

## **MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS IN 2022**

### **CONDITIONS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA SECTOR ACTIVITY**

### **CHANGES IN LEGISLATION**

### **VIOLATIONS OF JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA RIGHTS**

#### **Criminal Cases**

The case of Siarhei Satsuk

The case of Kseniya Lutskina

The case of Katsiaryna Andreyeva (Bakhvalava) and Darya Chultsova

The case of Dzianis Ivashyn

The case of Andrzej Poczobut

The case of TUT.by

The case of Valeriya Kastsiuhova

The case of Aliaksandr Ivulin

The case of Nasha Niva

The case of BelaPAN

The case of Henadz Mazheika

The case of Iryna Slaunikava

The case of Andrei Kuzniechyk

The case of Aleh Hruzdzilovich

The case of Dzmitry Luksha

The case of Sviatlana Garda

The case of Ihar Kazmerchak

The case of Aksana Kolb

The case of Yury Hantsarevich

The case of Kanstantsin Zalatykh

The case of Ales Lyubianchuk

The case of Yury Hladchuk and Yulia Mudreuslaya

The case of Ivan Murauyou

The case of Inna Mozhchanka

The case of Yauhien Merkis

The case of Dzmitry Semchanka

The case of Aliaksandr Lychauka and Snezhana Inanets

Criminal prosecution of bloggers

Prosecution of informal press distributors

#### **Detentions and administrative prosecution of journalists**

#### **Application of legislation on counteraction to extremism**

## Restriction of access to information

### Events in the state media sector

## CONDITIONS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA SECTOR ACTIVITY

Repressive policies of Belarusian authorities in relation to the Belarusian independent journalists and mass media continued in 2022. They were implemented in the form of a broader scope of activities that had features of censorship and fight with dissent. The full-scale military aggression of Russia against Ukraine since February 24, 2022 was supported by the Belarusian authorities. It had an impact on the applied policies. In particular, the authorities suppressed dissemination of information about the reasons and the progress of military actions that differed from the Russian point of view. Also, they persecuted people for expression of support to Ukraine and anti-war statements.

The continuous repressions against the Belarusian independent media sector were characterized by consistency and cruelty. The methods of pressure included:

- criminal prosecution of journalists,
- obstruction of their activities by law enforcement agencies,
- application of legislation on countering extremism to limit the influence of independent media,
- administrative measures to restrict access to information.

Belarus ranked 153 out of 180 in the "Press Freedom Index 2022", published on the eve of the World Press Freedom Day. It was the worst result among the states located in Europe (alongside Russia).

**17 sentences** were passed in media-related criminal cases during the year of 2022. Journalists and other media workers were sentenced to **1.3 - 14 years of imprisonment**.

It was shortly before the end of her prison term that journalist **Katsiaryna Andreyeva, who was sentenced to two years in prison in 2020**, was also found guilty of 'high treason' (article 356 of the Criminal Code) and **sentenced additionally** to eight years of imprisonment, on top of the initial sentence. **11 new**

**criminal cases against journalists and other media workers** were filed in 2022. They are still to be considered by courts.

**33 journalists were imprisoned** at the end of 2022. According to the 'Reporters Without Borders' international non-governmental organization, Belarus closes the top five countries in the world with the largest number of journalists behind bars and holds the 4<sup>th</sup> position as for the number of imprisoned female journalists (9) in the country.

**The law enforcement agencies continued to put pressure on independent media representatives.** In 2022, the BAJ registered **43 cases of detention of journalists and 55 searches.** The journalists were fined four times and **sentenced 20 times** to different terms of administrative arrest. In addition, representatives of law enforcement agencies summoned journalists for questioning, visited relatives and searched the homes of journalists, including those who had left Belarus.

As before, **anti-extremist legislation** was used by the regime in power as a **weapon in the fight against the independent press.** Primarily, it was used as a basis for restricting access to the content of independent media and persecuting people for any participation in their activities.

Thus, the first criminal case under the new "extremist" article of the Criminal Code 130-2 ('denial of the genocide of the Belarusian people') was initiated in connection with publications in independent media - "Flagstock" and "Zerkalo". Also, military expert Yahor Lebiadok was charged with assisting extremist activities under Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code for his comments to the European Radio for Belarus. (It should be underscored that the radio station was recognized as an "extremist formation" after the interview).

Over 5,000 "extremist crimes" were registered by the Prosecutor General's Office during the first eleven months of 2022. 76% of this number were posts on the Internet at that. They were usually connected to the events of 2020. The online statements were defined by the authorities as 'slandering the state and top leadership', 'insulting government officials', 'deliberate incitement of hatred', and 'discreditation of the Republic of Belarus'.

