

Media Watchdog Denounces Ukraine Defamation Bill

September 20, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

An international media watchdog urged Ukrainian lawmakers Wednesday to reject a bill that would make defamation a crime, saying it could "threaten the very existence of independent journalism."

This week, Ukraine's parliament, dominated by President Viktor Yanukovich's allies, tentatively approved a bill that would make defamation punishable by up to five years in prison, restoring a Soviet-era practice that Ukraine abolished 11 years ago.

Currently, alleged libel can result in only a civil lawsuit, and journalists who lose would just face fines.

Paris-based Reporters Without Borders said Wednesday that "such a return to the past would have a major impact on freedom of information in Ukraine. Journalists already have to confront many dangers and an increase in self-censorship inside news organizations."

The United States and other Western governments say moves to curb media criticism inside

Ukraine form part of a gradual backsliding on democracy and a trend toward greater authoritarianism in the country since Yanukovich came to power in February 2010.

Apparently reacting to growing complaints by the independent media, Yanukovich told a meeting of regional officials that exerting pressure on the media was unacceptable.

"If any such complaints are made to you, you must react to them quickly and not in any way allow the media to be put under pressure," he said, according to the presidential website.

Yanukovich's office also called for the creation of a special working group to analyze the bill.

But opposition parties said the bill, which has to clear a second reading and then be signed by Yanukovich to become effective, was directed at the activities of the few remaining free media outlets in the former Soviet republic.

"It is crystal clear that the authorities will use the law to suppress the remnants of democracy in the Ukrainian media," said a statement by the united opposition, which includes former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's party, Batkivshchyna (Fatherland).

The bill has angered Ukrainian journalists, especially since it could affect their coverage of the nation's Oct. 28 parliamentary election.

Alexander Akymenko, an editor at Forbes Ukraine, suggested that all reporters could easily end up behind bars.

"Now you need to have an already-packed bag at home," Akymenko wrote on his Facebook page. "Just in case."

Earlier this month, Yanukovich drew widespread condemnation when his security guards roughed up several reporters staging a silent protest during an international media conference as the president spoke about freedom and democracy from a stage just meters away.

(AP, Reuters)

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