

Ukraine: Censorship and self-censorship in time of war

Thursday 4 August 2022, by [SALUSBURY Matt](#) (Date first published: 1 August 2022).

What pressures do Ukraine's journalists face working under "censorship and self-censorship" in time of war?

Serhiy Guz had experience of forming civic society organisations when he went to a meeting that led to the formation of the IMUU in 2004. The IMUU affiliated to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ, of which the NUJ is also a part) in 2006. See [our report from that year](#) on Serhiy attending an LFB party shortly after that. When the then government closed the IMMU due to an "irregularity with paperwork", he was only signatory who could unblock its frozen funds, after going to the Ministry of Justice "every day for three months".

After a varied career including working in a factory, as a climber on high-rise building sites, as a commodities broker and a Pioneer Camp leader, Serhiy became a journalist in 1995. He described how in a cold winter with "nothing to eat... money for a loaf of bread and nothing more," he opened a newspaper and found one vacancy, for a journalist. He then worked his way "from the bottom of the ladder to the top", his CV to date giving him a "broad view" as a journalist.

When the current war started in February 2022, with Kyiv being bombed, it was difficult for Serhiy and his contemporaries "from the Soviet generation to believe that Russia can do this".

There is no safe place to go in Ukraine. There are "rockets flying over everywhere". The city of Kamianske, where Serhiy is from, hasn't been in the front line, but local defence forces have been digging anti-tank trenches around the town. Even if the war wasn't nearby, the war was everywhere. Food and medicines disappeared from the shelves in the first days of the war - while a lot of covid was going around. It was "incredibly difficult to get medicines to families". This "created a huge amount of psychological stress."

As a journalist and "left-winger", Serhiy is focused on issues around self-censorship in the country. He [writes for OpenDemocracy](#). He communicates via a closed Facebook group, which only friends can see.

How can you be an independent journalist in Ukraine and still write the things that you want to? You have to follow standards of journalism very closely to protect yourself, Serhiy says.

Investigating corruption

Before the war, Serhiy's car was set on fire when he started an investigation into corruption and theft of state funds by a local businessman. We can't go into details here, other than to note that the electronic systems for government tenders and subsidies for solar energy both offer opportunities for corruption. Serhiy received further threats, and friends who have a private security firm helped with "personal protection" - which he needed just to get cigarettes from the local store. While police never found the people who threatened Serhiy, they did begin an investigation into him. Eventually

they dropped this.

We should of course “fight corruption”, says Serhiy, but he notes that as part of the government’s current “anti-corruption battle... we are now going to privatise everything” - which “creates new channels for corruption”.

Serhiy is now trying to create contacts between Ukraine and the NUJ and other organisations and groups. He talked about this at the [Tolpuddle Martyrs’ Festival](#) of trade unionists in Dorset in mid-July. He was happy to be discussing trade unionism and journalistic ethics at the meeting the Freelance attended - he said that at the Tolpuddle Festival “they were just asking about Azov, Nazis, fascists”: the Azov Regiment is a controversial Ukrainian military unit whose founders were associated with far-right ideology.

Self-censorship

It is, Serhiy asserts, “really important to support independent journalism in times of censorship and self-censorship... Self-censorship is a big, big, problem.” In the Dnipro region “we are doing a project to support independent journalism... journalists will tell you about some very interesting event they are investigating that they don’t want to talk about because that would be ‘anti-patriotic’.”

Then there is Ukraine’s “state counter-propaganda”. Journalists are asked whether “by criticising the Ukrainian government, are they not going to stand on the side of Russia?” If someone criticises the government they are said - “even if they are doing it unconsciously” - to be helping the Kremlin. “We’ve got to address this problem: [that] can only be done by supporting independent journalism.”

Funds have been set up devoted to legal support for journalists who find themselves in this situation. Serhiy is also a member of a new initiative that brings together “leftists” in Ukraine.

Democracy

We must not, says Sirhey, close our eyes to existing threats to democracy which are happening now - otherwise “what are we fighting for?” What’s the point of fighting if we end up with the same totalitarianism as in Russia, he asks. Serhiy “doesn’t want Ukraine’s win to be the defeat of democracy.”