On June 14, 2022, the Supreme Court of Belarus recognized the 'TUT BY MEDIA' Ltd., which used to be the largest online resource of Belarus, as an 'extremist organization'. The company employees are under criminal investigation now.

The authorities continued to include Websites and pages of independent publications on social media in the list of extremist materials. Their employees, who were under criminal investigation and presented charges under certain articles of the Criminal Code, were included in the lists of "extremists" and "terrorists". Also, **9 independent**

**media outlets were recognized as “extremist formations”** by the regime in power during the year of 2022.

All in all, publications of approximately 1,500 Web-resources (mostly Telegram-channels and groups) were recognized as ‘extremist materials’ by courts [in 2022](#).

Also, **more than 100 Web-resources were recognized as ‘extremist formations’** by the KGB or the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

As before, this decision entailed the mass prosecution of Internet users for the alleged dissemination of “extremist” media content.

**The Ministry of Information continued their repressive activity** on restricting access to the ‘undesirable’ information, banning the independent mass media activities and acting as a censor.

[According to official reports](#), the regime in power restricted access either fully or partially to **3,002 Web-resources** (mainly, Telegram channels and chats) within the period of January – November 2022. (To be compared to a bit more than 5,000 Web-resources, subjected to such restrictions during seven preceding years.)

The list of blocked mass media included [‘Viacherni Babruysk’](#), [‘Babruyski Kuryer’](#), ‘Narodnaya Volya’, Polish Radio, [CityDog.io](#), [s13.ru](#), [‘Journalists for Tolerance’](#) et al. The VK social media blocked a range of pages and groups of Belarusian independent mass media, including ‘Charter’97’ and ‘Flagstock’, following a complaint of the Ministry of Information of Belarus, as well as ‘Zerkalo’ and the Belarusian edition of ‘Media Zone’ on demand of the General Prosecutor’s Office of Russia.

As a result of this policy, [Belarus worsened by three points](#) its position in the global [‘Freedom on the Net - 2022’](#) annual ranking, compiled by the ‘Freedom House’ human rights organization, getting 28 points out of 100. The preceding year of 2021 had been far from being easy at that.

It was a new phenomenon in 2022 that the Web-audience from Russia was deprived of access to a number of Belarusian news Websites, since the latter covered the military conflict in Ukraine. In particular, the General Prosecutor’s Office of the Russian Federation blocked access to the news Websites [Zerkalo.io](#), [Nasha Niva](#), [European Radio for Belarus](#), [Media-Palessie](#), [Salidarnasts](#) et al., by decision of the Federal Service for Communications, Information Technology and Mass Communications (Roskomnadzor).

Practically all major independent news Web-resources continued their work from abroad. Some media outlets were forced to relocate their editorial teams once again after the outbreak of war in Ukraine at that.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists also continued its activity in exile.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists was awarded with the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Prize for Contribution to Press Freedom in Montevideo on May 3, 2022.

*“By awarding the prize to the BAJ, we are standing by all journalists around the world who criticize, oppose and expose authoritarian politicians and regimes, by transmitting truthful information and promoting freedom of expression”, [said Alfred Lela, Chair of the Prize’s international jury](#). “Today we salute and praise them; we find a way to say: we are with you, and we value your courage”.*

## **CHANGES IN LEGISLATION**

On February 27, 2022, a republican referendum on **introducing amendments and additions to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus** was held. As a result, the notion of 'ideology of the Belarusian state' was introduced into Article 4 (for which there is no definition). The ideology of the Belarusian state is now the only ideology that is not covered by the constitutional ban on establishing it as obligatory for the citizens. Article 4 now reads as follows:

*“Democracy in the Republic of Belarus is carried out on the basis of the ideology of the Belarusian state, as well as the diversity of political institutions and opinions. The ideology of political parties, religious or other public associations, and social groups may not be established as obligatory for citizens.”*

Article 54 was supplemented with part 2: *“Preservation of the historical memory of the heroic past of the Belarusian people, patriotism is the duty of every citizen of the Republic of Belarus”,* which in fact restricts freedom of opinion, in particular regarding historical events, and should be considered in the context of the application of the laws “On preventing Nazism rehabilitation” (of May 14, 2021) and “On the genocide of the Belarusian people”.

