[GB] RT Breached Impartiality Requirements in Programme on Syria

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Ofcom, the UK communications regulator, has determined that RT (formerly known as Russia Today) breached the requirements of due impartiality in 'Syrian Diary' broadcast on 17 March 2013. RT is a global news and current affairs programme produced in Russia, broadcasting on UK satellite and digital-terrestrial channels. The programme was made by journalists from Rossiya 24, owned and controlled by the State-owned All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company.

Ofcom's Broadcasting Code requires that due impartiality be preserved on matters of political or industrial policy and matters relating to current public policy. Where presenters or reporters present a 'personal view' programme, they may express their own views, but alternative viewpoints must be adequately represented. The Code applies to all Ofcom licensees, including international channels broadcasting in the UK.

This edition of 'Syrian Diary' was expressed to be an account of the personal experiences and the personal views of Rossiya 24 journalists in Syria. The contributions were highly critical of the Syrian opposition groups (for example, 'their brutality knows no limits') and there was extensive use of interviews of Syrians, which again were all critical of the opposition (eg 'what they do is not for the people. They are killing us and our children'). The interviews were linked by rolling footage showing executions, devastation, brutality and killings reportedly perpetrated by opposition groups. There were three brief clips of Western leaders supporting the opposition, but these were inserted between comments about, and images of, atrocities claimed to have been committed by opposition groups.

RT claimed that the programme was clearly labelled as a personal view, and its subject was not the Syrian conflict but the impact on Syrian citizens. It also claimed that the programme presented an alternative view to the 'Western consensus' and that different viewpoints had been put forward in other programmes.

Ofcom noted that the Code does not prohibit broadcasters from criticising one side in a conflict or challenging orthodox views, so long as impartiality is preserved. The programme clearly related to a matter of public policy. It

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presented a relentlessly negative picture of the Syrian opposition whilst not questioning the policies, motives and actions of the Syrian Government; nor did it acknowledge that the opposition is comprised of disparate groups with different aims and activities. There were no contributions from the more moderate opposition groups. The context of the presentation of the clips of foreign leaders undermined any value they might have had in representing alternative viewpoints. It was not clearly a 'personal view' programme, despite being labelled as such, as it was not an individual statement but consisted of several journalists putting forward views consistent with one political viewpoint. Even if it had been a 'personal view' programme, alternative viewpoints were not adequately represented in it. The Code does not permit due impartiality to be preserved only across the whole of the service's programmes, but only permits it to be preserved through several editorially linked programmes presenting different viewpoints, for example through a 'season' of programmes.

In view of this decision, and other recent findings relating to RT, Ofcom has called it to a meeting to discuss compliance with due impartiality obligations.

Ofcom, 'Standards Cases: In Breach: Syrian Diary', Broadcast Bulletin 244, 16 December 2013

http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/2431/obb244.pdf

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