Some think we should “submit to this censorship now, and then build democracy later - but that’s not how it works.” Serhiy gets extremely annoyed when “Johnson and Co.” come over and say everything is wonderful in Ukraine. This is a reference to outgoing UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and members of his then Cabinet.

A total of 11 political parties have been closed down “without investigation”. Strikes, public meetings and protests are now finished when the banned, the government is removing the rights from trade unions, who can’t come out in protest.

Official censorship?

After the outbreak of war all the major TV channels were “forced to move to one live feed of essentially propaganda”. Many Ukrainian journalists don’t like this live stream and want to return to more normal way of doing things. Ukraine’s President Zelensky “doesn’t want to return to pre-war situation,” Serhiy says, since the current arrangement is “easier to control”. (See [here](#) for more on Ukrainian TV news channels merging in wartime.)

Prosecutors have been given more power to open criminal cases against journalists and others. For cases of alleged “collaboration or state treason,” prosecutors can write out arrest warrants without the need to go to a judge or magistrate first.

Is there official censorship, alongside self-censorship? It’s “very complicated”: journalists “don’t have to send copy anywhere for pre-publication censorship... But we all know what not to print.” Serhiy describes the censorship regime as a “hybrid system” under which journalists are “compelled to censor themselves”.

There’s no law that says you can’t take a photo of “sites of explosions” or military personnel - but you will get a call in which a “press spokesman from the Ministry of Defence says ‘don’t do that’ - and [journalists] don’t do it”. The least bad thing that can happen is that suddenly your website is blocked and your Facebook page is blocked. Journalists are frightened by these techniques.

If a fairly well-known journalist gets into trouble, the community closes ranks around that person. But if a little-known journalist from outside Kyiv is the target of the state’s techniques to frighten journalists, “who is going to defend that person?”

Food, gas, coal

Organising material humanitarian help from the UK to Ukraine - sending medicine and so on - is also a priority for Serhiy. “The longer the war goes on, the fewer the resources and the more the exhaustion even among volunteers... While at government level, the focus is on military aid, humanitarian aid is still very important.”

Kamianske, Serhiy’s hometown, was known in the Soviet era as Dniprodzerzhynsk. It was the birthplace of Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, whose statue still stands there.

The city is still dominated by the Dnieper Metallurgical Combine (DMK), a huge steel works. It has 8000 workers in a city that had 220,000 residents - and has more now that it has become a centre for displaced persons. There was still a lot of surviving DMK infrastructure from when the plant was much bigger: hospitals; kindergartens; a network of food shops; and a huge company union. DMK is the biggest contributor to the city’s budget, following its privatisation in “questionable circumstances”.

The town now has both the DMK company union and independent unions trying to help the families whose husbands and fathers have gone to fight with food and so on. With war having a “catastrophic” effect on the market and distribution network for its products and the supply of raw materials, the DMK plant has stopped production. Its workers are now on “a very minimal wage”. There have been “massive redundancies” at the plant. The shops, the canteens... all closed. Ancillary workplaces such as kindergartens and clinics associated with the factory have closed.

Bigger enterprises like DMK have a lot of resources to help them through a “financial situation that is very difficult,” but with so many DMK workers on reduced pay, smaller enterprises in the city find their trade has dropped: “the economic situation is only going to get worse and worse”.

Teachers in Kamianske “are getting paid irregularly”. With so much pressure on state budgets, the state’s institutions have “no idea next year of whether there will be money”. The state is making cuts to public sector workplaces. Serhiy is seeking ways to “help families in that situation”. Some material aid is being distributed by trade unions at grassroots level, rather than “from the state down”.

There is, says Serhiy, a need to “think about setting up funds to assist - this is only going to get worse as winter approaches.” How are people going to live with “no Russian gas... if the flow through the pipelines stops” and temperatures hit minus 20 degrees? How will “people who live in private houses... get coal or firewood to keep warm?”