**The law of January 5, 2022 “On the genocide of the Belarusian people”** legislated the concept of “genocide of the Belarusian people: these are *“atrocities committed by Nazi criminals and their accomplices, nationalist formations during the Great Patriotic War and the post-war period, aimed at the systematic physical destruction of the Belarusian people by murder and other acts recognized as genocide in accordance with legislative acts and norms of international law”*. At the same time, the “post-war period” means the time before December 31, 1951, and the “Belarusian people” are Soviet citizens who lived on the territory of the BSSR during the specified period. This ignores the provisions of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948, which is referred to in the preamble of the Law: according to Article 2 of the Convention, genocide can only be directed against “a national, ethnic, racial or religious group as such”. This law also includes a new article 130-2

“Denial of the genocide of the Belarusian people” in the Criminal Code, according to which public denial of the legally fixed interpretation of the historical events of 1941-1951 is a crime and is punishable by up to 10 years in prison. This innovation is also a violation of international standards for freedom of expression.

On March 31, the **presidential decree No 131 "On development of mass media"** was signed. The aim of its adoption was stated to be to ensure sustainable economic position of the national mass media and production of the necessary amount of high-quality Belarusian content, and the reason was stated to be the imposition of sanctions against Belarus in the conditions of the geopolitical conflict. The decree establishes a 10% advertising fee for outdoor and transport advertising, and a 20% advertising fee in other cases. The fee is to be paid by advertisers and is to be used to subsidize state media. In addition, the value added tax rate for data transmission services has been changed from 25% to 26%.

**Decree No. 269 of the Council of Ministers of April 29, 2022 “On measures to implement Decree No. 131 of the President of the Republic of Belarus of March 31, 2022”** defines how the extra percentage of tax introduced by Decree No. 131 will be spent. For this purpose, the Ministry of Information creates a Commission to determine the recipients of subsidies to finance the production (reimbursement of production costs) of Belarusian (national) content and the amount of these subsidies, which is to work "on a voluntary basis". This body is to form "unified approaches to the determination of recipients of subsidies and their amounts" and to consider quarterly applications of media editorial offices.

On March 22, **presidential Decree No. 116 "On news aggregators on the global computer network Internet"** was signed, aimed at preventing the distribution of materials from Internet resources, access to which is limited. This document introduces a new concept of a "news aggregator": an internet resource owned by a legal entity or individual entrepreneur, which hosts at least 50 news items per day for five consecutive days, and the number of news items borrowed from various sources exceeds 50 percent of the total number of items per day. Exceptions are state media and online retailers. The news websites are obliged, under threat of being blocked by a decision of the Ministry of Information, to prevent distribution of materials from "blocked" resources and hyperlinks to them, as well as to provide the Ministry of Information with "the information it needs to analyse the information" within five working days.

On 19 September, **the Operative Analytical Centre under the President (OAC), the Ministry of Communications and Informatization of the Republic of Belarus and the Ministry of Information issued Decision No. 5/14/15**, which changed the procedure for restricting (resuming) access to Internet resources. Whereas previously Internet providers would check the restricted list once a day, they are now required to

do so every three hours during the day and to restrict access to a particular "banned" internet resource within four hours of its inclusion in the list.

On 18 October, **presidential Decree No 368 "On interaction between telecommunication operators, telecommunication service providers and owners of Internet resources with bodies engaged in operational and investigative activities"** was signed, which provides for the creation of a special information system of electronic interaction with special services. The OAC and the KGB have been identified as those who can monitor users. Whereas previously real-time surveillance was carried out only on users of telecommunications operators, now it will become mandatory for telecommunications service providers and owners of Internet resources. Those identified by the OAC and the KGB will be required to register with the system within three months and set up their resources for unimpeded online access by security services. Failure to comply with these requirements will result in the blocking of access to "offending" websites.

## **VIOLATIONS OF JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA RIGHTS**

### **Criminal cases**

During the year 17 criminal cases were adjudicated: journalists and media workers received prison sentences from 1.3 to 14 years. During the year, 11 new criminal cases were initiated.

At the end of December 2022, **33 journalists were imprisoned**. According to the international non-governmental organisation [Reporters without Borders](#), Belarus was in the bottom five countries with the largest number of journalists behind bars and was in fourth place for the number of imprisoned female journalists (9).

