



MEDIA COVERAGE OF ELECTION CAMPAIGN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2014 – UKRAINE

PRESS-RELEASE

Kiev, 23 May 2014 – The Association Equal Access, an independent, non-profit organization that promotes the values of freedom and democracy, has been systematically monitoring the media coverage of the May presidential election, focusing on fifty-four national and regional TV channels, four radio stations, six newspapers and fifty-one Internet web sites since the beginning of April. The monitoring is supported by the Council of Europe and evaluates the media’s performance in providing objective and balanced coverage of contestants and their platforms so the citizens of Ukraine can make well-informed choices at the ballot box. The project’s findings have been determined through a well-defined and rigorous methodology and are not intended to support any one candidate or political party, but the integrity of the media environment as a whole during the campaign season.

“The media environment has been severely affected by the situation in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, with journalists facing intimidation and harassment from the pro-Russia separatist militants, including abductions, detentions, physical and verbal attacks.” said the Council of Europe expert Rast’o Kužel. “The combination of violence against journalists and the overall dominance of the crisis in the media coverage of the campaign had an impact on the ability of voters to receive full information. The media nevertheless tried to provide such coverage based on which an informed choice at the ballot box would be possible.”

This was done mainly thanks to a few improvements in the media coverage of the upcoming elections over the previous campaigns, such as fewer cases of paid journalism. Moreover, while the editorial policy of media still appears to be determined by the interest of owners, which was reflected in the way how certain outlets supported their chosen candidates, media in general succeeded in providing a more diverse and pluralistic coverage of the campaign than in the previous elections.

“In the run up to the elections, a number of TV channels started broadcasting of regular political talk shows which were generally not available in the last few years.” said Aleksandr Chekmishev of Equal Access. “Moreover, First National Channel offered the electorate a valuable opportunity to compare candidates through televised debates.”

There was limited news coverage of the campaign in April, with most media devoting more attention to contestants only in the last few weeks prior to the election. The monitoring of the news programmes on the First National Channel revealed that the channel focused mainly on the situation in the eastern and southern regions and not so much on the campaign. While the authorities continue to enjoy significant news coverage, unlike in the past, there was no apparent attempt to use such official coverage to support any one candidate. In April, parliament adopted the Law on Public Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine, which transforms the state-owned broadcaster into a public service broadcaster. However, it is unlikely that the law would come into force until 2015.

At the same time, some problems continue to negatively affect the media environment. For example, contestants’ appearance in the news and current affairs programmes was still sometimes determined not based on newsworthiness, but thanks to their payments for such appearances. The appearance of such materials that were either promotional (about those who ordered them) or negative (against their opponents) is a very disturbing trend. There was also a general lack of analytical and in-depth coverage in

the news, which could have helped voters to better assess the qualities and programmes of electoral contestants.

While the monitored newspapers generally showed a plurality of views, some of them also featured paid articles, presenting them as news. At least one newspaper, distributed free of charge, published articles to cast shadow over the legitimacy of the elections.

The media situation in the regions varied significantly, with journalists from the eastern and southern regions facing severe restrictions during these elections. The monitoring of the news programmes on regional TV channels revealed preferences in favor of certain candidates. More specifically, Petro Poroshenko received the bulk of the coverage in the western and central regions of Ukraine. In the northern regions, Yulia Tymoshenko and Petro Poroshenko received comparable proportion of the coverage. As for the eastern regions, Mykhailo Dobkin received the biggest amount of coverage. At the same time, there was very little coverage of the campaign in the Doneck and Luhansk regions.