It's unrealistic to protect all power stations against Russian rocket attacks. One has been hit by a rocket attack already. Residents of the areas of Donetsk still under Ukrainian control have been advised to evacuate already because “there will not be any gas.” Since the meeting, President Zelensky had ordered a general evacuation of Donetsk.

Serhiy says some are already saying: don't worry about the winter, the Ukrainian military will go on a counterattack and it'll “all be lovely”.

Serhiy and colleagues were at the time of his talk “writing an article for his newspaper [on] how to get through winter. What is the government going to do about this as well? The problem is that people are not speaking about this openly in Ukraine.”

A lot of journalists, says Serhiy, “honestly want to support their country. They don't write about these things, for absolutely understandable reasons...” you have to write about these things. You have to speak about these things. If you don't it's only going to get worse and then it's too late.”

No news from occupied Ukraine

What's really happening in the areas of Ukraine currently under Russian occupation, such as Kherson? That's “a hard question,” says Serhiy. Ukrainian news outlets say that in the occupied territories it's “the end of the world. In reality we don't know what's happening there,” which has been the case since the incursions of 2014.

The Ukrainian press stopped reporting on the Russian occupation because “they didn't know”. Foreign journalists who go to the Russian-occupied areas will legally not be able to return to Ukraine. So “we only have propaganda from Russia or propaganda from Ukraine. Which one to believe? I have relatives in the [Russian-occupied] Kherson region.”

In the small community where his sister and uncle live, Sirhey's not aware of any “terror being organised”. There are problems with money and problems with supplies. It's “too risky to leave Kherson region” - there's a “risk of being shot at”.

There is no internet there - “no Ukrainian bank cards, no Ukrainian currency in circulation. No roubles have arrived yet. When people go to the chemist... it's all on credit.” For those who don't participate in any politics or civic activity, money is the problem. That's what Sirhey has been able to understand from relatives and personal contacts.

Can you even make a telephone call to the occupied areas? Ukrainian “comms” don't work there. Some can get hold of Russian SIM card for the phone, so they can contact with relatives in the rest of Ukraine.

What about forced relocations? There are “Ukrainian official sources only on forced relocations”. All this emphasises the “importance of civil society: none of us can trust the information we get from the state.”

Trades unions

Companies can now rip up collective agreements or withhold wages because of “the war”. Trades

unions now can't take their employers to court for this. New legislation on the way would deprive trade unions of even more of their rights. Ukraine's "liberalisers" don't see a rôle for trade unions in the "new economy".

Trade union leaders are afraid openly to criticise the government. Some of the trade union leadership were in parties that had a big support base among ethnic Russians. Others are in "very patriotic parties... very anxious to paint themselves as patriots".

Surprised at the passivity of trades unions, Serhiy says that if they don't do something about the situation they will not have a future. Some trades unions will not have a future: they are like "big old trees falling". Some unions are direct descendants of the Soviet trade unions and own a lot of property. These have had 30 years of legal battles over this property: "the struggle for workers' rights, they dropped a long time ago."

There are, says Serhiy, "still activists in the workplace... they are organising. We mustn't keep quiet about the fact that Ukrainian trades unions have problems - they are not defending workers." We shouldn't "sit and wait for government to introduce limitations on unions. We can actively fight for workers' rights."

On a more positive note, Serhiy reports that Ukraine's other IFJ affiliate, the [National Union of Journalists of the Ukraine](#), has psychology consultants available to help journalists deal with trauma. See [our report](#) on support for Ukrainian journalists from the IFJ.

Matt Salusbury

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

One of the founders of the Independent Media Union of Ukraine ([IMUU](#)), gave an update on 18 July. Serhiy Guz, a former President of IMUU, spoke at a meeting at the [May Day Rooms](#) on Fleet Street. He understands English but doesn't speak it well, so he was speaking in Russian, translated by LFB's own Simon Pirani and Tom Rowley, of the NUJ OpenDemocracy Chapel - both are Russian speakers.

London Freelance

<http://www.londonfreelance.org/fl/2208guz.html>