Under Assault

Ukraine's News Media
And the 2004 Presidential Elections

Preface

Freedom House engaged Jeremy Druker and Dean Cox, Prague-based analysts from Transitions Online (www.tol.cz), to survey the state of Ukraine's media one year before the country's crucial presidential election.

The analysts gathered data for this report in June 2003 in conjunction with a Regional Networking Program assessment supported by Freedom House Budapest. They visited Kyiv, Cherkassy and Dnipropetrovsk and interviewed over 30 reporters, editors, journalism educators, human rights experts and media monitors in Ukraine. In addition, the team made use of an extensive review of literature and reports produced by Ukrainian and international monitoring groups on the state of press freedom and the health of the news media industry.

Druker and Cox are the report's principal authors and wrote its first draft. An in-house team of experts from Freedom House, including Senior Scholar and Counselor Adrian Karatnycky, Director of Research Arch Puddington, Senior Scholar Leonard Sussman, Senior Researcher Karin Deutsch Karlekar and Researcher Sarah Repucci, has reviewed the report, as have staff and scholars affiliated with Freedom House in Ukraine. Freedom House Director of Studies Christopher Walker served as the report's managing editor.

The final report contains recommendations developed by Freedom House staff and the report's principal authors.

Summary

Twelve months before the crucial October 2004 national election, the current state of Ukraine's media raises serious questions as to whether a fair and balanced electoral contest can be held. Political and other groups critical of the incumbent president and the ruling political elite are kept from the airwaves. An elaborate system of censorship, including instructions emanating from the offices of the presidential administration, distorts news and skews coverage of political affairs. Mass broadcast media exhibit a high degree of uniformity and bias in their coverage. Such phenomena—already significantly present in news coverage of the 2002 parliamentary elections and in the 1999 presidential election—are likely to intensify in the run-up to the 2004 presidential race unless the international community and Ukrainian civil society exert substantial pressure on Ukraine's leaders. For campaign coverage to be open and balanced, and to help accommodate a free and fair electoral process, the international community, and Ukraine's political leaders, media owners, editors, journalists and civic organizations will need to take the appropriate steps outlined below.
FREEDOM HOUSE RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Ukrainian President and Government:

- Immediately cease issuing and distributing “temnyky” (theme directives that instruct editors on news coverage) and end the intimidation of top-level editors at news media companies.

- Place the necessary financial support for state-subsidized media under the control of a multi-party committee that includes the major political parties.

- Rigorously investigate murders, attacks and threats—physical and financial—against journalists, including the case of Heorhiy Gongadze.

To the Federal Election Commission:

- Ensure equal access of leading candidates (as reflected in a national average of leading public opinion polls in the two months before the election) to the airwaves on state-owned television and radio broadcasts.

- Ensure that the candidates criticized in the news programs of state-owned media are given equal air time in news programs for rebuttal of negative coverage in the two months before the election.

- Establish a fair, representative multi-party media monitoring committee and ensure that state broadcasters provide regular reporting on its deliberations.

For Ukrainian Civic Groups:

- Organize meetings with top editors and media owners to demand fair and balanced coverage of all political parties and presidential candidates by Ukraine’s broadcast, print and online media companies.

- Put in place monitoring mechanisms to guard against excessive coverage of certain political forces on state-supported broadcasters or in state-supported publications.

- Press to ensure that the Committee of Voters of Ukraine has access to the public through state-owned broadcasters and press for coverage of the committee’s election monitoring in privately owned media.

For Ukraine’s News Media Organizations:

- Publish and analyze polling data released by independent and reputable Ukrainian polling organizations and international monitoring organizations that are closely monitoring the election.

- Adopt a public declaration and code of conduct to avoid last-minute or election-eve publication or broadcast of biased, untruthful or libelous stories to defame a candidate or party.

- Adopt and make public declarations of your allegiance to journalistic codes of ethics, such as those that have already been created by the Kyiv Independent Media Union or the Association of Publishers, or draft and publicize an in-house code that provides for unbiased political coverage, highlights conflicts of interest and explains a journalist’s duty to provide balanced, factual information to the public.

