FOREIGN MEDIA SPACE IN SYRIA AND ITS TRANSFORMATION'S PREREQUISITES DURING CIVIL CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

The article reveals the features of the formation of the media information field in Syria and its transformation during the civil conflict. The research methods were the comparative method, the expert method, the survey method, and focus groups, along with general scientific methods. The low confidence of the Syrian people in foreign media, which was further undermined during the civil conflict, was ascertained. The Syrian society's request for sources of high-quality reliable information and varied entertainment content has been identified. Recommendations on the development of Syria's media policy in terms of improving the use of the potential of the "soft power" of the blogosphere are presented.

Keywords: Media system, Syria foreign media, blogosphere, Syrian conflict, information warfare, propaganda

INTRODUCTION

Social media have permeated all generation of internet users becoming a prominent communication tool (Deepika & Lakshmi, 2017). In a media system of almost any state, a prominent role is played by foreign media, which broadcast or are published abroad or in the state itself (Obaid et al., 2018; Heidari 2019). The contemporary North Korea, where the authorities managed to limit the impact of foreign media on the information space within the country to the greatest extent possible, is a major exception. Meanwhile, even in this case, the foreign media have an external influence on the state, constructing its foreign political image and making an impact on the foreign diaspora (Prajs, 2004; Grinberg, 2008; Information management in the context of globalization, 2017). In the states with more open media systems, such an influence is felt more comprehensively and systematically, particularly in the Internet era (Renuka & Gurunathan, 2017). Although, before, as soon as the radio was invented and become popular, the opportunities of foreign media to influence the information space of a foreign state had been rather broad.

The aspects of impact from the foreign media on local armed conflicts are of particular interest. One of the striking examples was the civil confrontation in Syria in the 2010s, which was characterized by a large-scale involvement of participants and multilevel nature of contradictions, involving the Syrian government, armed rebels of various political affiliations, Turkish interventionists, terrorists (including interventionists from other states of the Middle East), as well as Russia and groups of the Western allies. At the same time, as already mentioned, the objectives and tasks of foreign media involvement in information coverage of the civil confrontation in Syria were not limited to the establishment of and ensuring the increased influence on the Syrian media space. In this regard, the formation and management of global

public opinion, which in today's environment makes it seem possible to justify foreign intervention into sovereign affairs of independent states, including the acts of military intervention, became an important aspect.

Both Syrian and foreign sources currently lack qualitative research into the influence and popularity of foreign media, including the research performed at various stages of formation and development of the Syrian statehood as well as the transformation of influence in the context of the civil conflict. The corresponding estimates may be obtained indirectly through the examination of a body of scientific literature of the period, as well as through recording of ideal traces preserved in memory of active communication recipients of the relevant period.

Taking into account the above circumstances, including multiple-vector and multilevel nature of the information warfare in the Syrian civil conflict, we conducted a study to examine the peculiarities of the formation of the media information field in Syria and its transformation during the civil conflict.

METHODS

The research methods included comparative method, expert opinion survey, polling, and focus groups, which formed the methodological framework of the publication along with universal research methods.

The empirical research methods included:

- Expert opinion survey involving 12 experts (4 Syrian media workers, 4 Syrian journalists, and 4 university researchers of media policy, political science, and social relations);
- The public opinion poll of the Syrian population (held in July-September 2019 personally by the author and involving 622 persons: Syrian residents of both sexes aged 16-82 of different occupational groups and social statuses);
- Focus groups, each having an equal number of 15 participants, with the following composition: focus group 1 ("Russian students"), which included the nationals of the Russian Federation who had been studying in higher education institutions of Moscow and St. Petersburg; focus group 2 ("Foreign students"), which included students of all nationalities, excluding residents of Russia and Syria (including former residents), who had been studying at the universities of Lund and Stockholm, Sweden; focus group 3 ("Syrian students studying in the Russian Federation"), which included the Syrian nationals who had been studying in higher education institutions of Moscow and St. Petersburg as part of higher education training programs.

RESULTS

Summarizing the materials presented in various sources (Prajs, 2004; Vinogradova and Mel'nik, 2005; Panarin, 2017; Medovkina, 2015; Kopylova, 2013; Fedjakin, 2008), it is feasible to distinguish between the following methods and mechanisms of the direct impact of foreign media on the information space of a foreign state, that is, not of the mediated impact made through the formation of an international image and influence on the foreign media, but of the impact, which directly forms public opinion within that foreign state.

