



## **URGENT**

### **Appeal for Solidarity from IFJ Election Monitoring Mission to the Ukraine**

With just hours to go before a critical election in Eastern Europe's largest country, journalists are on hunger strike against the propaganda being pumped out by state-controlled mass media.

Journalists and other staff at Channel 5 in Kiev, Ukraine, are now (21.00, Oct 28) entering their 4th day of a rolling hunger strike involving all 250 employees in a protest against attempts to force the station off the air.

Channel 5 is a new TV station, barely one year old. But in that short space of time it has built a reputation for independent and critical news reporting.

Unlike almost all its rivals, the station has given air time to the main opposition candidate for Ukraine's presidential election on Sunday, Viktor Yushchenko. Other channels have either ignored Yushchenko or carried exclusively negative coverage of his campaign.

This has made the station a target for the government and for pro-government businessmen and politicians. Channel 5 has experienced constant problems with its license to broadcast, with the frequency on which it broadcasts, and with the cable operators on which it relies to get its coverage into Ukrainian homes across the country.

The last straw for the station's workers came when, on October 13, a parliamentary deputy, Vlaimir Sivkovich, took out court cases to seize the station's bank accounts after it broadcast accusations about Sivkovich's work in parliament. On the next day the station's license to broadcast was revoked and on October 18 two of its bank accounts were seized.

At about the same time the station began to experience problems with cable operators in eastern Ukraine, the stronghold of prime minister and presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich. In Donetsk and other towns the channel found itself cut off.

On October 20 the management of Channel 5, with the backing of the entire workforce, gave an ultimatum to Sivkovich that it would start a hunger strike at 21.00 on Monday October 25 if the following demands were not met:

1. The bank accounts to be released
2. The license to broadcast be restored
3. Cable operators to restore the signal
4. Sivkovich to apologise publicly to Channel 5 staff.

These demands were not met and the hunger strike went ahead. At any one time, 20 employees are now on hunger strike for periods of 24 hours. Four staff members, who include the station's founders, are on indefinite hunger strike.

The protest has received coverage in opposition media, but has been ignored by state-controlled television.

Nonetheless, the protest has already achieved results. The station's bank accounts have been restored, as has its signal in Donetsk. Sivkovich apologised live on air over the telephone.

The question of the station's license to broadcast is still unresolved, however. The National Broadcasting Council has met twice since October 20, but on neither occasion did it even discuss Channel 5.

Since the protest began, Channel 5 has been flooded with messages of support from journalists and from the public. The journalists believe that their protest has helped to strengthen the solidarity of journalists on other stations.

Proof of this came today when 42 leading journalists on four major TV stations publicly signed a statement saying they would refuse to contravene their professional ethics and would no longer distort coverage of the electoral candidates. It is too early to say what effect this brave initiative will have.

The IFJ urges journalists to send messages of support immediately to press officer Alyona Matusko at Channel 5, email: [amatu@5tv.com.ua](mailto:amatu@5tv.com.ua) Tel +380 44 239 1686

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