For Journalists:

- Join the Independent Media Union as a first visible step of commitment to media objectivity. This new union was created as a result of a special December 2002 parliamentary hearing on political censorship, which was prompted by the manifesto on the issue signed by several hundred journalists in an important show of solidarity that fall.

- Work toward translating into forceful action the new union’s efforts to combat political interference with media content.

For Foreign Governments:

- Urge Ukraine’s government and administrators to uphold freedom of speech issues and freedom of information rights, and in particular to legally enforce domestic laws already protecting these freedoms in Ukraine.

- Ensure that international election monitoring begins six months before the vote, with extensive and systematic monitoring of news media bias and equal access.
Negotiate through the OSCE with the Ukrainian government a series of appearances by OSCE monitors on state-subsidized media during the six months leading to election day. The OSCE monitors should be given access to television in order to report on their findings and how they assess the pre-election environment.

For Foreign and Private Donors:

- Provide a dramatic increase in funding for media monitoring and hold the Ukrainian government and news media organizations responsible for fair and balanced news coverage.
- Provide financial assistance in support of journalists and independent news media companies engaged in fighting censorship through the courts.
- Ensure significant donor support to the Kyiv Independent Media Union to enable it to create a social fund for journalists fired for fulfilling their professional duties and to support a legal fund that can vigorously defend the rights of journalists through the legal system.

INTRODUCTION

No one should underestimate the political, social and economic importance of the presidential election scheduled for October 2004 in Ukraine. It is clear that this election offers an important opportunity for a new beginning for Ukraine, a country mired in official corruption. Yet given Ukraine’s recent history, including its last presidential and parliamentary elections, the next twelve months do not bode well for the independence of the country’s news media. President Leonid Kuchma (who cannot run for a third term) and his allies will look to secure at all costs the victory of a chosen successor. The election of an opposition candidate could portend a sea change in the upper echelons of power and enable sorely needed reform of the political system.

In the past, analysts in Ukraine and news media watchdog organizations outside this east European country have criticized Ukraine’s news media for performing poorly and failing to provide fair political and electoral information to the voting public. The financial dependency of the media and strict control of media companies by the ruling regime, local and regional administrations and political parties have increased dramatically since President Kuchma’s 1999 reelection and intensified during the 2002 parliamentary elections, when intimidation of reporters and media outlets reached its highest point since the consolidation of Ukraine’s post-communist independence.

Most domestic media monitors and many practicing journalists interviewed for this report say the outlook for balanced coverage of the 2004 presidential election campaign is even more bleak. Given the immense implications of a change in state power, and the strong showing of opposition forces in recent polls, there is a danger that many news media outlets—particularly broadcast media—will outdo even their past efforts to skew the news agenda. Once again, they can be expected to advance the biased political or business interests of their patrons, rather than present a balanced and fair overview of the full range of candidates and their policies.

The administration of President Kuchma, and the United Ukraine and SDPU (united) parties, in particular, have learned that a firm grip of the Fourth Estate confers tremendous power. In a depressed economic environment where many voters cannot afford to buy print media and receive news exclusively from television, firm control has been established over all national television broadcasters by the pro-Kuchma forces. Many observers interviewed for this report expect Ukraine’s past practice of state-controlled media promoting the candidates of incumbent power to continue, while privately owned media engage in a quid pro quo of promoting and attempting to secure the election of a candidate from the ruling elite in return for economic favoritism, political protection and potential subsidies for economically unprofitable news outlets.