As already mentioned, the increasing influence of foreign media on the space of national information of the foreign states occurred in the era of Internet growth and significantly

increased its availability by mobile Internet access. Starting from around 2015, it developed the influence of the blogosphere, which actually had not existed before, more precisely – the information influence coming from the most popular bloggers and opinion leaders in social networks. Their publication and communication activity is aimed at various kinds of promotion and has significantly proven effectiveness due to the most selective and, at the same time, the most efficient information impact on the target audience (Kul'minskaja, 2012; Vitvinchuk, 2017; Nebykov and Efimov, 2012; Lazutkina, 2016; Elshahed and Tayie, 2019). As social network technologies and algorithms improve, the power of influence of the most popular bloggers increases extensively. The corporate sector was the first to make the most of this circumstance, having made the blogosphere an important and effective advertising and communication platform (Isanshina, 2012; Slepcova, 2019; Babojan, 2019). The actors of political struggle also become gradually and more actively involved in the use of this method of information influence, particularly, as a "soft power" in the foreign policy arena, creating new methods of application and contact (Amirov, 2019; Zlobin, 2019; Morozova, 2019; Kamal, 2019; Soni and Soni, 2019), which are still to be assessed within the framework of the fundamental science of mass media.

The impact of foreign media on the information space of every particular foreign state is definite, and sometimes – rather different. This is apparently due to the national peculiarities and mentality of the audience (the recipient of relevant information), size of the state, specific nature of the national media system structure, historical traditions, etc.

Syria is no exception and some interrelated phenomena can be identified for it (O'Callaghan et al., 2014; Ghadbian, 2001; Rugh, 2007; Elias, Oudat, 1990):

- The population of Syria is rather sensitive to information of the foreign media, primarily – of the Francophone ones, due to its historical traditions. For Syrians, particularly – for the older generation, the French media is, first of all, a benchmark of high-quality journalism and content diversity. The relevant attitude extended to the Western media in general, and due to cultural and religious traditions, respect and attention are passed on from the older to the younger generation.

- At the same time, Syrians are not dogmatized in their media preferences. They consume the information content that actually reaches them. No choice was made in terms of the selection of information source and country of origin, at least in the period preceding the beginning of current civil conflict despite, among other things, the propagandistic efforts of the Damascus authorities.

- Inefficient government media policy and long-term oppression of oppositional media combined with an overall decline of the Syrian journalism, which predetermined the superficial attitude of the major part of information recipients towards the position of the Syrian authorities retransmitted by the media.

- For a long time, a relatively low general level of education in the country, which worsened during the civil-military conflict, prevented the efficient impact of disparate external propaganda. Prior to the civil confrontation, this circumstance appeared to be one of the important reasons for the low information activity of foreign media in the Syrian territory.

- Finally, the degree and level of foreign language proficiency, including the former state language – French, is generally rather low across the country. In view of this, the foreign media had to broadcast in Arabic, and, what is more important, with an emphasis on

assimilation with the Syrian audience, in order to have any significant impact on them. Actually, such broadcasting was performed by none of the major foreign media groups distinguished by us (the Western groups, the French groups; the Arab groups).

As was mentioned, there are currently no qualitative studies on foreign media influence and popularity involving various stages of the Syrian statehood formation and development. In order to seal the identified information gap, an expert survey was carried out, and they were asked to assess the power of influence of foreign media on the Syrian society at various stages of formation and development of the Syrian statehood on a 10-point scale.

