

Ukraine media laws in spotlight again

KIEV, UKRAINE: The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the World Editors Forum have welcomed the decision of the Ukrainian Parliament to reject a bill to reintroduce criminal defamation, calling on President Viktor Yanukovich to ensure the country follows up with strong commitments to freedom of expression.

WAN-IFRA appealed to Parliament members to reject the bill ahead of a vote held Tuesday, 2 October. In a separate letter to President Yanukovich protesting this new attack on media freedoms in the country, WAN-IFRA called on him to take promised measures to ensure support for a strong, sustainable and independent press.

At the World Newspaper Congress and World Editors Forum held in Kiev last month, and in a meeting with Board members of WAN-IFRA and the Editors Forum, Yanukovich committed to "a completely open and democratic society" with freedom of speech and independent media.

However, since that meeting, the country's Parliament has voted to amend the criminal code to reintroduce criminal libel with jail terms of up to five years, and state authorities have continued to pressure the private broadcaster TVi. Though the ruling party withdrew the draft bill on 26 September, with further discussions suspended until after elections on 28 October, WAN-IFRA and WEF sought further assurances that the proposal would be abandoned.

The Parliament overwhelmingly voted on Tuesday (2 October) to abandon the criminal libel measure in the face of both international and domestic criticism.

"We urge you to take all necessary steps to ensure that in future your country fully respects international standards of freedom of expression," the organisations said in an earlier letter to the president.

In the TVi case, the private broadcaster had its bank accounts frozen by a state authority on 11 September, when a tax court ruling called for a payment of nearly US\$500,000.

This followed a decision by the country's leading cable television provider, Volia, to transfer TVi's signal from its regular package to a premium package, a move that will lead to a sharp fall in viewers. TVi, known for its criticism of the government, claims Volia's decision was in response to government pressure. The station has seen other cable providers drop its signal in recent months, reducing its audience from 13 million to 9.5 million.

"We reiterate our call to allow media professionals to report openly on corruption and to ensure the government fosters an environment where a free press can flourish by being independent of governmental, political or economic control," said WAN-IFRA Press Freedom Director Alison Meston. "We urge the president to make firm, clear assurances that criminal libel will not be reintroduced and ensure TVi can continue to broadcast without intimidation or hindrance."

The full letter to the president can be read at <http://www.wan-ifra.org/node/63995>.

For more information on the press freedom situation in Ukraine visit <http://www.wan-ifra.org/node/54582>.

For more information on WAN-IFRA's press freedom engagements visit <http://www.wan-ifra.org/pressfreedom>.

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