THE LAST TIME AROUND: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN 2002

A look at Ukraine’s last national parliamentary elections provides clear evidence of a pattern of direct and indirect state interference in the media’s dissemination of alternative and opposition views. According to an OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM) report of campaign coverage in February and March 2002, state-funded television broadcaster UT-1 devoted between 21 percent and 40 percent of its prime time presentations to the pro-presidential “For a United Ukraine” (FUU) political bloc of five parties, with most of the reporting consisting of positive coverage. Of the six large
private television broadcasters, five still favored one political party or bloc over others, according to the EOM. The report stated that three broadcasters—Inter TV, Studio 1+1 and ICTV—provided more and favorable coverage of FUU and the SDPU(u)—Kuchma’s party—whereas the smaller Utar and Noviy Canal (since taken over by pro-Kuchma interests) favored Yushchenko’s “Our Ukraine” bloc and Yulia Tymoshenko. Inter TV and Studio 1+1 provided mostly negative coverage of Yushchenko and, just weeks before election day, ICTV—one of three broadcasters partially owned by the president’s son-in-law Viktor Pinchuk—presented a controversial and inaccurate “documentary” connecting Western money to Ukraine’s opposition. The program was rebroadcast on the state channel UT-1. Regional broadcasters owned by the state were deemed more biased, with channels in Kharkov and Nikolaiv dedicating some 70 percent of their news coverage to the pro-presidential FUU, which received only 11.77 percent of the vote.

While print media offered more of a plurality of political news coverage and views, readers still had to purchase several publications to see a balanced, complete picture of the campaign. In the 2002 elections, large-circulation daily newspapers Fakty i Komentarii (Facts and Commentary), Segodnya (Today), Den (Day) and Kiyevskie Vedomosti (The Kyiv Gazette) backed pro-presidential parties, while Silski Visti (Country News), Ukraina Moloda (The Youth of Ukraine) and Vechernie Vesti (The Evening Gazette) supported the opposition parties. The combined circulation of the national pro-government and government-controlled dailies exceed 2.1 million, while the combined circulation of national dailies that are critical of the authorities stands at 1.15 million. Ukrainian editions of Russian periodicals have a combined national circulation of more than 700,000 and tend to eschew criticism of the Kuchma administration. At the regional level, the imbalance is far greater, usually with a single local daily closely linked to the president-appointed regional governor or to pro-presidential local oligarchic groups.

The OSCE’s EOM report also highlighted the politicized role of the Ukrainian Tax Administration, whose relentless investigations of independent media aroused a storm of domestic and international criticism. Although the Tax Administration temporarily froze investigations of news media organizations just before the 2002 elections, other forms of harassment surfaced. Several opposition newspapers had contracts cancelled by Kyiv printing houses, delaying and impeding publication. According to professor Valeriy Ivanov, head of the mass media department at Kyiv National University, incidents in the regions included: a station refusing to broadcast a program in which an opposition leader participated; publishing houses refusing to print opposition periodicals; and distributors told not to sell several opposition newspapers. Professor Ivanov, who is also the head of the non-governmental Academy of Ukrainian Press (AUP), also noted that the media frequently quoted biased public opinion polls that various political groupings had “ordered,” in an effort to disorient the electorate.

Despite being documented and revealed to the public during parliamentary hearings in 2002, “temnyky”—instructions from the presidential administration to news outlets directing the angle and substance of reporting a story—still exist today.

The same set of circumstances that ensured the media could not—or would not—play a constructive role as an independent and balanced player before and during the last election remain today. The media environment, in essence, has changed little over the past few years. Although there are several signs of increased civic monitoring and organized efforts by journalists to resist censorship and pressures, these are far too isolated to overcome the worrying state of affairs in the Ukrainian media scene.

OBSTACLES TO OPEN AND FAIR COVERAGE

A range of interrelated factors contributes to Ukraine’s troubling pre-election news media environment. These
include significant state interference, the economic dependency and vulnerability of most news media, corruption of journalistic ethics and inadequate education and preparation of journalists.

This section of the report focuses on each of these important factors.

STATE INFLUENCE AND INTERFERENCE

State intimidation, state obstruction and influence peddling as a means of personal economic gain continue to pull the strings that control many of Ukraine’s news media. Most of the large-circulation, national news publications in Kyiv are highly politicized—and most are tied to the incumbent government, to political parties, to oligarchic groupings known as financial-political groups and to businessmen-parliamentarians. Media experts estimate that 90 percent of local and national newspapers and news magazines and 95 percent of television and radio stations are in the hands of political parties, national and local governments or oligarchs and entrepreneurs influenced by or “buddying” with politicians. Television, the most popular medium in Ukraine, is also the most heavily controlled by government and politicians close to the ruling circles. At the national level, the only six major television broadcasters are controlled by the Kuchma regime or owned by Kuchma loyalists. STB—a station that bucked this trend in 1999—had its entire ownership team removed and replaced by allies of President Kuchma. Novy Kanal, a station that gave voice to opposition parties in the 2002 elections, likewise, is under the control of a group closely connected to the president’s son-in-law, Viktor Pinchuk.

