

Press Coverage of the Investigation of the Ukrainian Parliament into the Murder of Journalist Georgy Gongadze

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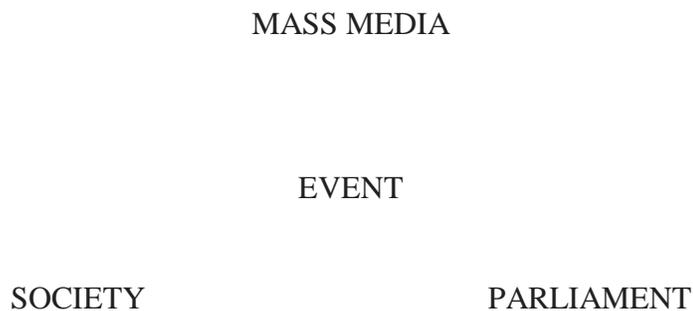
The influence of mass media on parliamentary legislative decisions depends on a series of factors, which in turn determine the level of that influence. The main ones are:

- The level of democracy in society and the degree of media engagement;
- The level of media influence on society;
- The level of parliamentary development;
- The level of political dependence on public opinion.

Mass media are a link between the legislative body and society. The reaction of society to events and decisions stemming from such events are largely dependent on media effectiveness. Society in turn, by its reaction provokes and influences its legislature inasmuch as members of parliament and political parties are dependent on the sympathies of the public, i.e. its electorate. Therefore media, in fact, are a prime link in this interconnection:

PARLIAMENT MASS MEDIA SOCIETY

This interconnection can be depicted in the following triangle:



To better examine the influence of mass media on parliamentary legislative decisions and the interconnection of these factors, we will examine an event, which thanks to media coverage, gained international renown. The disappearance and killing of well known Ukrainian opposition journalist, the editor of the Internet newspaper *Ukrajinska Pravda* Georgy Gongadze and the investigation of this crime brought on the largest political crisis Ukraine has encountered in its 10 years of independence. Individual politicians, the parliament and mass media were the main players in the events surrounding the crime.

In order to examine this problem in greater detail, we must return to the event itself and the reasons that led up to it.

After the disintegration of the USSR and the emergence of independent countries, the media empire created by the totalitarian communist system also fell apart. Based on existing financial and intellectual resources each new independent state began creating its own media network, thereby influencing society. The emergence of new and the denationalization of old media demanded a new legislative basis and new approaches to media organization. The absence of democratic traditions in society on one hand, and the lack of professionalism and the inability of journalists to work according to new standards, created a certain spontaneity in relations between mass media, the ruling powers and society. These factors influenced the structure and functionality of the media. The transformation of Ukrainian media brought on a polarization of positions when discussing the same social problems or events. The media ended up in vastly different professional and material conditions. During this time journalists had the opportunity to choose the path of their professional development. A part chose the easier path and stayed with the state media, which are financed from the state treasury and are controlled by the ruling powers.

During 10 years of building an independent society in Ukraine, a particular co-existence of state and commercial media has arisen and certain journalistic professional principles have emerged. At different times the level of media influence on society has varied, as has the level of dependency of media and individual journalists on their bosses and owners.

Regardless of freedom of speech declarations, the state, through administrative and financial pressure has forced Ukrainian media to become a tool of struggle between various financial-political groups for their own political and economic interests. The interests of society are completely disregarded in this formula. As a result, Ukrainians receive distorted and tendentious information about the state of affairs in their country, which in turn influences their perception of events. When materials that criticized the powers that be appeared in newspapers or other media, they were immediately subjected to intense pressure by the tax authorities or other officials. Journalists

became dependent on the owners of their publications and open censorship in turn became self-censorship. The last link in this chain is the physical harassment of journalists, going all the way to actual killings. The disregard for democratic principles, the absence of healthy competition and the increased pressure on journalists has brought Ukrainian society totally under the influence of controlled media. Therefore, by September 2000 only a small number of media outlets with a limited audience could call themselves independent.

