# [GB] Broadcaster breached impartiality rules in news reports on Ukraine

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Ofcom, the UK communications regulator, has determined that RT (formerly known as Russia Today) breached Ofcom's rules on accuracy and impartiality in four news bulletins on the situation in Ukraine during March 2014. In a detailed 40-page decision, Ofcom concluded that in light of previous breaches (see IRIS 2014-2/22), the broadcaster is now being put "on notice" that any further breaches may result in further regulatory action, including statutory sanctions.

RT is a global news and current affairs channel produced in Russia and broadcast on satellite and digital terrestrial platforms in the UK. Following a number of complaints, Ofcom decided to investigate four news bulletins broadcast by RT during March 2014 under Rules 5.1, 5.11 and 5.12 of the Broadcasting Code. These rules require that news must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality (5.1), due impartially must be preserved on matters of major political controversy (5.11), and in dealing with matters of major political controversy, an appropriately wide range of significant views must be included and given due weight in each programme or in clearly linked and timely programmes (5.12).

The first news bulletin was broadcast on 1 March 2014 and principally dealt with the news that the Russian parliament had approved the use of military forces in Ukraine. The interim Ukrainian Government had been described as a "putsch government", which had come to power with the help of "violent mobs". Ofcom reviewed the bulletin and held that the viewpoint of the interim Ukrainian Government was not "adequately reflected" and "given due weight" and therefore there had been a breach of Rule 5.12.

The second news bulletin was broadcast on 3 March 2014 and dealt with issues, such as the degree to which Crimea was under the control of the interim Ukrainian Government and the appointment of "two oligarchs" as regional governors in Ukraine. The interim Ukrainian Government was described as "self-appointed", giving "illegal orders" and "self-proclaimed". Ofcom reviewed the bulletin and held that the bulletin did not contain any statements that could be reasonably described as reflecting the viewpoint of the interim Ukrainian Government in relation to these allegations, and therefore breached Rule 5.12.

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The third news bulletin was broadcast on 5 March 2014 and included videos of right-wing organisations entering a local parliament session in a town outside Kiev, wearing uniforms, masks and t-shirts with Nazi symbols and reported various statements that referred to right-wing organisations being part of the interim Ukrainian Government. Ofcom reviewed the bulletin and considered that "by linking the extreme views of the Patriots of Ukraine with the interim Ukrainian Government, the likely effect on viewers would have been to suggest that these extreme views were representative of the interim Ukrainian Government as whole". Ofcom held that the broadcaster "should have sought to reflect adequately" the viewpoint of the interim Ukrainian Government in response to these allegations and therefore breached Rule 5.12.

The final news bulletin was broadcast on 6 March 2014 and concerned the news that the Crimean Parliament had unanimously voted to hold a referendum as to whether Crimea should become part of Russia. Ofcom reviewed the bulletin and considered that allegations had been made that the then Ukrainian opposition may have had a role in sniper shootings that had led to a number of deaths in protests on 20 February 2014 and a leading member of the interim Ukrainian Government had, during the protests, been seen driving away with "a sniper's rifle" in his car. Ofcom held that the viewpoint of the interim Ukrainian Government on these allegations had not been "sufficiently" reflected and therefore, Rule 5.12 had been breached.

Before concluding, Ofcom reiterated that there is no requirement on broadcasters to provide an alternative viewpoint on all news stories, or to do so in all individual news item and it is also legitimate for news to be presented in broad terms from the viewpoint of a particular nation-state. However, all news must be presented with due impartiality and broadcasters must ensure that they reflect an appropriately wide range of significant views and give those views due weight.

Finally, Ofcom noted that this was the third time RT's licence holder, TV Novosti, had breached the Code's rules on impartiality and accuracy in news and, as a result, Ofcom put TV Novosti on notice that any future breaches of these rules may result in further regulatory action, including consideration of a statutory sanction.

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http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/obb266/obb266.pdf

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