

Journalists Strike After Editor Is Fired in Kiev

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KIEV — Journalists on Ukraine's leading English-language newspaper have gone on strike to back its editor who was fired for publishing an interview with a government minister despite the owner's request to drop it.

Brian Bonner, editor-in-chief of the Kyiv Post, was dismissed last Friday after the publication of an interview with Ukrainian Agriculture Minister Mykola Prysyzhnyuk that touched on the sensitive issue of grain export quotas.

Journalists at the weekly newspaper said its British owner had ceded to pressure from the government in what they saw as a further case of infringement of media rights by President Viktor Yanukovich's leadership.

The Kyiv Post, which was founded in 1995 and has a print run of 20,000 to 25,000, covers political and social news as well as business news for Ukraine's investment community. It has online services in Russian and Ukrainian that were launched a year ago.

Its owner, British businessman Mohammed Zahoor, has run the newspaper through Istil Investment since 2009.

In a statement announcing the strike, its editorial staff said they wanted Bonner reinstated.

"The strike continues. Staff want Zahoor to explain his position on censorship, editorial independence and explain whether he will do it again or not, and give guarantees," deputy editor-in-chief Roman Olearchyk said Monday.

In a statement, Istil Investment denied that there had been calls from the government to kill the interview. It said there had been a difference of opinion between the owner and Bonner over editorial content, and the running of the Ukrainian- and Russian-language editions of the newspaper's web site.

In an interview with the Kommersant newspaper, Zahoor said he had wanted the interview stopped because it was "unprepared and flabby" and needed more work to be fit for publication.

Bonner challenged that version. "Even before the reporters were back from the interview, we were getting calls to say the minister was very concerned," he said.

As the newspaper went to press, Zahoor asked to see a copy of the story and subsequently asked for it to be excised. "I refused, and it looks like I really am fired," Bonner said.

Big grain trading houses and the Kiev government have been at odds over Ukrainian policy on grain export quotas, a billion-dollar business that, market insiders say, is prone to graft.

In the interview, Prysyazhnyuk defended government policy of imposing quotas to protect the domestic food market in times of indifferent harvests and high world demand.

International monitors criticize the Ukrainian government for protectionism and granting export quotas to traders in a nontransparent way that harms fair competition.

Yanukovich's administration is also under fire from the United States and other parts of the West for putting pressure on mass media at home to paint a rosier picture of government policies.

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