

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsfb.org/ukraine-moment-of-truth-for-freedom-of-24-10-2012,43575.html>

Europe/Ex-USSR - Ukraine

UN Universal Periodic review

Moment of truth for freedom of information, concern on eve of elections

24 October 2012

The UN Human Rights Council in Geneva will today examine the situation in Ukraine as part of the second cycle of the procedure known as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Reporters Without Borders, which has consultative status with the United Nations, submitted a report for this review in April ([available here](#)).

Six months later, the situation is even worse. With four days to go to parliamentary elections, Reporters Without Borders would like to sound the alarm about freedom of information in Ukraine.

"We urge the Human Rights Council's member to remind Ukraine to respect its international obligations and its own promises," Reporters Without Borders said. "Respect for freedom of information has worsened to such a degree that the country is now at a turning point. The onus will be on the parliamentarians elected on Sunday to not only refrain from further repressive legislation but also to halt this dangerous trend and reverse direction.

"Although Ukraine has just [refrained from criminalizing defamation at the last minute](#), freedom of information is in great danger. The impunity enjoyed by those responsible for the frequent violence against journalists has created a climate of intimidation that encourages censorship, while the media landscape's growing polarization in the run-up to the elections is exacerbating the tension.

"It is essential that the Human Rights Council's members remind Ukraine of recommendation No. 27, which it undertook to implement in 2008 and which has become a dead letter. The council said that it was high time that the government took 'all measures necessary to ensure that all acts of violence against journalists be investigated and that appropriate punishments are meted out.'

"Six journalists have been the victims of grave acts of violence in the past three months and one of them died. No fewer than 25 other journalists have been prevented from working in a more or less violent manner and nine others have been clearly intimidated.

"Despite [recent progress](#) in the investigation into [Vasil Klymentyev's 2010 disappearance](#), impunity remains the rule, starting with the emblematic case of [Georgiy Gongadze's murder in 2000](#). There has been a notable resumption of cases of pressure on independent media and within newsrooms. This lamentable state of affairs is unworthy of a country that will take over the rotating presidency of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in January 2013."

Violence and impunity - a toxic environment

In the latest serious case of violence against a journalist, **Konstantin Kovalenko**, a reporter for *GolosUA's* online edition, was kidnapped, tortured and threatened by unidentified individuals in Berdichev, in the northern province of Zhytomyr, on the night of 15 October.

His assailants forced him into a car, hit him repeatedly in the stomach and back, subjected him to a simulated drowning and threatened to kill him in a forest. They did this to deter him from publishing the results of his investigation into vote-buying in the 63rd electoral district. Despite

their threats, he filed a complaint and told the media about his abduction, but he thinks he is still in danger.

Dmytro Volkov, a reporter for 1+1 TV's investigative programme "Hroshi," was attacked and badly beaten as he was returning to his home in Kiev on the night of 26 September. His editor, **Maxym Sukhenko**, said he was accosted from behind by two unidentified men, one of whom hit him very hard on the head saying, "If you dig any deeper into this story, we'll rip your head off." They also told him "not to go back to Vyshgorod," a town just outside Kiev.

Volkov, who was hospitalized with concussion, a broken jaw and multiple bruising, had been carrying out an investigation into allegedly illegal land transactions in Vyshgorod, the results of which are still unknown. Interior minister Vitaliy Zakharchenko announced that he would personally supervise the investigation into the attack on Volkov.

Vladimir Goncharenko, a respected environmentalist who headed the movement "For the Right of Citizens to Environmental Safety" and edited the newspaper *EKO Bezpeka* (ECO Security), died in a hospital in the southern city of Dnipropetrovsk on 3 August from the injuries he received two days earlier when unidentified individuals in a car forced his car to stop and gave him a severe beating.

Goncharenko had written a lot about the environment in the Dnipropetrovsk region, especially on the state of the water in the Dnieper, Ukraine's largest river. Five days before the attack, he had reported the discovery of a large illegal dump of chemically polluted and radioactive metal waste in the Saksagan area near the city of Krivoy Rog.

The police investigation into "serious injuries causing death" (article 121 of the criminal code) is working on the assumption that the assault was motivated by a dispute of a personal nature but is not ruling out a possible link to Goncharenko's work. His family and colleagues think it was directly linked to his environmental investigations.

Natural resource management and land use are highly sensitive issues. At *STB* TV journalist **Irina Fedoriv**'s request, a police investigation under article 129 of the criminal code ("death threats") is being conducted into the phone threats she received on 20 September. For the past four years, Fedoriv has been looking into the allegedly illegal allocation of land in Belichansky Forest, near Kiev.

Cases of physical attacks and threats against journalists are on the increase although the degree of seriousness varies. Those responsible are often government officials or influential businessmen who are rarely arrested or questioned.

For example, **Sergey Kiva**, a reporter for the local newspaper *Focus*, was attacked by parliamentarian Vladimir Borisenko while investigating the water supply in a village in the eastern province of Poltava on 16 August. Angered by Kiva's attempts to record his comments, Borisenko tore up his press card, seized all of his equipment and threatened him in violent manner.

A businessman threw stones and other objects at an *Inter* TV crew led by reporter **Roman Bochkala** in Karmalyukove, a village in the central province of Vinnytsya, on 15 August when Bochkala tried to interview him about the alleged exploitation of his workers. Bochkala was injured by the oil can that the businessman threw it him.

Increase in attempts to pressure media

The election campaign has seen a surge in cases of censorship of media and harassment of journalists. Many reporters have been threatened or roughed up while covering election rallies. These are just a few of the cases:

- **Georgiy Mochayev** of the newspaper *Tochka Opory* was assaulted while trying to cover an address by a pro-government candidate in Kysorychi, in the northwestern province of Rivne, on 12 September.
- **Tatyana Zhuchenko** of *Khersonski Visti* was prevented from attending a meeting with the Communist Party parliamentarian Kateryna Samoylyk (about whom she had written a critical article) in Myrne, in the southern province of Kherson, on 8 August.
- **Serhiy Furmanyuk** of *Ostrov* was violently ejected from the meeting that the local candidate of the ruling Party of the Regions gave in Artemivsk, in the eastern province of Donetsk, on 14 September.
- The mayor of Selidovo in Donetsk province [threatened to hit](#) a cameraman working for

local TV station *Kapri* when he attended a meeting in violation of [article 74 of the electoral law](#).

The political pressure has not spared newsrooms. Two journalists, **Olga Godovenko** and **Olga Komarova**, resigned from *MIG* TV because, they said, they refused to "represent the interests of a certain political party" and because they were no longer able to "carry out their professional duties in accordance with the principles of ethical journalism." The head of the station, **Tatyana Yaroshenko**, also resigned.

Natalia Sokolenko, a leading investigative journalist, resigned from *STB* television in protest against the broadcasting of programmes which she said had been "ordered."

The [situation of TVi](#), an independent station, continues to deteriorate. One by one, cable TV services are ceasing to carry the station, especially in the east of the country.

Other media say they are also the victims of attempts to cut them off from their audience. The magazine *Ukrayinskiy Tyzhden*, for example, has been [dropped from certain distribution networks](#). The news website "Mayesh Pravo Znaty" (You have the right to know) was dropped by its web host for covering "political issues."

Ukraine is ranked 116th out of 179 countries in the [2011-2012 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

(Photo: Sergei Supinsky / AFP)

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- , (JPEG - 154.9 kb)
 - RWB contribution for Ukraine UPR, (PDF - 217.8 kb)
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