

Kuzio: In Ukraine, Media Under Pressure

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By [Taras Kuzio](#)

Ukraine is the only country in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to be designated “free” by Freedom House since 2005, primarily because of two critical factors: generally free and fair elections and the presence of a liberal media environment. The gains in media pluralism in Ukraine do not reflect a long-standing phenomenon; these gains were made during former President Viktor Yushchenko’s administration, which led to a lively media environment in the country. This was in marked contrast to the media environment in the country during the last years of the administration of Yushchenko’s predecessor, Leonid Kuchma, when journalists and media organizations faced pressures to censor news reporting. Thus, it is of interest to observers of Ukrainian politics that, since Viktor Yanukovich’s election as President on February 7, 2010, several developments in the first 100 days of the new administration are increasing fears that media independence and media freedoms, especially for television journalists, are once again under threat in Ukraine.

Pressure on the media has been primarily directed at television media. Reporters from two prominent television stations, 1+1 and STB, have penned open letters in which they stated they have been pressured to not cover specific stories, and they have been generally subjected to greater censorship since the new administration took office. They complained that certain topics, such as the 1933 famine in Ukraine, are no longer deemed appropriate for coverage, and criticism of the government and government figures is controlled.

Reporters Without Borders (RWB), the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), and the European Union have all voiced concern over these growing restrictions. Noting that intimidation of journalists has increased significantly since the administration took office, RWB wrote an open letter to President Yanukovich on 28 April 2010, complaining about the contradiction between his defense of media freedom while on foreign visits and treatment of media in Ukraine. The president of the EFJ, Arne Konig, said, “We are concerned by these developments, which threaten to reverse major steps we saw in past years toward democracy, partly thanks to press freedom.”

On 3 May, an unprecedented and unanimous statement was issued by the *Verkhovna Rada’s* Committee on Freedom of Expression and Information, signed by pro-regime and opposition members, denouncing “pressure on journalists” and “censorship” on television that infringes legislation. Demanding an end to all forms of censorship, the committee appealed to different branches of the authorities with specific calls for action, including criminal investigation and parliamentary hearings.

On 21 May, 147 journalists from state and private television channels, as well as newspapers and internet publications, united to establish the Stop Censorship! NGO. Membership in this group is open to other journalists and quickly grew to over 300 journalists from all types of media and across the country. Stop Censorship! stresses that it is not a political organization and does not support any political force but seeks to counter the administration’s move towards censorship. The formation of this NGO is indicative of the seriousness with which journalists in Ukraine are taking the Yanukovich administration’s moves on media independence.

The increasing restriction of Ukrainian media independence, especially as it relates to television, is thought to be directed by the Presidential Administration (PA) in much the same way as the PA-led censorship of the media during the Kuchma administration. These institutional pressures continue alongside physical violence that still threatens the daily lives of journalists, documented by RWB.

The PA was the center of censorship in the Kuchma era, when it issued *temnyky*, or instructions to media on what to cover and what to ignore. While it no longer is thought to issue written *temnyky*, the PA under Yanukovich has reprised its role during Kuchma’s administration vis-à-vis the media. President Yanukovich’s Chief of Staff Serhiy Levochkin and Deputy Hanna Herman have been accused by journalists of interfering in the media. The *Kyiv Post* reported they were “managing” television coverage by “working on designing media agendas for TV channels.” The EU noted, with concern, that authorities may be pressuring television outlets to reduce the amount of time allotted to opposition politicians and that some journalists are being denied the opportunity to cover official meetings.

According to media monitoring organization Telekritika, Herman has pre-authorized television news segments and coordinated television coverage by telephone. In addition, Herman recently appeared on television and said that popular talk show host Savik Shuster should be replaced because he is not

Ukrainian. Interestingly, Shuster came to Ukraine from Russia after fleeing the pressure on media brought to bear by Vladimir Putin's administration.

It should be noted that four financial-industrial groups primarily control Ukraine's television channels. In an environment where corporate raiding is common, pressure on business is the norm, and business was never separated from politics. Business owners inevitably seek to ingratiate themselves with the authorities; therefore, pressure placed on media by the PA may be the self-censoring actions of media owners themselves.

Two live political shows, including the popular '5 Kopecks,' on Channel 5, have been cancelled by owner Petro Poroshenko. Poroshenko was one of three businessmen who funded Volodymyr Lytvyn's election campaign. The Lytvyn bloc defected to the ruling Stability and Reforms coalition after Yanukovich's election. The case of Petro Poroshenko is one example of the actions that owners of television outlets are taking to protect themselves from reprisals by the authorities. The actions reported by journalists at 1+1 and STB are indications of the steps that media owners may take to placate authorities.

Considerable evidence exists that media freedom on Ukraine's television channels is being compromised by the new authorities, their owners, and self-censorship. Domestic and internationally gathered evidence is too overwhelming to reach any other conclusion. This is a clear step back in the democratization process from the advances made in recent years. The media in Ukraine played a pivotal role during the Orange Revolution, and its emergence as a vital fourth estate was one of the key developments of Ukrainian democracy since 2005. It will be interesting to see how the actions taken by the Yanukovich administration impact not only the media environment in the country but other aspects of Ukraine's democratization as well.

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