

The Role of Ukrainian Mass Media in the presidential elections 2004

Press, radio and television are nowadays going through a deep crisis. At present, there are almost no newspapers and magazines, television and radio stations that enjoy real independence. Due to the existing legal, economic and administrative regulations of the market in Ukraine, economic success of a newspaper, TV or radio program does not depend on number and qualitative characteristics of the audience (readers, viewers, and listeners). Sales revenues and profits from advertisement (in comparison to Russia ads are much cheaper in Ukraine) do not cover the costs of making of an information product. On the print media market, only entertainment, commercial and erotic newspapers are profitable.

The absolute majority of political press represents interests of various financial and political groups. There are several newspapers and magazines that inflate their circulation numbers and publish biased popularity ratings for the sake of publicity. Subsidies and sponsorship of mass media in exchange for so-called informational support have become an accepted norm. The circulation decline that started in 1991 still continues. The majority of the population has no access to periodicals, which means no information about social, economic, political and spiritual life in Ukraine, as well as international developments. In terms of saturation with periodical press, Ukraine lags behind the developed countries.

From the outside, mass media in Ukraine seems to be well regulated, and they are supposed to work normally. However, enforcement of regulations needs dramatic improvement. There is no single law in the field of mass media that is fully implemented. Laws that just exist but are not enforced do not benefit the society.

In our opinion, the main threat to press freedom in Ukraine is the poor economic state of mass media. The actual absence of an advertisement market and the inability to set real prices for media products due to the poverty of the majority of Ukrainian consumers result in dependence of media on state budget subsidies or sponsorship. Owners view media not as business but a means of formation of favourable public opinion. Thus, most investors consider media business to be secondary to their main one. That is the reason why nobody is really surprised when popular periodicals are sold at dumping prices that can not lead to self-repayment. Besides, media owners seek to keep their media unprofitable since it is much easier to control journalists when the salary directly depends on their sponsorship. Finally, such crisis conditions lead to spreading of such a phenomenon as hidden advertisement. Under these circumstances, most critical materials do not indicate presence of freedom of speech but implementing orders of sponsors or founders to destroy their business or political competitors. Thus, many media outlet are not considered as a means of providing information but as tools of influence of financial and political groups. The consequence is that the interests of the society and nations shift to the background.

Bias distortion of events through mass media increases dramatically in the pre-election period.

The research team of the Academy of Ukrainian Press and the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine has conducted monitoring of television news on Ukrainian leading TV channels, of election campaign in the press, and of political

advertisement on television. The project was carried out with the support of the International Renaissance, OSCE Mission to Ukraine, and US Embassy to Ukraine.

The content analysis of news in electronic and printed media allows us to draw the following conclusion:

Mass media did not limit themselves just to the informational function and did not take neutral stand mediating between the presidential candidates on one side and citizens (voters) on the other side.

On the contrary, they actively carried out selection of presidential candidates by limiting media access to some of them, and promoting others, and not providing the citizens with balanced information. Thus, the voters could not freely form their opinion.

This conclusion is based on the following research findings:

- Even in the middle of the election campaign, news was given from only one political perspective, i.e. a single official point of view prevailed. After the first round of the elections it was still just one point of view on the political events that dominated (86% in November). The share of political news in Ukraine that was given from one political perspective varied on average between 92-94% on the channels UT-1, TRC Ukraine, and around 78% on СТБ. The most balanced news coverage of political events was provided by Channel 5 (62% of one-sided political news on average in the period of election campaign, 66% - in November). The context of the events reported on for four months remained positive or neutral (63% in November).

- The journalistic standard of naming the information source of the news was also violated. Before the election, news reports not mentioning the information source have reduced twice (18% in July to 9% in November), although every 10th, 11th news report did not indicate the source. Two thirds of all news about Ukraine were directly or indirectly related to the presidential elections.

- In November, the names of politicians were mentioned more often than political institutes, and this happened for the first time during the period of monitoring. As in October, attention to the participants of the second round of the presidential elections was equal: V. Yanukovych was mentioned in 41% of all news about Ukraine, V. Yushchenko – in 38%. At the same time, other political figures declared backing Yanukovych in 52% of all news, and Yushchenko in 38%. Every fourth news report on Yushchenko was negative or ironic. Yanukovych was ironically or negatively mentioned in every 8th report. In terms of negative-ironic presentation, Yushchenko leaves Yanukovych behind.

