

PRIME MINISTER YANUKOVYCH AND MEDIA FREEDOM

By Taras Kuzio

Equal access to the media during this year's Ukrainian presidential campaign is a key issue in determining to what degree Western governments, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe can judge the election as "free and fair" (Ukrayinska pravda, August 3). Serhiy Tyhipko, the head of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's campaign, rejected accusations that his allies were censoring television and therefore not providing equal access for all candidates. Claiming he had never seen *tennyky* (presidential instructions to TV stations), Tyhipko claimed, "I do not know about such kinds of political censorship" (Ukrayinska pravda, July 27).

Prime Minister Yanukovich, the candidate of the pro-Leonid Kuchma camp, is unsuccessfully attempting to prove he supports media freedom. Speaking to an all-Ukrainian conference of heads of state and communal mass media outlets, he said that media freedom is one of the most important requirements for the normal functioning of the state. There was a need to speak the "truth," he added (Ukrayinska pravda, May 6).

The problem Yanukovich and his allies face is that actions speak louder than words, both domestically and internationally. A new report by Freedom House entitled, "Under Assault: Ukraine's News Media and the 2004 Elections," concluded, "Few believe Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's May 6, 2004, speech defending the rights of the media" ([freedomhouse.org/research/specreports/ukmedia604.pdf](http://freedomhouse.org/research/specreports/ukmedia604.pdf)). One major factor why "Ukraine fatigue" exists in the West is precisely because of the wide gulf between words and deeds on the part of Ukraine's pro-Kuchma elites. The same factor explains why Ukrainians have such low trust in their leaders.

Yanukovich declared in his May 6 speech, "If an official takes criticism as a personal insult then he should be not working in state institutions." Furthermore, he explained, "I, for example, have always taken criticism in my family and in society at large as a signal that I am not doing something in the right way, and I was grateful to my friends and colleagues [for this]."

During Yanukovich's six-year rule as governor of Donetsk oblast between 1997 and 2002, such humility went unnoticed. Donetsk oblast, in fact, has the worst record on media freedom in Ukraine. With a poor history on media freedom as both governor and prime minister, Yanukovich's promises to support media freedom if elected seem hollow.

Our Ukraine deputy Mykola Tomenko, head of parliament's Committee on Media Freedom, called upon Yanukovich to uphold media freedom in Donetsk oblast, but the appeal went unheeded (Ukrayinska pravda, June 24). The overwhelming majority of media outlets in Donetsk oblast, Tomenko pointed out, were "directly or indirectly tied to the oblast authorities or Donetsk financial-

industrial groups." This explains Donetsk oblast's dismal record on media freedom.

Tomenko raised the issue after Channel 5, a television station owned by Our Ukraine businessman Petro Poroshenko, was removed from the cable schedule in Donetsk oblast. While the official reason was "technical problems," cable TV providers unofficially told Channel 5 that the real reason was pressure from the local authorities (Ukrayinska pravda, June 23). One day later Volodymyr Demydko, deputy head of the Donetsk state administration, denied any official pressure on cable providers (Ukrayinska pravda, June 24).

Donetsk oblast also has very few opposition newspapers. One of the few, the weekly Ostriv, has always encountered difficulties. But since the election campaign began, these problems have dramatically worsened. Ostriv is the Donbas region's second most popular socio-political publication, according to a June survey by the Fund for Social Research that was financed by the Donetsk branch of the Union of Journalists (Ukrayinska pravda, June 18). But in June the Donbas printing house refused to print Ostriv, explaining that it had too many back orders to fulfill and broken printing machines.

Earlier, the Donechchyna printing house had also refused to print Ostriv. Their unofficial reason was an article that appeared in Ostriv in a November 2003 issue entitled, "The October Criminal Putsch." The article investigated the use of organized crime skinheads and other smear campaign techniques against challenger Viktor Yushchenko when he unsuccessfully attempted to hold an Our Ukraine convention in Donetsk on October 31, 2003.

Ostriv's editor sought to find other printing facilities outside the two Donbas oblasts (Donetsk and Luhansk), but with little luck. The Dnipropetrovsk-based printing house Zoria became the thirteenth in three weeks to refuse to print Ostriv because of yet more "technical reasons" (Ukrayinska pravda, July 13). However, the "technical reasons" did not prevent Zoria from accepting other print jobs. Anatoliy Polishko, Deputy Director of Zoria, advised Ostriv to, "Look for another print shop. But, in the Dnipro region, you will not be printed" (Ukrayinska pravda, July 13).

At this stage the editor of Ostriv, Yevhen Talyshev, called on Yanukovich to withdraw from the presidential race. Talyshev revealed that printing houses had been ordered to not print opposition publications, such as Ostriv, during the election campaign (Ukrayinska pravda, July 15). He challenged the prime minister to prove his "regard for the principles of democracy, the rule of law, and free elections [which] can be [confirmed by] only one step: beginning with the next issue, the newspaper Ostriv will be again printed in Donetsk, where the editors of the weekly are based." He continued, "And if you, Viktor Fedorovich, are not in a position to ensure not even this, then, do not take the trouble of having feelings for the good of Ukraine" (Ukrayinska pravda, July 15).

Yanukovich apparently took little notice, as Ostriv's printing problems have continued. In Pavlohrad the newspaper managed to print one issue, but was then informed by the director of the Pavlohrad City Print Shop that there would be "technical problems" with printing further issues (Ukrayinska pravda, July 21).

This was now the fourteenth printing house to turn away Ostriv, including every print shop in Yanukovych's home base of Donetsk oblast.

Kharkiv became the fourth oblast in which the Ostriv editors attempted to print their newspaper. Here, again, they encountered "technical problems." On top of the printing problem, now Ukrposhta, the state postal service, refused to continue fulfilling a contract to sell Ostriv in its Donetsk outlets.

Ostriv's editor, Talyshev, has reached the conclusion that his difficulties come from the regime's presidential candidate, Yanukovych. "If this state activist allows himself in the post of Prime Minister to so easily infringe the law, one can say with all certainty that he will not become the guarantor of the constitution if he is to be elected to the position of president of our country" (Ukrayinska pravda, July 22).