ukraine into one state broadcast and restricted political rivals. Political opposition fears such civil liberty constraints could continue.

**JUANA SUMMERS, HOST:**

Ukraine has had to take extraordinary measures to fight Russia's invasion. Among them, the government has consolidated the country's television outlets and dissolved rival political parties. It says it needs to do this to maintain a united front in fighting Russia. NPR's Emily Feng reports from Kyiv.

**EMILY FENG, BYLINE:** Before the war, Ukraine had a dizzying array of television news stations. But in March, President Zelenskyy decided to consolidate them into one 24-hour channel. But not all stations were included.

**UNIDENTIFIED PERSON:** (Non-English language spoken).

**FENG:** This is the swanky studio for Kyiv-based television station Priamyi, which means direct. It was once owned by former Ukrainian president and billionaire Petro Poroshenko. He was also a political competitor of Zelenskyy's, and Priamyi's reports have been excluded from the new national broadcast and most cable networks.

SVITLANA ORLOVSKA: (Through interpreter) We were switched off from digital broadcast and excluded from the national channel. We have not been provided any reasons for this.

FENG: This is Svitlana Orlovska, the executive producer. Before the war, she was concerned mostly with keeping her anchors happy and the shows running on time. Now she's worried about the network's survival.

ORLOVSKA: (Through interpreter) We do hope we can begin broadcasting again after Ukraine wins the war. But during the martial law, there are certain restrictions. We cannot oppose our exclusion.

FENG: Even before Russia invaded in February, some of Ukraine's opposition media outlet said they faced political pressure from President Zelenskyy's government. Volodymyr Mzhelskyi directs one of Ukraine's oldest television stations, Channel 5. It was also previously owned by former President Poroshenko, who sold his media holdings under a 2021 Ukrainian law.

VOLODYMYR MZHEL'SKYI: (Through interpreter) After Channel 5 was sold, the government suspected the sale was false and Poroshenko still controlled the station. We felt consistently pressure from institutions like the broadcast regulator. We have numerous lawsuits filed against us by current and former members of Parliament.

FENG: Why the government attention, I ask him.

MZHEL'SKYI: (Through interpreter) I think we were switched off because there was a fear that this time, we would not support the president's point of view.

FENG: Late last year, Zelenskyy announced Poroshenko was being investigated for treason, and this past March, 11 political parties were suspended and any of their elected members dismissed from office for being pro-Russian. Most were fringe, but one party had nearly 10% of seats in Ukraine's Parliament. Ukraine's minister of culture tells NPR Ukraine also had to take a stronger anti-Russian stance when it came to the country's media landscape.

OLEKSANDR TKACHENKO: During the last several years, we definitely realized what does it mean, Russian propagandistic machine. To be united in the time of war, it means that we need to coordinate our efforts.

FENG: And he characterized the lack of any opposition outlets from Ukraine's new national broadcast channel as simply a lack of space.

TKACHENKO: It's a tricky issue, how to include newcomers.

FENG: And Russian interference in Ukraine is a real problem, especially now that there's a hot war with Russia. Another political opponent, the pro-Russian billionaire Viktor Medvedchuk, was recently arrested and his business assets seized because of his close ties to Vladimir Putin. Viktoria Siumar is a member of Parliament and part of the same political party as Poroshenko, technically making her the opposition to Zelenskyy's party. But she stresses she's still a patriot.

VIKTORIA SIUMAR: (Through interpreter) Today I believe in Ukraine that there are no anti-government opposition forces. All Ukrainian politicians are united in opposition to Putin and Putin's Russia.

FENG: But she does have some complaints about Zelenskyy's government.

SIUMAR: (Through interpreter) The first difference is their attitude towards freedom of speech. We fiercely opposed the government on this.

FENG: Restrictions on these worry the opposition, namely that Zelenskyy is clearing out political rivals before the 2024 presidential election. Before the war, he was a deeply unpopular president.

ANDREAS UMLAND: I think there is such a danger of centralization of power or even authoritarian tendencies.

FENG: Andreas Umland is at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. And he says an adversarial, highly personal party dynamic drives Ukrainian politics.

UMLAND: Parties disappear. New parties arrive. Parties transform. And often, the fate of a party is very much tied to the fate of the leader.

FENG: But despite the restrictions placed under martial law, Umland does not believe Ukraine will ultimately trend authoritarian.

UMLAND: Well, about this sort of now already established consensus in society that there should be always an opposition, that there should be different voices.

FENG: These questions have become only more important as Ukraine tries to join the European Union. Not only does it have to win a war against Russia, it'll have to prove it's a stable government with democratic institutions like a free press.

Emily Feng, NPR News, Kyiv.

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