

Background on anti-Protest Laws signed by President Yanukovich

On the 16th of January 2014 members of the Party of Regions (President Yanukovich's party) and their allies passed a series of draft laws in the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's Parliament) with severe anti-democratic connotations. These 'laws' were passed by a questionable 'show of hands' rather than by the agreed electronic system of voting.

The Ukrainian president, Victor Yanukovich, approved these controversial 'laws' on the 17th of January 2014.

Among many other provisions, the new laws provide for the following amendments to Ukrainian legislation:

- State may take the decision to ban Internet access;
- Criminalization for libel targeting media for criticizing government officials, up to two years in jail;
- Blocking government buildings, up to five years in jail;
- Up to 15 days arrest for unauthorized installation of tents, stages and sound equipment;
- Up to 10 days arrest for participation in peaceful gatherings wearing a mask, helmet or other means of covering one's face;
- Groups of more than 5 cars driving together require permission from the Ministry of Interior Affairs, otherwise, the drivers face loss of license and vehicle for up to two years;
- A broad definition of "extremist activities" adopted disallows NGOs and churches from engaging in support of civil protests.
- Allowing trial and sentencing in absentia of individuals, including prison terms, in cases where the person refuses to appear in court and when criminal proceedings in absence of such person are pronounced possible;
- Blocking access to residential buildings, up to six years in jail
- Gathering and disseminating information about Berkut (Ukraine's special security force), judges or their families, up to 2 years in jail;
- MPs may be stripped of immunity by a simple majority vote in Ukraine's Parliament (the Verkhovna Rada) thereby allowing initiation of criminal proceedings, detention or arrest with such cases no longer requiring prior review by the relevant Parliamentary Committee;
- Amnesty from prosecution previously adopted by the Verkhovna Rada and granted to peaceful protestors who participated in protests since November 21, 2013 has now been extended to also exempt from punishment those who committed crimes against protestors, including Berkut and other law enforcement officials;
- NGOs that accept foreign funds must include in their title the term "civic organizations that fulfills the functions of a foreign agent" and face high scrutiny, additional tax and regulatory measures.