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The President of the International Society for Human Rights meets with lawyers and human rights defenders of Ukraine

The President of the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR), Professor Thomas Schirrmacher, met in Kiev (Ukraine) with leading lawyers and human rights defenders from that country.



Ukrainian lawyers with Thomas and Christine Schirrmacher © BQ

The participants discussed their concerns with regard to preserving the right to a fair trial in Ukraine. Specific recent cases reviewed by the group included charges against three journalists (Muravitskiy, Vasilets and Timonin), managing officers of tax authorities (the so-called “helicopter case”), and Ukrainian ex-president Viktor Yanukovich.

The lawyers present detailed the following alleged violations of human rights:



- accusations against journalists, charging them with high treason, in connection with their professional activity, because they published materials criticizing the state authorities and particular representatives thereof;
- abuse of power by the military prosecutor's office, by pursuing criminal cases against tax authority officers not connected with the army or the military conflict in eastern Ukraine in any way;
- beating of arrested persons, with the goal of obtaining confessions and cooperation in prosecutions of other accused persons;
- barring ex-president Yanukovich from participating in the criminal case brought against him, as the court denied him the right to participate by video-conference.

The participants also apprised Schirmmacher aware of the problems that they faced in carrying out their work on cases that have a "political colouring". These include disciplinary proceedings, threats from representatives of state authorities and radical groups, damage to personal property and physical attacks.

Schirmmacher pointed out that protection of human rights defenders and lawyers is a prominent concern for the ISHR, the United Nations, and other international human rights organizations.



Thomas Schirmmacher talks with the Ukrainian Minister for Education and Science, Dr Liliia Hrynevych © BQ/Warnecke

Publicizing the work of human rights defenders is sometimes an effective way to enhance their protection. However, lawyers seeking to protect the human rights of accused persons often face the risk of persecution by those (including government representatives) who prefer to keep such criminal cases quiet and out of public view. It is important for human rights organizations to sensitively balance the value of disseminating information publicly and the possibility that by doing so, they may risk exposing lawyers or other human rights defenders to physical harm.

The participants in the meeting also discussed possible means of interaction between EU civil society organizations and Ukrainian lawyers and human rights defenders. Possible forms of cooperation could include:



- providing international specialists as experts to assist in criminal cases;
- preparation of reports by international human rights organizations and their subsequent use as evidence before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR);
- participation by international human rights organizations in the ECHR cases as third-party intervenors.

Further efforts to establish contacts between civil society representatives from Ukraine and those of EU countries, as well as dialogue with state authorities, could be important steps helping Ukraine to implement the reforms that it has announced an intention to pursue, including reform of its judicial system.

See also this slide show on Freedom of speech in Ukraine.