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Macedonian government must stop silencing critical media

The Macedonian authorities must stop its attempts to extinguish freedom of expression, Amnesty International said today, after three of the country's newspapers were shut down.

Newspapers Shpic, Vreme, and Koha e re, all owned by detained media tycoon Velija Ramkovski, were closed down at the weekend, ostensibly due to unpaid taxes demanded by the government.

"These closures, the amounts demanded, and the conditions of payment, appear to be politically motivated," said Nicola Duckworth, Amnesty International's Director for Europe and Central Asia.

"This is not an isolated incident but a confrontation with media critical of the government that has been going on for over a year. These closures are looking more and more like an all-out assault on freedom of expression."

Velija Ramkovski was jailed in December 2010 on tax charges, and is known for owning media outlets critical of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, including the country's most popular television network A1.

The government has demanded that his media outlets pay 10 million euros in back taxes or face closure, and has rejected requests that the payments be made in instalments. There are fears that A1 may be the next media outlet to be closed by the authorities.

The threatened closure of Velija Ramkovski's newspapers earlier this year preceded an opposition walkout of parliament. As a result, the government called a snap election in June, which it won.

"We fear that Prime Minister Gruevski's government is using its new mandate as an excuse to continue its attempts to isolate, marginalise and silence media critical of the government," said Nicola Duckworth.

Macedonian journalists have consistently alleged government interference in their work, ranging from being shut out of press conferences, to defamation suits, to death threats.

Macedonia has applied to become a full member of the European Union.

"The EU should remind the Macedonian government that membership requires them to uphold basic human rights like freedom of expression," said Nicola Duckworth.

"A free media is fundamental to everyone's right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds."