



For immediate release 03 June 2010

STATEMENT

Ukraine: Press Freedom Situation Deteriorating Under New President

ARTICLE 19 and International Media Support (IMS) are calling on President Viktor Yanukovich and his administration to ensure that Ukraine upholds its commitments to freedom of expression and in particular press freedom under the European Convention of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Since the end of February 2010, the press freedom situation in the country has deteriorated markedly.

Press censorship has re-emerged in various ways, including through the banning of critical reports about the government, curtailing of editorial control and the issuing of specific instructions to include or remove certain political issues.

To mark the 100 days in office of President Viktor Yanukovich, IMS and ARTICLE 19 are calling on the government to revise its approach towards the media. Both organisations are reiterating their offer of full support and expertise in the development of freedom of speech and freedom of media in Ukraine, as stated in the open letter to President Yanukovich, dated 25 February 2010.

In an interview with ARTICLE 19, Natalia Ligacheva, editor-in-chief of local media watchdog *Telekritika* said: *“Television news has become practically sterile: it mentions the authorities in a positive light or not at all. TV news is silent not only when it comes to opinions that are uncomfortable for the authorities, but also about facts.”*

Joined by their colleagues at the STB television channel, 15 journalists from Ukraine’s second largest television channel, 1+1, have threatened to go on strike if the censorship does not stop. In response, on 21 May, Ukrainian journalists announced the launch of a civil movement called “Stop Censorship!”

Concerns expressed by TV journalist, Myroslav Otkovych, about this trend were reportedly responded to by the Presidential Administration as ‘political, dilettante and amateurish’. In a reaction TV reporters from 1+1, wrote an open letter to fellow journalists on 6 May stating: *“We do not want to be serfs and propagandists. The freedom of speech is not a mere word for us but the foundation of our profession. That is why we announce our protest against the oppression of freedom of speech.”*

Physical attacks and harassment of journalists have increased in the last three months, whereas the reaction of government officials has been inadequate, not holding those responsible to account. For example, on 23 March, Vasyl Demyaniv, editor-in-chief of the newspaper Kolomyisky Visnyk, was attacked and severely beaten by unknown persons. It is believed the assault is connected to Demyaniv's professional activity. The police are investigating the attacks as a mere case of "hooliganism" instead of instituting criminal proceedings for the impediment to exercise journalistic activity. Also troubling in this respect is an increase in harassment of media representatives by government officials. On 4 April, an official from the Kyiv city administration reacted aggressively to a reporter's question and threw away the reporter's microphone.

On the occasion of the Presidential inauguration on 25 February 2010, ARTICLE 19 and IMS had urged the President Viktor Yanukovich, to respond immediately to serious shortcomings within the legislative and policy framework related to freedom of expression and press freedom in Ukraine. Rather than taking decisive action in this direction, on 2 April, President Yanukovich dissolved the National Commission on (the Reinforcement) of Freedom of Speech and Information Development. This Commission consisted of Ukrainian media experts tasked with advising the President, overseeing compliance with European and international media standards, and facilitating the launch of public service broadcasting in Ukraine.

"Although the commission continues to exist as an independent organisation, the fact that it was abolished by President Yanukovich is a blow to civil society and their ability to engage effectively with his administration on urgent media concern," said Agnès Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19. *"Removing this commission at a crucial time like this, when censorship and physical attacks on media are on the rise, implies that the President does not regard a censorship-free media as priority,"* continued Callamard.

Another concern is the growing pressure and administrative harassment of independently owned media outlets, specifically TV stations. In April, allegedly a mistake in spelling of the name of a TVi channel led the National Security Service to conduct an investigation aimed at cancelling frequencies recently issued to this channel.

"In Ukraine, where over 80% of the population receives its main news through television, the Ukrainian government has an obligation to ensure diversity of opinions and political views via television programming," said Jesper Højberg, Executive Director of IMS. *"This can't be done without ensuring transparency of media ownership, freedom of information and public service broadcasting, areas which require urgent legal reform in Ukraine,"* continued Højberg.

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works globally to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech. For more information on ARTICLE 19 please visit www.article19.org

- International Media Support (IMS) is a non-profit organisation working with media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition. In more than 30 countries worldwide, IMS helps to strengthen professional practices and ensure that media and media workers can operate under challenging circumstances. For more information about International Media Support please visit www.i-m-s.dk
- This statement is issued within the framework of the IMS Media and Democracy Programme for Central and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.