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OCCRP Condemns Baseless Investigation of Ukraine Member Center Slidstvo.Info

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The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) condemns last week's decision by Ukraine's Ministry of Internal Affairs to pursue a baseless pre-trial investigation into our local member center, Slidstvo.Info. Issued in response to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests from the independent media outlet submitted late last year, this decision threatens the right of a free press to access information and inform citizens around the world.

In December 2019, Slidstvo.Info sent FOI requests to 14 Ukrainian government officials, politicians, and agencies, seeking information on a range of matters in the public interest related to the U.S.-Ukraine relationship. Among the recipients of these requests were Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov and a deputy in Ukraine's parliament, Oleksandr Dubinsky.

In January, Dubinsky announced that he was filing a criminal complaint against Slidstvo.Info, falsely claiming that the outlet's FOI request was proof that Slidstvo.Info was carrying out espionage in Ukraine, including illegally spying on U.S. Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch.

On March 3, the internal affairs ministry announced that it had accepted material from Dubinsky and incorporated it into an ongoing investigation into alleged surveillance of the former U.S. ambassador under Article 163 of Ukraine's Criminal Code, which covers the violation of the privacy of mail, telephone, electronic, and other correspondence.

The punishment for Article 163 is imprisonment of three to seven years, and Slidstvo.Info journalists could be subject to raids and the seizure of confidential journalistic materials in the course of a pre-trial investigation.

"This decision is completely unfounded and makes no legal sense. It's a direct attack on freedom of the press and a crude attempt to intimidate and silence independent media — not to mention a direct effort to interfere in reporting in the public interest," said OCCRP Co-founder and Publisher Drew Sullivan.

Slidstvo.Info is a member center of OCCRP and the 2017 recipient of the renowned Investigative Reporters and Editors Medal for investigative reporting. Its chief editor, Anna Babinets, is an OCCRP regional editor and the 2019 recipient of the International Women's Media Foundation "Courage in Journalism" award. OCCRP regional editor Aubrey Belford — a dual U.S.-Australian citizen and award-winning journalist with more than a decade of experience at international outlets including Reuters, the New York Times, and Agence France-Presse — is also based at Slidstvo.Info's Kyiv office, where he leads collaboration with Ukrainian journalists.

Submitting FOI requests is a legitimate and routine part of reporting, and access to public information is a right protected under Ukrainian law. OCCRP calls on the Interior Ministry to drop its investigation and all legal harassment of Slidstvo.Info immediately.