THE PROBLEM

On September 16, 2000 a pivotal event occurred which influenced the development of social relations and the media in no uncertain terms. The abduction and murder of Ukrainian opposition journalist Georgy Gongadze became a watershed in contemporary Ukrainian history. This event not only laid bare the true state of press freedom in Ukraine, but also exposed an entire system of interrelations between social and governmental institutions. The publication in the media of the contents of recordings, which connected the murder of a journalist to highly placed political figures and the president of Ukraine brought this problem to the level of an international scandal. This problem not only became an important factor in internal Ukrainian politics but in Ukraine's international relations as well. The Gongadze case was widely publicized in the western media. Considering the role of the media in western democracies, this story forced many western politicians to reexamine their position on Ukraine.

As the crime was committed against a journalist who was well known in journalistic and political circles, Ukrainian media reacted to his murder instantaneously. Information was distributed in the following chain: Internet -- radio and television – press.

In the beginning it wasn't clear what had happened: there were suspicions as to the cause of the crime and the possibility of the highest authorities being involved in it. Georgy's family and friends clung to the hope that he was still alive. Therefore we decided that the only way to save his life was to publicize his case as widely as possible.

Having analyzed the power structures in Ukraine I presumed that politicians and the parliament are the only sections of that structure which can be influenced by public opinion and media. The politician is a public figure and his public life depends on the quantity and quality of his presence in the media. He is forced to react to media signals and public pressure. Insofar as the parliament is one of the branches of government, by passing appropriate legislation it can compel the executive and judicial branches to work more effectively.

CHRONOLOGY

What follows is a chronology of events during the first week after Georgy Gongadze's disappearance, which prove that the media can influence legislative decisions.

Georgy Gongadze disappeared on September 16, 2000. The first press conference, held on September 18, 2000 attracted an incredibly large amount of interest from journalist. We decided to engage all instruments of influence and to involve all manner of mass media in the process. As media needs constant news and details, it was necessary during that first week to provide new information and literally create news. The fact that a crime had been committed against a person close to us, more than that, a colleague, played a decisive role. All journalists, regardless of whom they worked for, felt it was their duty to inform about this crime. This became a consolidating factor in the journalistic community. When the information torrent reached a critical stage, politicians too became involved in the case.

Sunday, September 17, 2000

Georgy Gongadze's disappearance is reported in the internet publication Ukrainska Pravda. (Gongadze was the editor in chief of this Internet project.) Two national television stations report the disappearance in their newscasts.

Monday, September 18, 2000

9:00-13:00 the majority of Ukrainian Internet sites and radio station report the disappearance. Commentaries on the event appear on many sites.

14:00 a press conference is held in the Interfax Ukraine press agency. I, Myroslava Gongadze participate as his wife; Olena Prytula is present as an editor for Ukrainska Pravda.

15:00 political parties issue their first statements. The first party to become involved in this matter was the Reform and Order Party. Their parliamentary faction has 15 members of parliament, the Sobor party, which also has a parliamentary presence, becomes involved. They announce a reward for any information concerning the fate of Georgy Gongadze.

Non-governmental television stations report on Gongadze's disappearance. International broadcasters Radio Liberty and the BBC also cover the story.

Tuesday, September 19, 2000

11:00 a press conference is held. Leading journalists sign an open letter to Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma demanding a speedy investigation.

14:00 Leonid Kuchma holds a press conference for regional journalists. The open letter is given to him.

The majority of Ukrainian national publications reported the story on their front pages. “Journalist Georgy Gongadze disappears”, “Find the journalist”, “Assault on the truth” — such were the headlines of the day. Political parties issue statements and politicians state their opinions. The newspaper “Molod Ukrajinny” reports on this day in parliament as follows: “The parliamentary week began not with discussions concerning legislation but with emotional statements on the disappearance of the journalist Georgy Gongadze, the founder of the Internet publication Ukrainska Pravda. Legislators forgot about faction and party squabbles and unanimously demanded that the authorities immediately look into the circumstances surrounding the journalist’s disappearance. Parliamentary speaker Ivan Pliushch announced that he had personally issued such a demand to the authorities.”

Wednesday, September 20, 2000

9:00 Member of Parliament Anatoliy Matvienko calls for a temporary investigative committee to look into the Gongadze case. Many parliamentary factions support this call.

11:00 a press conference is held on international reactions to the Gongadze disappearance. CSCE, Reporters without Borders, the U.S. embassy in Kyiv and Amnesty International statements are made public. The majority of national media continues to cover events as they develop.