### **The case of Siarhei Satsuk**

On March 25, 2020 Siarhei Satsuk, a well-known investigative journalist and the editor of "Yezhednevnik" online media outlet, was detained. One of his high-profile investigations was a series of articles in "Yezhednevnik" about corruption in the Belarusian healthcare system. Later, a number of high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Health were found guilty of corruption. On March 23, 2020, the "Yezhednevnik" website (ej.by) published a column by Siarhei Satsuk "Who is sowing panic around the coronavirus, the president or websites and channels?" In this piece the author questioned the official statistics on the incidence of coronavirus in Belarus. Two days afterwards, on 25 March, he was detained and taken into custody. The reason for the criminal prosecution under Article 430 of the Criminal Code (bribery) was the alleged receipt of money by Siarhei Satsuk for preparing and publishing an article about corruption. Satsuk's detention and the initiation of the criminal case against him provoked sharp criticism from the Belarusian and international community. On the

tenth day after his arrest, the General Prosecutor reversed the decision to place him in custody. The journalist was released, but the criminal case against him was not dropped.

On December 8, 2021, Siarhei Satsuk was detained again. On the same day he was searched and interrogated by the Investigative Committee. The ej.by website was blocked at the same time. After the interrogation on the old bribery case the journalist was taken into custody. Later he was charged with two more charges: incitement of racial, national, religious or other social enmity or discord and abuse of power or official authority. Minsk City Court pronounced the sentence on Siarhei Satsuk on October 26, 2022. He was sentenced to **eight years' imprisonment in a strict regime penal colony**, having been found guilty of receiving a large-scale bribe (Article 430, part 2 of the Criminal Code), abuse of power (Article 426), as well as of inciting social hatred (Article 130).

### **The case of Kseniya Lutskina**

Kseniya Lutskina, a former employee of the state-owned Beltelecom company and winner of state awards for achievements in her profession, was arrested, together with the staff of the Belarusian Press Club, on December 22, 2020 by officers of the Financial Investigation Department. On December 31 they were charged with an offence under Article 243 (part 2) of the Criminal Code (tax evasion on a particularly large scale). After the Press Club case was dropped in August 2021 and all of its defendants, who had petitioned for clemency, were released, a new criminal case was brought against Lutskina, who suffered from a growing tumour in her brain but remained in custody. She was charged with conspiracy to seize state power by unconstitutional means (Article 357 of the Criminal Code), motivated by the fact that she "headed a group of information support and counteraction to state media" in the Coordination Council of the Belarusian opposition, and tried to create a public Belarusian interactive television to "conceal and distort the real facts, escalate the protest activity, stimulate a split in the Belarusian society, form a negative opinion among people about the activities of state bodies". On September 28, 2022, Minsk City Court sentenced Kseniya Lutskina to **eight years in prison**.

### **The case of Katsiaryna Andreyeva (Bakhvalava) and Darya Chultsova**

On February 18, 2021, journalists of the Belsat TV channel Katsiaryna Andreyeva and Darya Chultsova) were sentenced to two years in prison for allegedly organizing actions that grossly violate public order (Article 342 (part 1) of the Criminal Code), for having conducted a live broadcast of the violent dispersal of peaceful demonstrators who came to pay tribute to Roman Bandarenka in the yard of his apartment building on November 15, 2020. On April 7, 2022, it became known that five months before her



release from prison, Andreyeva had been charged with "treason against the state" (Article 356 (part 1) of the Criminal Code). Her case was considered in camera by the Gomel Regional Court, and on July 13, 2022 **a second sentence of eight years and three months in a reinforced regime penal colony was handed down.**

Darya Chultsova was released on September 3, 2022, having served her entire sentence.

### **The case of Dzianis Ivashyn**

Investigative journalist Dzianis Ivashyn was arrested on March 12, 2021 in Hrodna and charged under Art. 365 of the Criminal Code (interference in the activities of a police officer), which carries a maximum penalty of three years imprisonment. Ivashyn worked for the Novy Chas newspaper. He was also the author and editor of the Belarusian service of the InformNapalm website. The last article he published in the Novy Chas was about former members of the Ukrainian Berkut special unit allegedly involved in violence against peaceful protesters in 2014 in Kyiv, who had taken a job with the Belarusian police (the article was written using data from open sources). On September 2, 2021, he was charged again. On September 14, 2022 Ivashyn was convicted in a closed trial under two articles of the Criminal Code: 365 (interference in the activities of an internal affairs officer) and 356 (part 1) (high treason). The State Security Committee accused the journalist of cooperation with the Ukrainian intelligence service, Ukrainian diplomats. He was sentenced to 13 years and 1 month in prison and fined 4,800 rubles. He must also pay compensation to nine victims in the amount of 2,000 rubles each. Who these victims were was not known to the public. In total, the journalist has to pay more than 9000 dollars.