- Disbalance in presentation of the main presidential candidates started with the distribution of live time coverage on television and citing in the press that was a possibility to express own opinion in direct speech. Also in this case, the advantage was given to Yanukovych. In the first week of October live time allocated to Yanukovych exceeded three times the live time of Yushchenko (1514 sec vs. 445 sec), whereas it was four times more (1884 sec vs. 447 sec) in the first week of November. The TV channel Inter gave Yushchenko live time coverage six times less in comparison to Yanukovych, and at TRC Ukraine – it was 19 times less.

- Anti-advertisement on TV was directed against the leaders of the presidential race though the share of Yushchenko is two times less than that of Yanukovych (20% vs. 10% of all advertisements).

Before the revote of the second round of the presidential elections the media picture changed: Journalists started to abide by the professional norms. For the first time, the

opposition was represented on the national TV channels. News programs became more unbiased:

1. almost equal attention was given to key political subjects and figures;
2. positive and neutral assessments of the opposition and its leader was more often given;
3. "government bonus" in the attention got absent.

The news share with one opinion remained on the level of previous months – 10%. However, coverage of a range of important events from two points of view got quite a high percentage (e.g. for voting for the "package" of the law drafts in the Verkhovna Rada – 54%, Yushchenko's sickness – 43%, actions of Yanukovych's supporters – 25%, change of the Prosecutor General – 24%). Although the political situation remained tense, the context of discussion of the events was mostly neutral (62%), which is the highest indicator for the whole monitoring period. The conflict and the negative context had the lowest rate in the news of UT-1 and TRC Kyiv – 20%, and the largest – on the TRC Ukraine (43%). The events were commented mainly by journalists and politicians (89% and 41% news), experts were present in 4% of the news reports (7% on STB).

Tendency for keeping balance in the news was realized by the television channels through redistribution of attention to the main participants of the presidential elections. In comparison with November, attention to them got reduced (from 38% to 33% towards V. Yushchenko, from 41% to 29% towards V. Yanukovych), and changed in favor of the opposition leader. This also related to assessments of the candidates. V. Yushchenko started to get presented more often in a positive or neutral tone as compared to V. Yanukovych (31% of the news vs. 26%, in November 37% vs. 41%), and less often in a ironic or negative tone (7% vs. 8%, in November 13% vs. 6%). In general, the share of negative assessments of V. Yushchenko reduced twice: from 13% to 6%, whereas that of V. Yanukovych somewhat went up (from 6% to 8%).

Similar to November out of all politicians mentioned in the news, more than a half are Yanukovych's supporters (53%, in November 52%), a third are supporters of V. Yushchenko (37%, in November 38%).

V. Yanukovych's advantage in the beginning of December was a wider access to news coverage as compared to his opponent. His live time coverage increased twice as compared to the previous month (from 1884 sec to 3880 sec). In December, the volume of the live time of Yushchenko went up, too (three times: from 447 sec to 1420 sec). However, the disproportion in access to the news between Yanukovych and Yushchenko remained. The live time of Yanukovych was 6,2% of all the news reports about Ukraine, and took 4,3% of time of all the news flow, Yushchenko's live time in 3,8% accordingly, and in 1,6% of the total time. On channel TRC Ukraine live time of Yushchenko was absent; whereas Yanukovych's live time took 16% of the weekly news time. Only on channel Tonis, Yushchenko had more news time than Yanukovych (2,0% vs. 0,6% of the weekly news time).

In general, in the course of the campaign (excluding December) mainstream mass media remained obedient tools of agitation and propaganda for the representative of those in power. Some journalists protested against censorship and left their jobs but those were few. Only one channel – Channel 5 – broadcast balanced picture of the situation in the country. In December, mass media changed their policies but this happened not because of journalists 'realizing' the severity of the situation but thanks to people's pressure on the authorities and mass media. When it became clear that people will not accept the results of the falsified election, media owners changed their policies

within just a few days. But there is no guarantee that mass media will blindly serve interests of the new authorities as they did for the old one.

Thus, we can name several main threats to the press freedom in Ukraine. First, it is the inability of mass media to be profitable, i.e. economically independent. Secondly, these are killings and attacks on journalists. The third threat is legal prosecution, especially, cases concerning protection of individual honor and dignity. The fourth threat is administrative pressure (audits and sanctions of the tax authorities, firemen and other state services). Unfortunately, we must state the fact that in Ukraine there do not exist yet the necessary conditions for the establishment of a civil society and independent mass media.