State pressures on the media of Ukraine are hardly new. They were present in the first seriously contested Ukrainian election, the presidential race of 1994, when Kuchma unseated Leonid Kravchuk. At that time, local television media were harassed by the incumbent authorities. President Kuchma and, in recent years, his colleagues appear to have learned from the past and have applied the same tactics with a vengeance to political opponents.

The unfortunate result is that, after prospering and growing during the first days of Ukrainian independence, Ukraine’s press freedoms in practice have gradually eroded. Notwithstanding the passage of a series of progressive media laws, today Ukrainian media freedoms are widely and systematically denied. Tax inspections, libel rulings against independent journalists, intimidation, state links to killings of journalists and questionable administrative controls over distribution and revocation of broadcast licenses have stifled the operations of most independent news organizations and achieved alarming frequency and proportions in the 1999 presidential and 2002 parliamentary elections.

One alarming and well-documented practice of direct state interference is the use of “temnyky.” Despite having been amply documented and revealed to the public during parliamentary committee hearings held late in 2002, “temnyky”—instructions from the presidential administration to news outlets directing the angle and substance of reporting a story—still exist today, although more discretely. In a March 2003 study, “Negotiating the News: Informal State Censorship of Ukrainian Television,” Human Rights Watch reported that “temnyky” were first sent to several pro-presidential news media companies and television stations in September 2001, during the campaigns prior to the March 2002 parliamentary elections. These directives have since been distributed to a larger number of broadcasters and are often reportedly followed up with intimidating phone calls from the presidential administration or by personal visits from “enforcers.” State-financed broadcasters and publications are required by the state to provide certain programming, which some editors and producers say forces them to cover stories from only one side or avoid certain topics. Otherwise, the news organizations risk loss of subsidies from governments—national, regional or local.

Following protests and complaints by hundreds of journalists in October 2002 in Kyiv, the parliamentary Committee on Freedom of Speech and Information conducted hearings—during which the “temnyky” were brought to light—on political censorship and freedom of speech issues. From the meetings materialized a bill—signed into law by President Kuchma—that amended previous freedom-of-speech laws already in existence. The law is considered a significant positive step in Ukraine’s development toward protecting press freedoms.

State interference is also severe at the local and regional levels, where officials (especially governors, who are appointed by the president and not by local elected councils) have grown more powerful over the years and have their own methods of harassing the print and broadcast media.
In eastern Ukraine, journalists at several media outlets said they were not afraid to criticize “far off” Kyiv, but did express reservations about offending local and regional authorities. The editor-in-chief of one of the most popular newspapers in eastern Ukraine said his paper did not shy away from criticism, but could only go so far—the local authorities owned the building where his paper was housed. Many editors find it easier to stick to social and cultural themes than sharp reporting that might risk pressure and official retaliation.

Blatant physical attacks against editors, producers and reporters have continued since the 2000 murder of online reporter Heorhiy Gongadze. Among those who died under suspicious circumstances are Donetsky TV journalist Ihor Aleksandrov and Mykhaylo Kolomiytets, the head of the Ukrainian News Agency, who apparently committed suicide in November 2002. In other recent cases, online journalists Edouard Malinivsky (reporter with Ostriv) and Oleg Eltsov (editor of Ukraina Kryminalna) were assaulted by two thugs each in August and June 2003, respectively. Although direct connections have not been confirmed, the attacks have been investigated as retaliations for posted articles. Furthermore, the threat of violence has led some journalists to shy away from controversial political or economic topics. Almost half of 727 Ukrainian journalists polled in November 2002 by the Ukrainian Center of Economic and Political Research, the National Association of Journalists, Charter-4 and the Web-based media watchdog Telekritika believe physical retaliation from criminal elements or authorities are possible with the publication of critical materials. But psychological pressure (79.2 percent) and economic punishments (75.7 percent), the journalists said, happen more often.