### **The case of Andrzej Poczobut**

Andrzej Poczobut, a journalist of Polish descent from Hrodna, an employee of the Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza as well as the newspaper Nad Niemnem, was arrested together with several other members of the Union of Poles in Belarus on March 25, 2021. He was taken into custody and charged under Article 130 (part 3) of the Criminal Code (incitement of racial, national, religious or other social hatred or discord). He faced five to 12 years' imprisonment. According to the official version, since 2018 members of the Union of Poles held a series of illegal events with the participation of minors in Hrodna and other cities of the region "to honour members of anti-Soviet gangs who acted during and after the Great Patriotic War, committing robbery, killing peaceful population of Belarus, destructing property". These actions of the authorities took place against the background of the anti-Polish propaganda spread by the state media, which described Poland as an aggressor that allegedly had territorial claims to the Republic of Belarus. In August 2022, Andrzej Poczobut faced

a new charge: he was additionally charged with "calling for restrictive measures (sanctions) aimed at causing damage to national security" (Article 361 of the Criminal Code).

On February 8, 2023, Hrodna Regional Court sentenced Andrzej Poczobut to **8 years of imprisonment to be served in a maximum security penal colony.**

### **The case of TUT.by**

On May 18, 2021 the Belarusian authorities launched an unprecedented attack on tut.by, the most influential independent news resource in Belarus (earlier, on January 19, TUT BY Media Ltd was stripped of its media status by a court decision). The Department for Financial Investigations opened a criminal case against its employees under Article 243 (part 2) of the Criminal Code (large-scale tax evasion). On that day, searches were conducted in the offices of tut.by in Minsk, Brest, Vitebsk, Mahiliou and Hrodna, as well as in the offices of the associated companies hoster.by, av.by and rabota.by in Minsk and in the homes of a number of employees. On the same day, the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus blocked tut.by for access both from Belarus and from abroad. The decision was taken on the basis of the notification of the General Prosecutor's Office, which found "numerous facts of violation of the Law on mass media" and, in particular, referred to the publication of materials originating from the BYSOL Foundation, an initiative to raise funds to support victims of political repression in Belarus (legislation prohibits media to distribute materials on behalf of non-registered organizations).

A criminal case for tax evasion on a particularly large scale was opened (Article 243 of the Criminal Code). Allegedly, being a resident of the Hi-Tech Park, TUT BY Media received revenues for about a year without having the right to do so. As part of the case, 13 employees of TUT.by and related companies were placed under detention or house arrest:

1. editor-in-chief Maryna Zolatava;
2. general director Liudmila Chekina
3. chief accountant Angela Asad (*released on March 11, 2022, but remained charged*)
4. deputy director Iryna Rybalka (*released on March 11, 2022, but remained charged*);
5. chief engineer Ala Lapatka;
6. editor-in-chief Volha Loika;
7. journalist Alena Talkachova;
8. deputy chief accountant Maryja Novik (*released on March 11, 2022, but remained charged*);
9. deputy general director for technical issues Aliaksandr Daineka;
10. manager Andrei Audziejeu;
11. director of hoster.by Siarhei Pavalishau (*released on September 1, 2021*);
12. general director of RocketData Darya Danilava;

13. lawyer Katsiaryna Tkachenka (house arrest);
14. former lawyer Iryna Kastsiuchenka (house arrest).

After some time, the company paid the damages calculated by the investigation - more than EUR 1,120,000. Nine of the defendants in the case applied for exemption from criminal liability, and their cases did not go to trial.

In October 2021 the Investigative Committee of Belarus informed that a new criminal case was brought against employees of TUT.by - for incitement of hatred (part 3 Article 130 of the Criminal Code).

Five employees were charged under other articles. In January 2022 editor Volha Loika and journalist Alena Talkachova were released from pre-trial detention due to the change of preventive measure. They secretly left the country and were put on the wanted list, as was the lawyer Katsiaryna Tkachenka.

On April 25, 2022, **Darya Danilava was sentenced to 1 year and 4 months imprisonment** under Article 342 (part 1) of the Criminal Code (participation in acts grossly violating public order). She was released in the courtroom, as she had served her entire sentence while under investigation.

