

The Ukrainian media and political fight

No. 18/266, May 6, 2002

On April 30, 2002, on the eve of World Press Freedom Day, the President of Ukraine signed the decree «On Social Security of Children of Journalists Who Died or Became Disabled in the Execution of Their Duties». The document established the procedure for payment of presidential subsidies to children of journalists who died or became disabled in the execution of their duties. Of course, children are our future, but isn't it better to ensure that their parents face no danger in execution of their duties? This question is not rhetorical, since the problem is of paramount importance.

On May 3, 2002, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) marked World Press Freedom Day by naming the world's worst places to be journalists – 10 places, whose dangers and restrictions represent the full range of current threats to press freedom. At the top of the list is the West Bank, where Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's government has used extraordinary force to keep journalists from covering its recent military incursion. Next is Colombia, where violent reprisals against the press by all factions in the civil conflict have made this the most deadly beat in the Western Hemisphere. Meanwhile, dangers persist in Afghanistan, where eight journalists were killed in the line of duty in late 2001, and where U.S. government actions have hindered independent reporting on the war. CPJ also placed Eritrea, Belarus, Burma, Zimbabwe, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, and Cuba on the list of worst places to be a journalist. The fact that Ukraine is not on the list cannot be viewed as a reason for complacency, as problems relating to speech and press freedom are still acute in our country.

According to Freedom House's annual global survey of press freedom, out of 187 countries, 40% were considered Free, with no significant restrictions on the news media, whereas 33% were rated Not Free, characterized by state control or other obstacles to a free press. Ukraine and other 50 countries received scores that, as in previous years, placed them in the Partly Free category. Although, the situation in the countries within this category is not the same. Ukraine is a better place to be a journalist as compared to such post-communist states as Belarus, Turkmenistan or Tajikistan. At the same time, the situation is much worse than in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and even former Yugoslavia.

The above conclusions are based, in particular, on manifestations of violence against and serious crackdowns on independent journalists and media outlets. Ukraine displayed worrying signs of sliding into the Not Free category, after President Leonid Kuchma became indirectly implicated in the disappearance and brutal murder of independent

journalist Heorhiy Gongadze. The report pointed out that restrictions on the news media were imposed through interference of tax bodies, while governmental agencies frequently failed to enforce constitutional guarantees for speech and press freedom. According to Freedom House's report, the only positive change is approval of the new Criminal Code, under which libel suits are no longer considered as criminal offenses.

In 2000, the international organization of journalists Reporters without Borders published a list of countries, where assassinations of journalists took place, and Ukraine was on the list because of the murder of Heorhiy Gongadze. In 2001, Ukraine appeared on the list together with Northern Ireland, Kosovo and the Basque country. A tragic death of journalist Igor Alexandrov was meant that time. Another dangerous tendency that takes place in most countries, including Ukraine, is impunity of crimes towards journalists. All investigations of such crimes result in nothing in most cases and the principals of the assassinations remain unpunished.

Nancy Isenson, member of Reporters without Borders, says that the situation relating to press freedom in Ukraine is not changing for the better, since two Ukrainian journalists were assassinated and, at least, 20 independent print and radio journalists were attacked (the *Ukrainska Pravda*, May 3, 2002). Such phenomenon as censorship is widely proliferated as well. Members of Reporters without Borders believe freedom of the Ukrainian media to be significantly restricted and characterized by state control, which was especially true during the latest election campaign.

In the opinion of the European Institute for Mass Media, biased position of the Ukrainian media was one of the major problems of the 2002 elections. As a result, print and electronic media used the so-called hidden advertisement. As a matter of fact, the above type of advertisement allowed political parties and coalitions to substantially reduce their election expenditures, thereby by no means contributing to transparency of campaign expenses. Hidden advertisement means political advertisement that cannot be legally interpreted as such. Conclusions about the 2002 election campaign indicated that struggle between politicians dominated over that between political programs (the *Interfax-Ukraine*, April 1, 2002). According to experts, inability of the media to properly present information about different political forces to the general public was the underlying reason for discontent of political parties and coalitions. According to representatives of Julia Tymoshenko's bloc, the above was true about their coalition. Actually all parties and coalitions voiced their discontent with the work of the media due to dissemination of unconfirmed facts or mostly negative context of information on political forces opposing that media outlet's party-sponsor.

Problems of Ukraine's media, especially in the context of the 2002 elections, are not only indicated in reports and surveys of international institutions. A glance at TV newscasts and publications in newspapers and journals is enough to assess Ukrainian media freedom. On the whole, specific relations of power and the media as well as the media and political elite during election campaign ensue from their relations within the period between elections.