**Economic Vulnerability**

Although “temnyky” and attacks on journalists tend to garner much of the attention of international press monitoring groups, many of the hurdles to attaining press freedom in Ukraine are neither criminal nor even strictly political in nature. Some stem from the financial weakness of Ukraine’s media market.

Media magnates, businessmen, relatives of top government officials and local administrators continue to abuse the news media to curry government favor and build power and influence. Owners of private media are known to pronounce “editorial policies” that support politicians and political parties, promote their own political aspirations, bury business competitors and protect the interests of friends and family. As one interviewee put it, “In Ukraine, the way to make money is through politics and the way to do politics is through the media.” One television news producer in a regional city said that political pressure was not the greatest impediment to independent journalism—the boss’ attempts to please his business friends disturbed the producer much more. In this light, the government should be seen, said one journalism educator, as just one of several interest groups—it was unfair, he said, to blame President Kuchma alone for quashing press freedom.

In interviews conducted for this report, Kyiv-based national media professionals and rights monitors repeatedly highlighted the considerable degree of political interference and control exerted by the authorities or forces linked to them. By contrast, their counterparts at the local and regional levels—at least in the east, one of the main targets of this assessment—attribute their lack of independence far more to the economic climate. With a healthy advertising market and the other elements of a “normal” market economy, they believe their publications would be strong enough to resist both political forces and wealthy businessmen looking to use the press as a personal vehicle.

Ukraine’s current advertising market—although it is growing by 30 percent annually—is very weak, especially for newspapers and news magazines. The situation is more robust in the capital, but about 75 to 80 percent of all ad revenues—which totaled between $80 million and $200 million last year according to various estimates—go to the six national television channels.
These outlets, as noted above, are controlled by or support the current ruling administration. Jed Sunden, the publisher of the English-language Kyiv Post and the Korrespondent magazine and Web site, said print publications only take in around 7 percent of ad revenue nationally, a very low figure compared to the more “normal” 15 percent in other countries. He traced the situation to a number of factors, including a lack of skilled media managers and a dearth of Western investors—scared off by the country’s bad free-press image and the crash of the Russian ruble in 1998. At this point in the development of the market, Sunden said, newspaper executives should be able to take advantage of the rising economy, run their operations more efficiently and devise innovative ways to increase circulation and attract more advertisers. Still, with the additional obstacle of a high proportion of Ukrainians living in poverty or possessing little discretionary disposable income, readership remains pitifully low, especially for a country of 48 million people.

Of the some 700 television and radio stations and 3,500 news publications on the market, about half admit to operating in the red. But it is suspected that actually most suffer losses. Those partially owned by or loyal to the Kuchma administration, regional governors, mayors, opposition leaders and political parties are kept financially afloat by government subsidies and/or hidden handouts. Lack of transparency, submission of false data to the National Council and hidden ownership make it increasingly difficult to know the financial truth.

Some of the journalists and editors interviewed for this report felt the fastest way to a genuine media market would be for the state to relinquish its ownership and stop the practice of subsidies as quickly as possible. As a result, unappealing, politicized newspapers and broadcasters would, they say, disappear from the scene. The privatization of state-owned media would, this theory goes, boost the demand for Western-style journalism, allowing journalists to pursue “true” freedom of speech and recast news media as real businesses. Others, however, worried that media oligarchs would snatch up newly “free” news organizations, and the currently enforced “editorial policies” would continue as they do today. “Privatization under the current market conditions is horrifying,” said Sergiy Guz, the general secretary of the Kyiv Independent Media Union, predicting greater economic pressure on journalists and continued political control of publications and broadcasters.

### An Erosion of Ethical Standards

Most journalists and editors struggle to survive financially on meager paychecks. The average journalist’s salary is half the minimum standard of living in Ukraine. Reporter and editor salaries outside the capital range from $70 to $100 per month, whereas Kyiv-based journalists earn on average about $300 per month. Some television-journalists are known to earn about $1,500 per month, but with significant portions of padded journalism salaries paid “in a separate envelope”—meaning illegally and untaxed. Many journalists thus feel they have little choice but to comply with the editorial demands of the owners and are forced to practice a form of self-censorship. They must tiptoe around offending the business interests of either the owners or directors of their media outlets, or the cronies of both.