The results in the form of average values of experts, estimated values are presented in Figure 1.
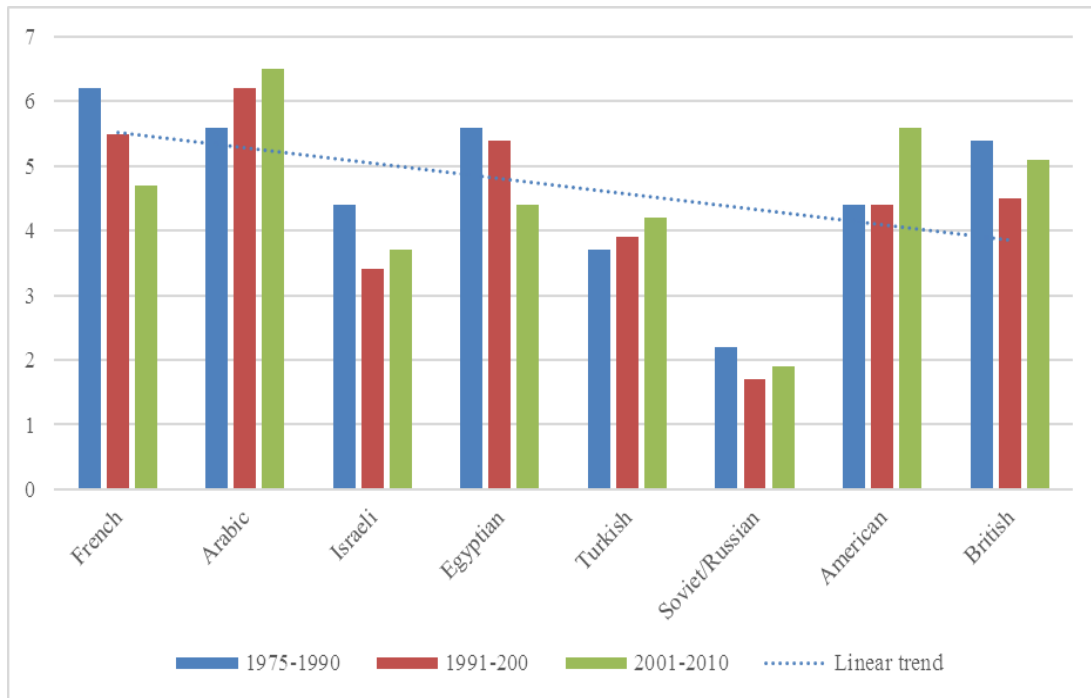
Figure 1. Assessment power of the impact of foreign media on the Syrian public and its dynamics in 1975-1990, 1991-2000, 2001-2010 (min = 0, max = 10)

As can be seen from Fig. 1, none of the foreign media groups had a significant and much more – a critically significant influence on public opinion in Syria within the period from 1975 to 2010. The corresponding estimates of influence vary within the range from weak to moderate. These circumstances, among other things, predetermined the outlines of the official governmental information policy.

The content of the military conflict and the logic information warfare within its framework not only transformed the national media system of the Syrian Arab Republic but also changed the information field of foreign media either in its structure and system or in the information coverage of internal military confrontation.

It is of particular importance in the context of this study that the information impact of foreign media during the period of the military-civil conflict became oriented on two major categories of recipients at the same time:

- Residents of SAR, including the Syrian diaspora, which is concentrated abroad;

- The international public in general.

Taking into account the objective factual account of a considerable information policy shift of foreign media during the period of the civil confrontation in Syria, it was attempted to track and describe the relevant changes. A specific regional and typological color map of influence of foreign media in the Syrian media space at the turn of 2010-2020s was made using the expert method. In the relevant color map in Figure 2, the deeper color corresponds to the media having a greater impact on the Syrian population.

Media	Territory, audience			
	Government-controlled territories	Territories controlled by moderate opposition	Territories controlled by radical rebels and terrorists	Syrian Kurds
French				
Arab				
Israeli				
Egyptian				
Turkish				
Russian				
American				
British				
Western online media in general				
Arabic online media in general				
Western blogosphere				
Arabic blogosphere				

Figure 2. Regional and typological color map of the assessment of the foreign media influence on the Syrian media space at the turn of the 2010-2020s

There have been no critical transformations of the influence of foreign media on the population living in the areas under the control of the Syrian authorities. The main changes occurred in the territories beyond control, with the Arab media influence prevailing, which apparently corresponds to the outlines of their information policy during the civil confrontation period: at the time of escalation of internal military confrontation Syria was actually regionally isolated and it would not be possible to oppose the negative influence of the Arab propaganda, which was extremely deep, had a multiple-vector nature and accounted for almost all the scope of external information flows from the Arabic world, except for counteracting in radical ways with low efficiencies, such as blackout and blocking. At the same time, as will be demonstrated below, it is extremely difficult to identify the actual influence of the Arabic media on opinions and moods of the population living in territories beyond the control of the SAR Government, as it is practically inseparable from the communicative impact of the oppositional Syrian media, up to the complete mixing.