On January 9, 2023 the chief editor Maryna Zolatava and the general director Liudmila Chekina stood trial. Both were charged under part 3 of Article 130 of the Criminal Code (incitement of racial, national, religious or other social hatred or discord on racial, national, religious, linguistic or other social belonging, committed by a group of persons or resulting in grave consequences) and part 3 of Article 361 (calls to actions aimed at damaging the national security of the Republic of Belarus, committed through mass media or the Internet global computer network). Liudmila Chekina was also charged with large-scale tax evasion (Article 243 part 2 of the Criminal Code). The trial was held behind closed doors. On March 17, 2023, Judge Valiantsina Ziankevich sentenced both former employees of TUT.by to **12 years of imprisonment**. Liudmila Chekina was also ordered to pay a fine of 37,000 rubles.

### **The case of Valeriya Kastsiuhova**

On June 30, 2021 Valeriya Kastsiuhova, political scientist, analyst, founder and editor of the expert community website "Nashe Mnenie", editor and author of "Belarusian Yearbook", head of the expert group for monitoring "Belarus in Focus", was detained after a search of her home by KGB officers. Her arrest was preceded by an appearance on Euroradio, where she answered questions about whether the release of political prisoners could be achieved by sanctions and whether a rift with the West would provoke a rapid deepening of Belarus' integration with Russia. Since then she has been in custody. Kastsiuhova was charged under three articles of the Criminal Code: Article 357, part 1 (aiding and abetting acts aimed at seizing power), Article 361,

part 3 (calling for acts harmful to national security) and Article 130, part 3 (inciting other social enmity and discord). On March 17, 2023, she was sentenced (together with researcher Tatsiana Kuzina) to **ten years" imprisonment**.

### **The case of Aliaksandr Ivulin**

On June 3, 2021 Aliaksandr Ivulin, a sports journalist and contributor to Tribuna.com and the author of the Youtube channel Chestnok, was arrested. He was charged under Article 342 part 1 of the Criminal Code (organisation and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them) and sentenced by judge Siarhei Shatyla to **two years in prison** on January 19, 2022.

### **The case of Nasha Niva**

On July 8, 2021 the Ministry of Information completely blocked the access to the website of the online weekly newspaper "Nasha Niva" (nn.by) on the basis of a notification from the Prosecutor General's Office "for distribution of information which is prohibited by Article 38 part 1 of the Law on Mass Media". The offices and homes of four of its employees were searched. Two of them, Yahor Martsinovich and Andrei Skurko, were charged with causing property damage without signs of theft (Article 216 of the Criminal Code) and taken into custody -- they allegedly paid utility bills for the editorial office at the residential rate. On March 15, 2022 they were both sentenced to **two and a half years' imprisonment** at Zavodsky district court in Minsk (judge Angela Kastsiukevich).

### **The case of BelaPAN**

On 18 August 2021 searches were conducted at the office of the independent news agency BelaPAN and the homes of its staff in Minsk as part of a criminal investigation under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them). BelaPAN websites (belapan.by and belapan.com) were completely blocked. Six staff members were questioned by the Investigative Committee's Office. On the evening of the same day the Investigative Committee published a statement that a tax inspection of BelaPAN had been initiated and violations of tax legislation had already been revealed. BelaPAN director **Iryna Leushyna** and its former director **Dzmitry Navazhylau**, who became the defendants in the case under part 2 of Article 243 (tax and duties evasion) of the Criminal Code, were taken into custody. On November 18, 2021 it became known that both journalists were also charged with "establishment of an extremist formation" (Article 361 part 1 of the Criminal Code). This was preceded by the

recognition as an extremist formation of "a group of citizens of Belarus from among the staff of BelaPAN news agency".

**Andrei Aliaksandrau**, a former BelaPAN employee, media manager and founder of the online edition journalby.com, has been in custody since January 12, 2021 (as has his partner Iryna Zlobina, whom he married already behind bars). Initially they were both charged under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (organisation and preparation of events grossly violating public order or active participation in them) for "financing persons involved in mass disorder and other protests". On August 31, 2021, following the arrest of Aliaksandrau's former BelaPAN colleagues, he was additionally charged with tax evasion. Aliaksandrau and Zlobina were also involved in the BelaPAN case, which was tried in camera for four months. On October 6, 2022, the court sentenced media manager **Andrei Aliaksandrau to 14 years in prison, his wife Iryna Zlobina to 9 years, former BelaPAN agency director Dzmitry Navazhylau to 6 years and BelaPAN editor-in-chief and director Iryna Leushyna to 4 years:**

- Andrei Aliaksandrau and Iryna Zlobina were charged under Article 342 (part 2) of the Criminal Code for preparing "at least 260 persons to take part in group actions that grossly violate public order" (this is how the investigation interpreted their payment of fines, lawyer's bills, etc. They were also charged under Article 356 (part 1) of the Criminal Code (treason against the state) for assisting the ByHelp Foundation in activities "aimed at harming the national security of the Republic of Belarus";
- Andrei Aliaksandrau, Dzmitry Navazhylau and Iryna Leushyna were accused of creation and leadership of an extremist group of BelaPAN workers and other persons under Article 361 (part 1) of the Criminal Code;
- Andrei Aliaksandrau and Dzmitry Navazhylau were accused of tax evasion under Article 243 (part 2) of the Criminal Code (the Investigative Committee stated that BelaPAN employees allegedly evaded taxes by 449 thousand rubles for six years and received concealed funding from foreign organizations in the amount of 1.6 million dollars since 2014).