In Ukraine, the overwhelming majority of the media often serve as propagation and advocacy sources and have nothing in common with journalism. For the time being, Ukraine's press still follows the old Marxist-Leninist theory saying that it has to perform the functions of propagation and advocacy. Nevertheless, the media are not the one to blame, for according to the same theory, it is impossible to live in society and be independent from it. Moreover, the press was transformed into the PR instrument rather by politicians and state officials than by journalists themselves. The media are funded and controlled either by the state or by financial and political groups, referred to as «oligarchic». In Ukraine, political figures invest in the mass media and not vice versa. Consequently, a certain media outlet serves definite political forces, advocating and protecting their interests and not values shared by the editorial staff. It is no secret that a definite political force or business group influences almost each Ukrainian media outlet or TV channel. At the same time, those political forces and business groups do not suppose the media to be potentially profit-making. Ukraine lacks people like Murdoch, Gusinski or Berezovski. The mass media are controlled by the state or political forces or business groups, whose major sphere of interests has nothing in common with the media business. For the moment, profit-making printed or electronic media are actually absent in Ukraine. Some regional printed media manage to survive exclusively due to advertising. Be it paradoxical as it may, large politicians and businessmen are not interested in making the media their business and deriving profit. Besides, the Ukrainian advertisement/media market is underdeveloped.

Meanwhile, media consumers cannot afford to pay for media products due to economic problems in the country. The situation can be viewed as a vicious circle, for diversification of sources of funding the media could reduce their dependence and make them freer. Though, traditionally, the issue of speech freedom can be easily «regulated» by the State Taxation Administration, the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service, the National Council for Television and Radio Broadcasting and other state agencies that can revoke the license of the media outlets.

Hence, investing in the Ukrainian mass media, political forces pursue their own interests and draw dividends in the form of newspapers and television advertisement. There is a common truth: the one who pays is the boss. In Ukraine, political elite pays the media to wage struggle against their political rivals and business competitors. So, in our country the media either silence information about the rivals of their sponsors or provide misleading data, covering political opponents in mud, while comments on sponsors and their allies are mostly positive. Actually, influence of all parties and politicians on the media is limited. The media often censor information or take it out of context and this tendency prevails. Given such a situation, journalism turns into a mechanism for manipulation of people's consciousness and information becomes just a tool designed to influence public opinion. So, the audience is forced to develop specific abilities and, according to popular satirist M. Zhvanetski, «information is successfully substituted with intuition». People continue reading between the lines as under the Soviet Union.

Results of the 2002 parliamentary elections can serve as an indicative example of today's situation in Ukraine. The election campaign demonstrated deep mistrust of information

consumers in printed media. The overwhelming majority of votes were given not to political forces, whose representatives constantly appeared on TV and in the press. The bloc For United Ukraine and the Social Democratic Party (United) proved to be the outsiders. Despite powerful media resource and the fact that those parties were elected to parliament, they failed to win the majority. The above leaves us with an assumption that influence of the media on outcomes of elections was not that strong. At the same time, during the 2002 elections, the Ukrainian media have been involved in political fight stronger than ever before. The matters in question are not participation of 174 journalists in elections and enrollment of the media representatives in party lists as a form of bribery. The Ukrainian mass media failed to remain aloof from political fight because of a number of objective and subjective reasons. Objective reasons included influence of the national and local authorities, unwilling to lose control over the situation, and investments in the media made by certain politicians. Subjective reasons included positions of journalists who followed imposed rules of the game for various financial and organizational reasons.

Due to involvement in political games, the Ukrainian press became one of its participants. The media participation in the «battle», direct use of the press and biased position on certain developments served as peculiar technological instruments during the latest parliamentary elections. Most likely, the above trend will be maintained, constantly gaining momentum in the light of upcoming presidential elections.

During the 2002 parliamentary elections, the media were involved in several scandals, being the apple of discord between various political forces. Those extremely unpleasant developments included tapegate-2 (tapes made public by Dmytro Ponamarchuk, former press-secretary of Volodymyr Chornovil), scandals around TV channel 1+1 with direct involvement of Kyiv mayor Olexandr Omelchenko, the Polityka newspaper and the Internet media project «Obkom». Numerous notorious incidents took place at the regional level as well.

Proceeding from the above, respective tendencies are likely to become even more sophisticated in the future. Given the overall political situation in the country and financial position of Ukraine's media, they are doomed to technological standstill. Financial, economic and political realities determined the role of the Ukrainian press as a sacrificial lamb. This role can change only if Ukraine's media sector becomes attractive for foreign investments, media leadership manages to diversify sources of income and the advertisement market develops. Pluralism can also appear as a result of political reforms, provision of the opposition with free access to the media and reform of public TV channels. Meanwhile, much depends upon the position of journalists, their competence, compliance with ethic rules and ability to offer resistance to various attacks on the part of politicians and state agencies. Journalists must do their utmost to remain aloof from political fight.