Respectively, Figure 3 represents another color map – an expert assessment of the intensity of influence of foreign media on the global image formation of the SAR and specific features and aspects of the civil armed conflict in the Republic at the end of the 2010s.

It can be concluded from Figure 3 that the influence of foreign media on the world public opinion, unlike the public opinion and entire information space in Syria, is diametrically opposed.

The fact of the general transformation of the foreign media information policy to cover the civil armed confrontation in Syria depending on its phases is also rather obvious. This is probably due to the changes in the military and political position of the stakeholders of the media concerned, which found its reflection in the adjustments of propaganda objectives, tasks, and directions as well as the general information agenda on the Syrian conflict.

It seems important to study the actual reflection of the transformation of the influence of foreign media on public opinion among representatives of the target groups (the Syrian and the world public). For this purpose, we carried out:

- Syrian public opinion poll concerning the credibility of foreign media and information given by them, including the Russian media, credibility dynamics and the ways to select information on the national and international state of affairs;
- Sessional discussions involving the participants of three focus groups regarding the reflection of the news and other information circulating in global and local media space.

| Media	Region		
	All the World	Western world	Arabic world
French			
Arab			
Israeli			
Egyptian			
Turkish			
Russian			
American			
British			
Western online media in general			
Arabic online media in general			
Western blogosphere			
Arabic blogosphere			

Figure 3. Color map of the intensity assessment of foreign media's influence on the global image formation of the SAR and specific features and aspects of the civil armed conflict in the Republic at the end of the 2010s.

Some of the most remarkable, in our opinion, results are presented herein, which will start with the results of the sociological survey. Particularly, it can be stated that a level of public trust in foreign media and their information is rather low, at least – in the liberated territories of the SAR (at the time of the study, over 80% of the Syrian territory was under the total control of the government; more than half of the country settlements with over 65% of the Syrian population has lived in a peaceful civil environment for around at least three years).

Special attention should be paid to the indicators of assessment of changes in the credibility of foreign media (Figure 4), which, as it can be stated, varied from stable to reduction of overall

credibility of particular media.
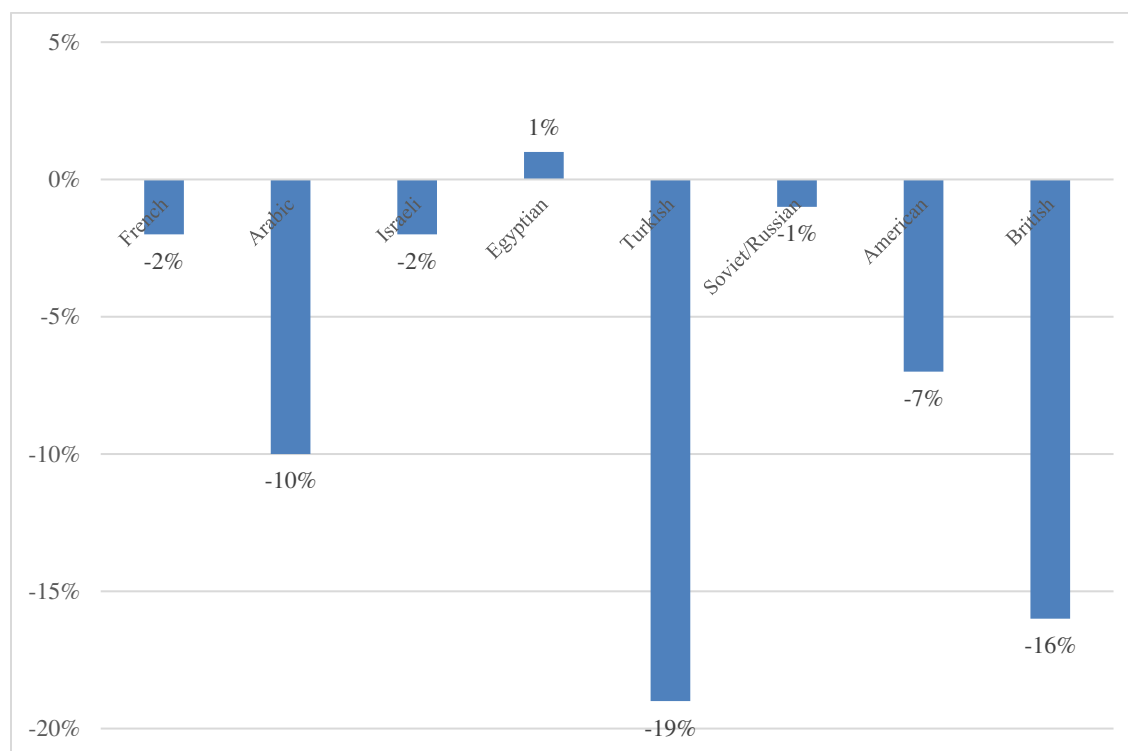
Figure 4. Assessment of the changes in the credibility of foreign media (2019 vs. 2010, % of the number of respondents, and difference between the percentage of respondents who have trust in media for the period) among Syrian citizens