Thursday, September 21, 2000

9:00 journalists demonstrate outside the parliament building, carrying large photographs of Georgy Gongadze and placards reading “We won’t allow independent press to be wiped out.”

11:00 journalists apply direct pressure on the parliament. When the legislators refuse to discuss the investigation of the Gongadze case, the auditorium is flooded with leaflets, which state: “Find Georgy Gongadze”. The legislature is forced to allow a journalists’ representative to address the MPs. Julia Mostova, deputy editor of the weekly “Zerkalo Tyzhnia” (Weekly Mirror) addresses parliament on behalf of Kyiv’s the journalists. She reads the open letter to President Kuchma and the demand for an independent investigative committee.

This desperate measure forces the parliament to take their first step in this case. Parliamentary resolution #1959 calls for a temporary investigative committee to look into the disappearance of Gongadze and investigate the wide variety of crimes committed against political activists in Ukraine. Parliamentarians support a proposal (329 votes for) to listen to the authorities’ report on the Gongadze investigation the following day in parliament.

All Ukrainian media report on these events.

Friday, September 22, 2000

The police report before parliament on their investigation into the Gongadze crime. Newspapers, radio and television are inundated with information and commentary in the matter.

Saturday, September 23, 2000

11:00 the first civil act of protest takes place in the center of Kyiv. Family, friends and colleagues collect signatures for a petition: "The authorities should carry out their promises: find the journalist Georgy Gongadze."

21:00 Friends, family, colleagues, representatives of youth organizations hold a torch light march on Khreshchatyk, Kyiv's central avenue, demanding the authorities find the missing journalist.

Sunday evening analytical television shows and the following days' newspapers call Gongadze's disappearance the most resonant and tragic event of the week.

The above shows two ways of exerting influence, indirect and direct.

Indirect media influence through journalists carrying out their professional responsibilities, that is, informing the public. The quality and quantity of media reports are directly proportionate to the level of public interest and the amount of key players involved in enacting legislative decisions.

Direct media influence through direct involvement in an action or process involving pressure: Kyiv journalists issued their parliamentarians an ultimatum: either you act or we will not cover the work of parliament.

Achieving a positive result through direct media influence was followed by a series of other active steps by media personnel. It was journalists who chose a Member of Parliament, based on his moral and professional qualities, to head up the parliamentary investigation committee. That person was Oleksander Lavrynovych from the national democratic Rukh party.

In an interview published by the leading Ukrainian daily "Den" Lavrynovych said: "The highly visible and vocal reaction of journalists to the disappearance of Georgy Gongadze played a leading role. It would have been senseless for the ruling powers to confront the media in this case. For many politicians sympathetic treatment by journalists is very important, it safeguards their public rating and their political life." Lavrynovych thereby confirmed one of the primary reasons, why media is an important factor of influence on the parliament: the public life of a political figure is dependent on the quantity and quality of his presence in the media.

CONCLUSIONS

As a result of active media involvement and a series of practical activities by journalists the investigation of this particular crime became a personal matter not only for journalists but for politicians as well. A large number of politicians, political parties and community activists saw it as their responsibility to take a position concerning this high profile crime against a journalist. The high level of coverage devoted to the disappearance of this well known journalist and the reaction of international organizations such as the OSCE, Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders and others forced the Ukrainian parliament, the most public branch of government to react accordingly and enact decisions aimed at a timely investigation of the case. The main result of media and public efforts was the formation of a parliamentary investigative committee, whose chairman regularly briefed parliament and the media. Furthermore, the parliament began demanding regular reports in the case from the authorities.

Analyzing the development of events in the Gongadze case, I have reached another important conclusion. If in the initial weeks after Georgy Gongadze's disappearance and murder the press was the primary source of information, later, the parliament and individual politicians involved in the case became significant sources of information for the journalists. 15 days after Gongadze's body was found by journalists, opposition leader, chairman of the Socialist Party and former presidential candidate Oleksander Moroz (10% of the votes were cast for his candidacy) chose the parliament as the venue for publicizing information which connected the President of Ukraine and his circle to the abduction and murder of Georgy Gongadze.

Thanks to the role and influence of mass media, their capable utilization and the realistic appraisal of their influence on society, one event can become a factor, which brings on substantial changes inside a country as well as change the world's attitude to Ukraine.