### **The case of Henadz Mazheika**

Henadz Mazheika, a journalist for "Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi", was detained in Moscow by special services and deported to Minsk on October 1, 2021. The reason for his detention was his article on the website kp.by, published in the evening of September 28. In it, a former classmate positively described the programmer Andrei Zeltser, a participant in the tragic incident in which a KGB officer and himself were killed. Although the editorial board removed the text a few minutes later, the next day the site kp.by was blocked by a decision of the Ministry of Information in connection with the publication of information "contributing to the formation of sources of threats to national security". Henadz Mazheika, placed in custody, was charged under two articles of the Criminal Code - 130 (inciting racial, national, religious or other social

enmity or discord) and 368 (insulting the president of the Republic of Belarus). In connection with these events the Russian office of Komsomolskaya Pravda decided to close its office of CJSC BelKP-PRESS that had been publishing Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus since 1994. On March 23, 2023, Minsk City Court sentenced Henadz Mazheika to **three years of imprisonment**.

### **The case of Iryna Slaunikava**

Iryna Slaunikava (former employee of the TV channel Belsat) was detained at Minsk airport on October 30, 2021, when she and her husband returned from holiday. After 30 days of administrative detention she was not released and was charged under Article 342 of the Criminal Code. On August 3, 2022 Slaunikava was sentenced to **five years' imprisonment** under two criminal articles in the Homel Regional Court: 342 (organisation of group actions that grossly violate public order or active participation in them) and 361 part 1 (establishment of an extremist formation or leadership of such formation or a structural subdivision within it). The court's decision was not affected by the fact that she cooperated with Belsat TV channel before the Ministry of Internal Affairs recognized it as an "extremist formation".

### **The case of Andrei Kuzniechyk**

Andrei Kuzniechyk, a freelance journalist for Radio Svaboda, was detained on November 25, 2021. After his detention, the security forces briefly managed to gain control over the Telegram channel Radio Svaboda. The next day, Kuzniechyk was sentenced to administrative detention, then twice more - for a total of 30 days - but he was never released. On December 23, Kuzniechyk's relatives were informed that a criminal case was opened against him. While the journalist was under administrative arrest, on December 3, the court recognized as extremist materials the channels of Radio Svaboda in Telegram and YouTube, as well as pages in social networks. On June 8, 2022 Radio Svaboda journalist Andrei Kuzniechyk was sentenced to **six years in a strict regime penal colony** under Article 361-1 part 1 of the Criminal Code (establishment or participation in the extremist formation). The trial was held behind closed doors, therefore, the specific circumstances of the case are unknown.

### **The case of Aleh Hruzdilovich**

On December 23, 2021 Aleh Hruzdilovich, a journalist of Radio "Svaboda" was detained. In the summer of 2020 he was actively covering socio-political events in Belarus, holding popular Radio Svaboda webcasts from protest actions, although in August 2020 he was denied accreditation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs together with the majority of foreign media journalists. Hruzdilovich was first detained on July

16, during a mass search of independent journalists in Belarus, and spent ten days in custody. Upon his release, the journalist remained a suspect and had to sign an undertaking to appear. On December 23, masked men took Hruzdilovich from his home in Minsk, breaking down the doors, after which it became known that his preventive measure was changed. The journalist became a defendant in a criminal case brought under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them) - he was charged with participation in an unsanctioned action at a time when he had already been stripped of his accreditation as a journalist by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry. On 3 March 2022, the court of Savetski District of Minsk sentenced him to **one year and a half of imprisonment**. After nine months behind bars, Aleh Hruzdilovich was released on the basis of a petition for clemency. He immediately left Belarus.