Despite the pro-government position as well as the generally successful implementation of the peacekeeping mission of the Russian troops in Syria, the Russian media do not have wide public credibility, and apparently do not seem to have had it before.

Moreover, it was found that during the civil conflict the criteria and method of selection of information on the national and international state of affairs are subject to changes. Despite the generally low level of credibility of foreign media, the information vacuum and numerous cases of disinformation at the beginning of the civil armed confrontation from different sides undermined the credibility of the Syrian media system as such, including both segments (internal and external) based on the country of origin, and, at the same time, generated demand for objective diverse social, political and economic information, which had not been typical for the Syrian society before.

As most sources lack credibility, the gap is filled with the desire to obtain information as much as possible with its further critical reinterpretation. In view of the technological difficulties in access to alternative broadcasting channels as well as of the persistent problems in the level of education of the majority of Syrian society, which apparently worsened during period of the armed civil confrontation, there exist high risks of uncontrolled propagandistic impact on the Syrian population from those information sources that would be able to become an effective and relatively stable (i.e., long-term) alternative to official governmental information.

In this regard, the online segment, including the blogosphere with its mentioned potential and

capabilities, is drawing increasing attention. Along with the fact that the Western governments are still acutely sensitive to the sphere of information warfare as to the most important battlefield within the framework of the armed Syrian conflict, and there is no obvious demand for an early end to the conflict from the largest geopolitical actors in the West, it can be stated that both in the short-term and the long-term perspective, the active propagandistic Western influence will be implemented both through the influence on the diaspora and through traditional satellite channels and the Internet, particularly – through the blogosphere.

We clarified the relevant data on current transformations of influence foreign media on the information space within the framework of the focus groups.

In general, a lack of awareness of the true state of affairs in the Arab State was identified among the non-politicized public outside the SAR. For example, the information provided by foreign media presents the overall picture of persistent instability across the SAR, including ongoing military operations. We obtained the relevant data in terms of focus group 2. The data were confirmed by materials of the interviews held with the representatives of the focus group 1. In particular, many people unreasonably believe that the military activities are is still taking place throughout the territory of Syria, including its capital Damascus (January 2020), that the remaining of foreigners in the country is not safe, that the work of journalists is extremely dangerous, including the groups under the control of the Syrian authorities. Finally, the representatives of the focus group 3 (Syrian students studying in the Russian Federation) state that their fellow students really develop misconceptions about the real civil, political, and economic situation in Syria. It is notable that Russian students were more correct in their judgments and assessments regarding the real situation in Syria, although this circumstance in itself does not mean simply a fairer coverage of the Syrian conflict by the Russian media.

In general, the data obtained from focus groups confirmed our considerations and public opinion poll data regarding the transformed influence of foreign media on the information space. At the same time, the obtained results caused the necessity to focus on the following fundamentally significant, in our opinion, the circumstance in the context of the development of the Syrian media policy in terms of the influence of foreign media on global and local public opinion.

DISCUSSIONS

Based on the obtained results, it can be stated that, in general, the influence of foreign media on the information space in Syria during the active phase of the armed civil confrontation underwent significant transformations, both qualitative and quantitative, including the following ones:

- Syrian conflict had remained in focus in the world media and had been the main issue on the agenda of the Arabic media throughout the second decade of the XXI century.
- The media, including the foreign, are used actively to produce an information impact on the world and the Syrian audience for propaganda and delivery of information, which is favorable for one of the opposing parties.
- A great deal of information presented by foreign media distorts the real situation in Syria. This situation is typical for all the actors of external information influence as well as for internal actors of information confrontation, but primarily – for separate oppositional

media of Syria and the West.

