

Montenegro: Fury Over Opposition 'Censorship'

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President Djukanovic's opponents unite to scupper his media reforms and introduce restrictive new amendments

Press freedom in Montenegro is under attack from controversial law changes passed by a new opposition alliance intent on ousting President Milo Djukanovic.

The amendments to the media and electoral bills have been condemned by critics who fear information will be restricted and human rights jeopardised as a result.

The coalition Together for Yugoslavia and the Liberal Alliance recently joined forces in an attempt to push Djukanovic out of office and, after gaining a narrow one-seat parliamentary majority, the unlikely alliance of deputies immediately struck at the government's media stronghold.

Under the amendments, both the state and private media will have to abide by new rules, which dictate whom they may interview, the size of articles and the kind of commentaries they can publish. The rules also prescribe the exact number of reports, interviews and other journalistic forms that both government and private media must publish about each political party.

The new laws also "recommend" that journalists consult party officials about headlines, captions and other components of a published article. Stiff fines ranging from 2,500 to 15,000 euros - many times the average monthly wage in Montenegro - await any newspaper that steps out of line.

Frederica Prina, head of Article 19's European programme, condemned the new rules as "excessively restrictive". She added that the opposition's attempt to dictate the amount and type of private media output was "unacceptable".

The OSCE described the amendments as politically motivated and rash, and the European Media Institute also expressed concern, saying the changes jeopardised the press' legitimate role as a public watchdog and guardian of democratic values.

These bodies are especially disappointed because Djukanovic's government launched its own, widely-praised reforms of the state sector media nearly a year ago. The plan was to draft three laws that would have transformed Montenegro's state television into a public service broadcaster, created a new public broadcast act and laid down progressive new laws on the media.

The bills, drafted with expert assistance from the Council of Europe, Article 19 and the European Media Institute, were described as among the best in the region. However, just as the government was about to table the proposed legislation in parliament, the united opposition passed its amendments purely for its own political benefit.

The strongly pro-independence Liberal Alliance withdrew its support for Djukanovic after he signed the so-called Belgrade agreement in March, relinquishing a long-promised referendum on secession for at least three years.

Following the local elections in May, the Liberals surprised everyone by turning their backs on their former allies and choosing to side with the coalition Together for Yugoslavia - a move that led to early parliamentary elections being called for October 6.

The Liberals have said their main goal will be to unseat the now-minority government of Djukanovic's Democratic Socialist Party, DPS, and remove the president from power.

The amendments essentially place Montenegro's opposition in control of the state media sector for the first time and impose strict rules on private media bodies aiming to cover the election campaign.

Under these changes, a slim majority will now be enough for parliament to replace the editor-in-chief of a state media body instead of the old two-thirds margin. It effectively means the opposition will be able to appoint its own candidates.

Dragan Koprivica, spokesman for the main opposition Socialist People's Party, SNP, defended the changes, saying they were needed to counter pressures from Djukanovic's supporters.

Liberal Alliance leader Miodrag Zivkovic took a different tack and insisted that the amendments were only provisional. He told IWPR that parliament had opted for an interim solution since the government's new media reforms, even if adopted now, could not be implemented in time for the elections. "It would take at least six months or more to form regulatory bodies," he said.

Despite the threat of large fines, some privately owned media groups warned they would not abide by the new laws. Slavoljub Scekic, director of the Montenegrin daily Vijesti, said politicians should establish their own media outlets if they wanted to dictate the flow of information.

"Those who cooked up this idea to turn politicians into editors-in-chief, who would then provide headlines, captions and determine the length of the text, should do so only after they purchase or set up media of their own," he said.

As well as condemning the new rules as censorship, journalist associations demanded urgent adoption of the authorities' existing media bills.

Veselin Pavicevic, an expert in election law from the University of Montenegro, said the changes were either the work of "some uneducated person, or someone prepared to openly commit a breach of constitutional law".

However, there is still a chance that the opposition might not get its way. After failing to block the adoption of the contentious changes, President Djukanovic returned the amendments to parliament, describing them as undemocratic.

Parliament must now review the amendments and this could mean that they won't be adopted before the October elections.

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