

Ukraine Media Feel Squeeze Ahead of Election

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Sokolenko, who was taken off covering politics, visiting a book fair in Kiev. **Anatolii Stepanov**

For Natalia Sokolenko, an award-winning Ukrainian TV reporter, the last straw was when she was taken off coverage of the national political scene and demoted to reporting traffic accidents for the commercial news station where she had worked for 10 years.

Her career, she said, had been on a slide since she lobbed a provocative question at President Viktor Yanukovich and fought attempts by politicians and businessmen to buy screen time at her STB channel on the sly.

With a parliamentary election due on Oct. 28, journalists are complaining of increased pressure on independent newspapers and key TV news outlets from the authorities and their allies.

If Yanukovich's Party of the Regions and its partners hold on to their majority as expected, journalists fear the screws will only tighten in a country due to preside over the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe from January.

Cases like Sokolenko's highlight the weak state of the media in Ukraine halfway through Yanukovich's five years as president and 20 years after the former Soviet republic won independence.

After six months covering traffic and highways, the 37-year-old Sokolenko quit.

"I thought of everything I had achieved," she said. "I thought of my youth and my talent. Here I was covering traffic accidents. So I left."

Several weeks on, she is still without a job in mainstream journalism and has stepped up her campaign for media rights.

TVi, one the few stations that criticizes the government, says the authorities are putting pressure on cable company providers that distribute it.

Proposed legislation to make libel an offense punishable by jail time has caused alarm in media circles. The bill was dropped after an outcry, though opposition leaders warn it could return in another form after the election.

And there is also an enemy within: journalists who censor their own news stories under pressure from politicians or who gratuitously mention politicians for payment.

Politicians and big business groups, media watchdogs say, are going to ever greater lengths to persuade media executives to publish paid-for "news" or airtime to massage their candidates' image as election day approaches.

Many commentators foresee even greater state control of media if, as expected, Yanukovich's Party of the Regions consolidates its grip on the 450-seat parliament this month.

"I am afraid that after the parliamentary election there will be a tightening of the screws to purge information space," said Iryna Bekeshkina, director of the Democratic Initiative Foundation think tank.

Yanukovich's administration denies this and says he is committed to preventing any pressure being exerted on the media, especially in the run-up to the election.

Media freedom has played a pivotal role in post-Soviet Ukraine since the murder of opposition journalist Georgy Gongadze in 2000 sparked protests that marked a turning point in former President Leonid Kuchma's 10-year-rule.

The leadership of the Orange Revolution highlighted it in the fight for power in 2005 after street protests and the presidency of the movement's leader, Viktor Yushchenko, brought unprecedented freedom — often to his own discomfort.

Yushchenko's clashes with prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, his unsuccessful relations with Russia, his personal foibles and the exotic lifestyle of his son all became fair game.

All that changed when Yanukovich came to power in 2010. For instance, there are now no satirical TV programs poking fun at the leadership, as was the case during the Yushchenko years. Media criticism of Yanukovich is muted to say the least.

Sokolenko, who was awarded the title of Ukraine's best TV reporter in 2009, says her troubles began in July 2011, when at a news conference given by Yanukovych she alleged that his son, Viktor, who is a deputy, had proxy votes on his behalf in parliament.

"I asked him why he allowed his son to violate the constitution like this. He got angry and said that he hoped that if I had children they would be as good as his," Sokolenko said.

After that, and as she became increasingly involved in campaigning for press rights, she gradually lost access to government and presidential briefings and began the slide down to the traffic and highways beat.

In Ukraine, as in most other ex-Soviet republics, television is far and away the main provider of news for the population, but there is no independent public TV channel, and almost all TV stations have a wealthy backer.

TVi saw the writing on the wall when it was raided by the tax police, a classic harassment tactic in post-Soviet countries.

The State Tax Service said it had launched a criminal case against TVi's chief executive, Mykola Knyazhitsky, saying the channel had evaded more than 3 million hryvnas (\$375,000) in VAT payments.

Though the tax evasion case was dropped, the station says local cable companies have come under pressure to either give up TVi or move it to more expensive packages, putting it beyond the means of many of its traditional viewers.

The station's audience has correspondingly slumped from 13 million to 9 million, Knyazhitsky said.

The Party of the Regions and its allies, backed by wealthy industrialists and businessmen, face the United Opposition bloc, which includes the Batkivshchyna (Fatherland) party of jailed former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and the UDAR (Punch) party of WBC world heavyweight boxing champion Vitaly Klitschko.

A big Regions victory, the opposition fears, will lead to a rollback of the social and civil liberties gained in the Orange Revolution.

One feature of the Ukrainian press that never died out even under Yushchenko's presidency is the practice of paid-for "news," colloquially known in Ukraine as "jeansa," deriving from the idea of slipping money into the back pocket of jeans.

Telekrytika, a Ukrainian Web-based media watchdog, said that as much as \$80,000 will change hands for a leading politician to ensure a guest appearance on a popular TV show, while a 20-second TV sound bite in a news bulletin may cost just \$200.

"There is a complete frenzy now ahead of the elections," Sokolenko said. "Deputies are now shamelessly paying not just the journalists but also their managers and the editors above them."

Knyazhitsky said politicians regularly extend lucrative offers to get the station to insert

a screen shot or sound bite of their candidates into news bulletins.

"They say to us: 'We'll place our party's advertising with you as long as you feature reports about our politicians.' This is common practice in the Ukrainian television market," he said, adding that TVi refused these offers.

STB television, where Sokolenko worked, was unavailable for comment on whether it practiced jeansa.

The Internet is more unfettered but at the same time even more susceptible to jeansa, as most bloggers and Web news outlets do not even pretend to be balanced or neutral.

Media circles say it is standard practice now for Yanukovych's aides to call prominent TV channels to provide direction on how specific issues should be handled.

Replying to a question from Reuters, Yanukovych's administration said the leadership was committed to the principle of defending the free press against "any pressure or interference," though it said the approach to the election could be marked by "increased emotion" and "provocative actions."

"The authorities will react sharply to any violations of freedom of expression," it said in a statement.

Yanukovych himself regularly speaks out in support of a free press and in New York last week criticized a bill presented by a Regions deputy that would once again criminalize libel.

The deputy, Vitaly Zhuravsky, who sought to make libel punishable by up to five years in jail, argued that it was needed to secure the integrity of the election.

Ukraine, he said, was following the lead of Russia, though similar legislation there does not provide for any prison term.

The move raised alarm among journalists, who said it would curb their ability to expose wrong-doing in high places.

"The parliamentary majority is using a law on libel as a disguise for bringing in a law on censorship," wrote Vitaly Sych, editor-in-chief of weekly magazine Korrespondent, whose Sept. 28 issue carried a whited-out cover in protest of what it said was a move to gag the free press.

Though the proposal was dropped on Oct. 2, opposition leaders expect the Regions to resurrect it if the party strengthens its position in parliament.

Early last month, Yanukovych endured an embarrassing moment when a dozen Ukrainian journalists stood up and raised anti-censorship banners as he hailed Ukraine's march to greater media freedom at a World Newspaper Congress in Kiev.

Even as he spoke, his security guards ripped banners saying "stop censorship" from protesters' hands.

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