- Although the population of Syria and the international community are apparently equally acting as an objective addressee of disinformation, the information space was mostly distorted for the international audience, while the SAR citizens had more objective information from alternative sources, including the "rumor mill" (at least, in respect of the population in the territories under the control of the government; the rest of the population having been under almost complete information control of the rebels, which made them fall out of the focused influence of foreign media).

Regarding the influence of foreign media on the world information space, based on the information provided by foreign media an overall picture of the persistent instability across the SAR territory. Meanwhile, in real life, the major part of the territory of Syria controlled by the government and life there is slow-paced and peaceful and is characterized by the gradual recovery of infrastructure and business and civil relationships. In view of the persistent general instability, incomplete nature of the armed conflict in general, inconsistent and sometimes inhumane attitude of some external geopolitical actors towards direct or indirect interference with the Syrian affairs, there certainly exist risks of conflict escalation, including the peaceful territories, but these are not on a large-scale. Thus, there exist no grounds to form an information picture, according to which the population of Syria and the guests of peaceful territories controlled by the government are in the state of conflict and have everyday fear for their lives. This picture is primarily created due to the fact that foreign media, intentionally or not, broadcast exclusively - reports on military activities and cover information on the incidents, which are rather typical for an incomplete civil confrontation and, though rather rarely, can occur even in the controlled peaceful territories. This information is supplemented by the negotiations regarding the system that will be adopted in Syria, news on the international issue of Syria, and politicians' statements.

Due to the lack of simultaneous information presented on the peaceful life in Syria, recovery of infrastructure, and economic and cultural events, the world audience does not get adequate information on the current state of affairs in Syria. In case such information is presented intentionally, as it may be with certain Western media, the actions are likely to be aimed at preservation of the negative national public opinion on the inability of the Damascus authorities to ensure peaceful life or to benefit the majority of Syrian people and to motivate the general approval of further intervention from the Western allies into the Syrian conflict with the ultimate goal of elimination of "non-democratic", and "inefficient" regime of Assad.

The unprofessional nature of journalism and its overall decline can, to some extent, contribute to the situation and stimulate the development of such phenomena as "clickbait" and "hype".

Meanwhile, the development of social media blogosphere makes the prospective increase of the potential use of the "soft power", including the relatively small organizational and financial costs, possible. For example, the "soft power" policy-makers in Syria may be recommended to establish systematic interactions with politically active bloggers from around the world, offering them to have a short-term visit to Damascus with the expenses covered by the Syrian government.

The experience obtained during the visits will be reflected in blogs and will make some kind of positive reflection on the image of Syria internationally, and guide the world public more

objectively concerning the state of affairs in the country. It is not advisable either to expect that all bloggers will relay opinions favorable for the Damascus authorities or to select only the most loyal bloggers for these tours, as the expected anti-propaganda can significantly reduce the efficiency of the event. Herewith, despite any possible statements of particular bloggers after their visits, the mere fact of their trip will be a huge indication of the safety and the state of Syria to the world. We consider it reasonable to use this as a keynote of the updated foreign media policy concept of the Syrian state towards the end of the civil confrontation.

CONCLUSIONS

The research performed made it possible to obtain the following results, which characterize the formation of the information field of foreign media in Syria and the prerequisites for its transformation during the period of the civil conflict:

- Due to a number of objective and subjective reasons, foreign media had not produced any significant impact on the Syrian public opinion during the period up to the beginning of the armed civil confrontation. A certain increase in the influence of foreign media on the information space of a foreign state was observed in the era of Internet growth and strengthened in the period of a significant increase in the availability of mobile Internet access.

- It was found that through participation in the information coverage of the Syrian conflict the foreign media form, intentionally or not, different information agendas for the Syrian and world audience. At the same time, the Syrian civil conflict is characterized by active information warfare, the markers of which include the gross of facts manipulation, large-scale propagandistic influence, multilevel, and intertwined nature of participants.

- The low credibility of foreign media among the Syrian people was even more undermined during the civil conflict. Meanwhile, against the background of the simultaneous decline of the authority of the national media system agents, the demand for the sources of qualitative reliable information and variable entertainment content is raising.

- Partial overcoming of an inefficient information confrontation from foreign media is obviously feasible through the development of specific use of the "soft power", particularly, through the systematic work with representatives of the blogosphere and media.

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