The choice to succumb to such pressures, however, is easier for some because of the glaring lack of any appreciation for journalism ethics, including conflict of interest. Many journalists are known to have businesses bribe them for positive news coverage and they accept “sponsorship donations.” Furthermore, many news personnel, including top editors and producers, hold second jobs, while others work in the public relations departments of companies they personally cover for their news organizations. Journalists and editors sometimes defend their publication’s or broadcaster’s policy of accepting money from candidates for favorable coverage, claiming that they would otherwise be passing up an opportunity to cover an event and earn some well-needed cash or a rival news media company would reap the financial reward.

The fight for advertisers in regional and local news outlets is particularly keen. Ethical principles are not honored, as publications and broadcasters regularly accept money from businesses in return for positive stories on ordered subjects. Journalists themselves are known to have accepted payments from business owners in return for favorable coverage. Owners, editors-in-chief and journalists defend the practice as a means of survival in the current economic climate. Even Mikhailo Veisberg, head of the Association of Publishers, argued that the members of his network must first get on a firm financial grounding before having the luxury of addressing ethical issues.

Sergiy Tomilenko, editor-in-chief of Nova Doba (New Times) in the central Ukrainian city of Cherkassy, is one of many
journals with a cynical view of the campaign coverage expected next year by privately owned and government-financed news media organizations. “Many independent media owners said they will publish for money all materials,” Tomilenko told interviewers this June, referring to the positive-coverage “stories” expected to flood into the pages of cash-strapped publications next year. “Future government candidates will have more money and more power for the campaign. Our readers will not receive good information for voting.” Although he claims his local, government-sponsored newspaper would be more objective than the competitive independent, privately owned publications, he expects the large-circulation, government-subsidized national newspapers “will not give the truth to their readers.”

By now, many readers well understand that corruption is widespread in the media and can see through election-time manipulation. Referring to the 2002 parliamentary elections, the AUP’s Professor Ivanov wrote: “The results of the election have shown that people learned to resist the media’s influence. The electorate has become selective about parties, candidates, and political advertising, and doubtful about journalists’ work. From more than 100 journalists running for seats in parliament, only (one) has won in his majority constituency.”

Another academic, Vladimir Demchenko, head of the journalism department at the State University in Dnipropetrovsk, felt that the mass media, especially the printed press, would play a less important role in the lead-up to the presidential election than during the last parliamentary elections. “Nobody believes them anymore,” he said. Few, if anyone, believe the media serve the needs of society. A poll conducted by the Ukrainian Democratic Circle in February 2003 states that Ukrainians exhibit considerable distrust in newspapers and news broadcasts, and in particular that television viewers trust national broadcaster UT-1 the least in its truthfulness of news coverage. The report also said the most watched news programs on Inter TV and 1+1 also suffer from low ratings in terms of political impartiality. Another poll released by the think tank in August 2003 shows 71 percent of Ukrainians believe political censorship exists in the news media.

**Education and Training of Journalists**

The poor state of journalism education in much of Ukraine also means that there are few training grounds for the next generation. Western-styled, fact-based journalism education in Ukrainian universities and institutes still lags far behind the advancements that have been made in the former communist nations geographically closer to western Europe, such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and the Baltic States. The schools offering studies in journalism and mass communication, especially those outside Kyiv, are still promoting curriculums burdened with Soviet-era, theoretical-heavy lectures and few, if any at all, practical, hands-on courses. Several of the larger journalism education programs at universities—mostly in Kyiv—have, however, expanded their offerings and replaced retiring professors with young journalists and editors. These new educators have had exposure to Western-style training workshops, have visited U.S. and European newsrooms, and currently practice more balanced, less opinionated journalism. But specialized reporting classes, such as political coverage, campaign and election coverage and investigative reporting, are still almost non-existent.

