

# **AEJ AUSTRIA October 2014 CONGRESS UKRAINE MEDIA FREEDOM REPORT: Annual report on attacks against freedom of speech and harassment of journalists in Ukraine**

**By Artur Rudzitsky and Maya Zakhovayko**

2014 became an unprecedented year for targeted violence against journalists and gross violations of press freedom in the history of independent Ukraine. The world was shocked by the number of murders, beatings and obstruction of journalists in the last 10 months. During three months The Revolution of Dignity at Independence Square in Kiev (from November 23, 2013 till February 24, 2014) over 200 journalists suffered in the struggle against the criminal regime of Viktor Yanukovich. There were 206 official cases about harassed journalists, photographers and cameramen while they were doing their professional duties in the area of clashes between protesters, police and bandits.

During just one day on December 1, 2013 40 journalists were attacked and beaten near the building of Administration of President of Ukraine Yanukovich. The police did not respect the press signs on the media workers' clothes. They were arresting and brutally beating everyone they could seize. Many of those incidents were recorded on videos. The recordings show how police repeatedly and violently kicked people who were lying helplessly on the ground.

## **Being a journalist in Ukraine is dangerous**

Over the next month there were a lot of kidnappings and beatings of famous journalists. Tatiana Chornovil was one of them. Her car was stopped by strangers in the middle of the road on December 25. Unknown thugs broke her nose and fractured her skull. Doctors diagnosed her with a severe concussion later.

Journalists repeatedly warned that the police did not pay any attention to the bright orange vests with PRESS-markings which the journalists wore. Moreover, most photographers and cameramen stressed that the special police department "Berkut" were specifically targeting journalists with rubber bullets and did it just for spite. Because of this "hunting" several journalists got eye injuries. It is totally unacceptable, even during an armed conflict, that journalists and doctors should be treated as targets by any side in the conflict. It was very dangerous to be a journalist in Ukraine during the revolution.

### **Police “hunted” journalists eyes**

As an example, many journalists were injured on January 19, 2014, when the demonstration from Independence Square spread to Hrushevchko street, which leads to the building of the Ukrainian parliament. Many journalists boarded a bus which was located between protesters and “Berkut” police. The journalists were not at all involved in the violent clashes, but the police deliberately shook the bus, grabbed the camera operator for “Channel 5”, Denys Savchenko, threw away his “Press” badge and dragged him to the police bus. There witnesses say that they broke his leg.

Another journalist was injured by a stun grenade explosion. He was the senior editor of the magazine “Crytyka”, Danylo Yevtukhov, and he was also severely injured by a police rubber bullet in his eye and another in his hand. The cameraman of ICTV, Volodymyr Zinchenko, was shot in the eye as well. He was filming the clashes between protesters and police on the Hrushevskoho Street. These are just a few examples, but there were dozens more.

### **Pro-Russian separatists kidnapped over 60 journalists**

After the overthrowing of Yanukovich at the end of February 2014 being a journalist in Ukraine is still not safe. The Russian army's presence in Ukraine has led to considerable risks for health and life. In the beginning of March Russia sent troops into the territory of Crimea, and annexed it. In April 2014 the Russian army invaded Donbass. They didn't declare war against Ukraine officially, but in this has been a de facto war for half a year with many victims from both sides. Despite clear evidence, sanctions from the EU and USA Russia continues to deny all the evidence-based accusations that have been provided by EU and NATO. At least 62 journalists were kidnapped or captured and imprisoned by separatists from the so-called “Donetsk Peoples Republic” (DPR) and “Lugansk Peoples Republic” (LPR). These data are published in the “Barometer of Freedom of Speech” which was made using Institute of Mass Information Media (IMI) data.

The new wave of violence and intimidation began in March in Crimea with 11 kidnappings, and continued in the Eastern part of Ukraine with 20 abductions of journalists in April, 13 in May, 11 in June and 7 in July.

### **5 journalists died in the East of Ukraine in 6 months**

Since the beginning of 2014 the IMI also confirmed 6 deaths of journalists during the performance of their duties. One during the events of the Maidan square, 5 in the area of the Anti Terror Operation (ATO). 257 cases of beatings and attacks on journalists, 114 cases of obstruction of business and 117 cases censorship were registered.

The experts noted that most of these violations occurred in the eastern Ukraine and were carried out by separatists.

The pressure on the media and journalists by the illegal occupation authorities is continuing in Crimea (9 cases in September alone). Journalists who are working in the area of what the Ukrainian government calls the 'Anti-Terrorist Operation' remain at high risk abduction by the lawless and unpredictable forces of the so-called Donetsk Peoples Republic and Luhansk Peoples Republic: five more such cases occurred in September .

Intimidation and disruption of the mainstream Ukrainian media has also occurred in the form of numerous bomb threats against the offices of news agencies and TV channels. For example, Channel 5 was threatened five times in September 2014. The National News Agency Ukrinform has also received warnings of bomb explosions. Fortunately, actual explosives were never found.

In September the number of serious incidents against journalists or media outlets in Ukraine showed signs of decreasing: just 5 attacks on journalists were recorded -- the lowest figure for the whole year (compared to 8 in July and August, 13 in June, 18 in May, 22 in April, 44 in March, 70 in February and 82 in January). The number of recorded cases of censorship was down to two. The Institute of Mass Information recorded no new cases of attacks on media offices or cyber crime in September.

Summing up, since the beginning of the year IMI has recorded 7 cases of killings of journalists, 270 cases of beatings and attacks on journalists, 120 cases of obstruction of journalistic activities and 122 cases of censorship.