



One month of invasion: Summary of observations

By Eurasia team of Free Press Unlimited

Despite numerous warnings about Russia's plans to invade Ukraine, the full-scale war still came as a surprise even to those media partners who were preparing for it. The fact that Russian troops simultaneously attacked various Ukrainian cities and its capital Kyiv shocked journalists in Ukraine and made some of them either leave journalism or leave the country or enroll in territorial defense. Yet, many stayed and continue reporting despite lack of war reporting training.

Free Press Unlimited multiplied its efforts coordinating the exchange of the content, getting real-time updates on personal protection needs, and setting up schemes for relocation and emergency support. In the early days of the war, our Prague-based editors were on duty on the news feeds in shifts to offer content to partners 16 hours a day, moving to 12-hour shifts later. We held regular coordination calls with partners,

closely monitored the selection of news digest, and were always ready to play the role of moderator in case of possible disagreements between partners from different sides of this war.

Initial fears vs actual risks

Some initial fears and risks related to that offensive have not taken place in the first 4 weeks:

Chemical/unconventional weapons attack and massive bombing of Kyiv. Sources in several Western intelligence services issued a warning in the second week of the invasion suggesting to evacuate everyone from Kyiv in the anticipation of the attack that would bring mass casualties and use unconventional weapons. This did not happen, although phosphorus bombs are reported to be used in some other regions of the country.

The collapse of the entire banking system in Ukraine. Ukrainian partners expected it to happen, citing as an example the war in the East of the country in 2014-2015 when banks worked with great interruptions. Still, a month after the war, the banks are working properly, which greatly contributed to the assistance for relocation and PPE from Free Press Unlimited.

Other risks materialized and were/are mitigated:

Limitations in bank wires to organizations with Donetsk/Donbas in the name. One of the partners had several international transfers rejected until they removed that word from their title. This is caused by Western banks not being willing to risk sending something to the potentially sanctioned entity. Before the invasion, the organization was receiving foreign funding for years.

Non-Ukrainian passport holders have their accounts in Ukraine blocked. Hundreds of Belarusian journalists fled to Ukraine in 2020 and 2021 after repressions in their home country and chose to stay there and continue their work. They could also have contributed to the Ukrainian media during the war. However, almost immediately all Ukrainian banks blocked accounts of Belarusian passport holders, and hostility towards Belarusians was growing which caused those journalists to flee to the EU countries (unable to return home) and stay there in a discriminated status comparing to Ukrainian passport holders.



An expected and anticipated risk was the change in the **safety of journalists**, which we describe in a separate section below.

Safety of journalists

During the month of the war, Free Press Unlimited's safety team in partnership with the Eurasia team supported the relocation and provided personal protection equipment to nearly **200** journalists and media workers in/around Ukraine. The vast majority were leaving their homes in Ukraine for another city, some of those who received assistance were Russian journalists who worked for independent media. Among PPE that Free Press Unlimited transferred to Ukraine were 100 grade 3 enhanced bulletproof vests and protective shields.

Our policy and advocacy colleagues raised international awareness about danger to journalists who continue working in-country. Some of our partners were detained while working, some came under fire during the evacuation. One of the kidnapped by Russian forces journalists and two journalists under shelling had all their equipment confiscated. It is feared that their devices may be forensically screened by the Russian forces to identify the personal information of their colleagues and to put other journalists on the kidnap or killing lists.

While the greatest danger is to journalists who continue working inside Ukraine, the independent media actors in Belarus and Russia get increasingly endangered due to censorship, criminal persecution and open harassment. Free Press Unlimited continues advocating for emergency visas and special procedures for verified independent journalists who are committed to continuing fact-based coverage of Ukraine-related events.

Another aspect of security and safety is digital protection. Free Press Unlimited distributed several dozens of VPNs to shield journalists in Ukraine and Russia who operate in the situation of Russian government's surveillance.

Despite the danger, partners that we work with continue to exchange content between themselves, thus helping their audiences to get a multi-sourced balanced picture of the day.



Content exchanges and collaborations

Free Press Unlimited continues facilitating exchanges and collaborations between friendly media in more than 10 countries in the region. This is how the war influenced this process:

Firstly, all the media outlets in Eastern Europe with whom we kept contact naturally made Ukraine their main news. This sometimes took its toll on the domestic agenda, which receded into the background or was covered through the prism of the war in Ukraine. The situation was slightly different in the countries of Central Asia. Although they also maintained a constantly updated news feed from Ukraine, they remained in the orbit of the internal news of their countries more than other partners. We set up a special Telegram channel serving as an “internal news agency” for all interested media, which continues operating now and assists partners in Ukraine coverage while allowing them to free up the time of their news producers.

Secondly, Ukrainian media had to send most of their human resources to cover the war in a live reporting format. That means fewer resources to continue developing formats and stories that engage audiences, provide deeper context, cover issues important to marginalized or vulnerable groups. We plan to support them by adding more services from abroad: exiled journalists or our editors in the Prague office can produce social media-friendly content, animations, and visualizations for the in-country partnering newsrooms.

Thirdly, for the partners from the countries that are involved in hostilities (Ukraine, Russia, Belarus) it has become difficult to cooperate with each other directly. This is both emotional but also a consequence of the new wartime restrictions. In the case of Russia, these restrictions took the form of real censorship, but other countries updated their legislation as well, with Ukraine effectively banning cooperation with Russian media. Despite these new limitations, newsrooms from different sides express willingness to help each other.

We also see some **space for growth**. The interest in the content produced by the Ukrainian partners is huge both in the region and beyond. The pressure on independent media in Russia and Belarus also causes big audience interest towards those independent media that withstand the pressure. The partners in other countries of the region, that are not affected by the war directly, but could be viewed as the potential next target (such as Moldova or Georgia) grew their influence in their countries thanks to the professional work and quality collaboration with the Ukrainian and other partners.