“It is hard to imagine an employer hiring one of my students,” Professor Demchenko said, complaining that he has little flexibility in shaking up the curriculum due to strict core requirements mandated to every university. He also admitted that a huge number of graduates—he estimated about 75 percent within two years after graduation—end up quickly leaving the profession, disappointed by constraints in the workplace and minuscule salaries. “They leave for PR where they can earn a car from working during one election,” he said. A group of Demchenko’s students interviewed for this report echoed their professor’s pessimistic views and expressed no idealism in regard to the profession. Ihor Soldatenko, director of Ukrainian non-governmental organization Charter 4, noted that about 90 percent of the people from regional and local radio stations that his organization has trained have less than two years of practical experience working on radio and “almost none of them have a basic journalism education.”

Hundreds of reporters have attended training seminars—run by USAID and foreign donor-supported international organizations such as IREX and Internus and local groups such as the Soros-financed International Renaissance Foundation and Charter 4. Yet media professionals say newsrooms, especially at the local and regional levels, still suffer from a large deficit of specialized journalists, in particular those with experience in political, campaign and election coverage. And with the election looming in 2004, Charter 4 had not
organized training courses for election coverage as of midsummer, as a result of discussions concerning constitutional reforms. “Nobody in Ukraine can tell you when the next elections will be,” said Charter 4’s Soldatenko.

The legacy of inadequate training is more than evident: Some editors and journalists have expressed confusion about what kind of “news events” they should cover during political campaigns. For example, if one candidate stages several conferences or events and a rival does not, journalists are unsure what to cover for fear of providing one candidate too much airtime or too many column inches.

CONCLUSION

According to many Ukrainian news industry experts and practicing journalists, the media are likely to repeat the failures that led to media bias in the elections of 1999 and 2002 unless significant changes take place during the next year. An environment that encourages the violation of professional ethics and the absence of a culture that seeks to provide fair and balanced election coverage, coupled with a whole range of politically and economically tinged tools of repression, do not portend any improvement from past practice. In the current economic climate and high-stakes political scene, most of Ukraine’s newspapers, newsmagazines, radio and television news shows, and some of its online news outlets simply cannot operate as genuine independent entities.

Former Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko, who consistently garners support of up to 35 percent of the population in opinion polls, and who leads his closest rivals by a margin of two- or three-to-one, is considered by many to be the leading presidential candidate for 2004. Unless pro-Kuchma forces can agree on a successor to the current administration, it is widely believed that Yushchenko will likely win. As the election approaches, that reality, of course, will make Yushchenko—along with many other opposition candidates and parties—a prime target of attacks by Kuchma loyalists, many of whom control influential media companies. As its vulnerability is exposed, Ukraine’s incumbent political elite can be expected to exert even more intense pressure on the media to drive voters away from the opposition.

Indeed, between now and October 2003 there may be simply too little time for positive trends in the Ukrainian media to blossom into fully fledged counterweights to the vast array of forces stunting independent journalism. Still, while there is some long-term potential for the emergence of more objective media, it is unlikely that sufficient independent sources will emerge to inform the Ukrainian electorate objectively on the candidates’ positions in the year leading up to the October 2004 presidential poll.

To cite a number of key examples: while the economy continues to improve and with it the ad market, market-distorted state subsidies and the overall poverty of the population cast doubt that quality, independent publications could get off the ground and play a prominent role in the time remaining before the coming elections. Journalists impressively united to protest political censorship at the end of 2002, yet most remain far too vulnerable to the wishes and whims of their owners to risk taking such courageous chances on a consistent basis. And even if various pre-election journalism training courses take place, and independent sources of information strengthen, and the media as a whole improves its performance from the last parliamentary elections, it would take time for people’s level of trust in the media to improve. The level of current trust in the media (particularly television) is simply so low that the vast majority of the electorate does not believe it can rely on the media for professional and truthful election coverage.

That does not, however, mean all hope is lost. The great majority of analysts and working journalists interviewed for this report believe that the Ukrainian media—left to its own devices in the current atmosphere—will at best fulfill its watchdog function in piecemeal fashion. There is, however, an opening for local and international actors to make a difference, if they take forceful action along the lines of the recommendations laid out above. No one can expect the negative trends observed over the past decade to disappear overnight, leaving in their wake an independent media capable of skilled and fair election coverage. But the stakes for Ukraine and the region are high enough—and the media such a crucial element in the equation—that virtually any action in this field is worth the investment.

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