

Pro and contra: The freedom of speech and censorship in Ukraine

Vitaly Shevchenko, member of the 3rd parliament of Ukraine (1998-2002), member of the National TV and Radio Broadcasting Council of Ukraine:

Will the situation with the freedom of speech get worse? It is hard to make it worse on purpose. I think local reaction to the hearings that are being broadcast by the media is adequate. Local authorities feel at a loss, local bosses think that something has changed. This is a relief to local journalists. For changes in the journalist circles depend to a large extent not on the authorities [but] on journalists themselves. They lacked the sense of a [friendly] elbow. If they become more brave, they will win the situation and the time to enforce what has been said in the Verkhovna Rada with relevant laws, and that will be possible to do. We need about two or three months.

We do not know results of the shake-up in the parliament, linked to the re-division of the committees. But regarding the media there will be draft laws, but it depends to a large extent on journalists whether they will be voted or not. I noticed that the attitude to the sphere linked to the freedom of speech is very uncertain, the laws are adopted depending on the mood, [and] preliminary preparations. If journalists do not lose their chance, do that minimum required from them, i.e., tell, show, write, the situation can be substantially improved.

There is already less interference with work due to the “temniks” and their local surrogates. As I said, bureaucrats in the regions are at a loss, [they] do not give orders to journalists, do not write, do not make phone calls, for [they are] afraid that their interference will be known. Naturally, the changes are not of a systemic nature, but journalists I know from the Sumy, Chernihiv, Poltava regions, have noticed those changes. Look, the news at 1+1 have changed; I think even at the “Inter” channel there will be a journalist trade union, and even [Vice Speaker of the parliament and a major shareholder of the “Inter”] Oleksandr Zinchenko will not object. Hence, there is some liberalization.

I think the authorities have lost everything related to those hearings on the media. They built their defense on myths. First, [they] argued that the hearings should not be transformed into a rally, but there should be constructive discussion. Though the journalists did not turn the hearings into a rally. Second, [they] said the authorities were better prepared than the opposition. But what is better is they did not have any documents on how to overcome the situation? The Committee for Freedom of Speech and Information prepared a number of bills – there are seven draft bills I made – that had been put there since last autumn, but now they have been re-introduced, approved at the sessions, and will be debated by the assembly. These include regulation of relations between the media and the courts in terms of compensation of non-material damages, and amendments to the law on the Natsrada [i.e., National TV and Radio Broadcasting Council of Ukraine – red.], and the public broadcasting system, and approaches to de-nationalization of the media, a new version of the law “On Television and Radio Broadcasting”. Yes, in Tomenko’s committee, maybe, unfortunately, there has been too much politics, but one cannot say that it has worked inadequately. For which of the committees then has worked actively?