### **The case of Dzmitry Luksha**

On March 11, 2022, Dzmitry Luksha (ex-Belteleradiocompany worker), a freelance correspondent of the Kazakh TV channel Khabar 24, was detained and taken into custody. A criminal case was brought against him under two articles of the Criminal Code - Article 369-1 (discrediting the Republic of Belarus) and Article 342 (organization or active participation in the group actions that grossly violate the public order). It is known that the reason for this was his latest story shown by a Kazakh channel. According to the prosecution, Luksha, in order to discredit the country, with the help of a cameraman and with the participation of his wife, prepared a series of videos containing deliberately false information. On December 2, 2022, the judge Natalia Buguk sentenced the journalist to **four years in a general regime penal colony and a fine of 16,000 roubles**.

### **The case of Sviatlana Garda**

On March 14, 2022 information about a criminal case against Sviatlana Garda (at that time she was out of Belarus), head of the network media outlet Media-Polesie, for abuse of power under Article 424 of the Criminal Code (for failure to make tax payments and obligatory deductions) was issued by the Luninets district prosecutor's office.

### **The case of Ihar Kazmerchak**

On April 1, 2022 a criminal case was opened against Ihar Kazmerchak, the founder of the regional news website Orsha.eu, who left Belarus (Article 368 of the Criminal Code for insulting the president). In December it became known that Kazmerchak was put on an interstate wanted list within the CIS.

### **The case of Aksana Kolb**

On 20 April 2022, Aksana Kolb, the 'Novy Chas' newspaper's Editor-in-chief, was arrested (novychas.by was blocked in Belarus in October 2021, but continued to operate).

On June 15, 2022, she sentenced to 2.5 years of restriction of freedom with a referral to an open correctional institution, being found guilty under part 1 of Article 342 of the Belarus Criminal Code (arrangement and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order or active participation in them). She fled Belarus later.

### **The case of Yury Hantsarevich**

Yury Hantsarevich, a correspondent of 'Intex-press' periodical (Baranavichy, Brest region), was detained on May 5, 2022. A criminal case was filed against him under Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code (assistance to extremist activity) afterwards. It related to the transfer of photos of Russian military equipment to the 'Zerkalo' and 'Radio Liberty' publications. On July 14, 2022, he was sentenced to **2 years and 6 months of imprisonment**.

### **The case of Kanstantsin Zalatykh**

Kanstantsin Zalatykh, Director of 'Belarusy i Rynak' newspaper, was detained by KGB officers on the morning of May 18, 2022. He was charged with committing crimes under four articles of the Criminal Code: 426 (abuse of power or official authority), 130 (incitement of racial, national, religious or other social hatred or discord), 369 (insulting a government official) and 368 (insulting the President of the Republic of Belarus). On April 6, 2022, Minsk City Court sentenced Zalatykh to **four years in prison**, having heard his case in camera.

### **The case of Ales Lyubianchuk**

A criminal police search was carried out at the house of journalist Ales Lyubianchuk in the village of Kryvichi, Iuye district, Hrodna region on May 26, 2022. Consequently, he was detained as part of a criminal investigation and taken to a temporary detention center in Minsk. He was charged under Article 361-1(3) of the Criminal Code (establishment of or participation in an extremist formation). The journalist's case was heard in Minsk City Court and on October 27, 2022 Lyubianchuk was sentenced to **three years' imprisonment**.



### **The case of Yury Hladchuk and Yulia Mudreuskaya**

On 16 June 2022 Yury Hladchuk, editor-in-chief of ABW.by and Yulia Mudreuskaya, editor of special projects, were detained. Yury Hladchuk was kept in custody until his trial in December, when he was sentenced to 2.5 years of imprisonment under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them) and Article 368 (insult of the President of the Republic of Belarus). Yulia Mudreuskaya. She was charged under Article 342 of the Criminal Code and sentenced to a year and a half of imprisonment.

### **The case of Ivan Murauyou**

Ivan Murauyou, journalist, cameraman and photographer, was detained on August 29, 2022 in Minsk by officers of the Investigative Committee; afterwards he was charged under Part 3 Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code (establishment of an extremist formation or participation in it). The reason for the prosecution was a video for the investigation of journalist Stanislau Ivashkevich, which was broadcasted on Belsat TV channel in July of the same year - a story titled "Lilia Lukashenko's friend and oligarchs became beneficiaries of the orthopedists' case". On December 26, 2022 the Minsk City Court sentenced Murauyou to **two and a half years in prison**.

### **The case of Inna Mozhchanka**

On September 6, 2022 Brest Regional Court found the former BelTA journalist Inna Mozhchanka guilty on charges of insulting a public officer (Article 369 of the Criminal Code) and inciting social hatred (Article 130, part 1 of the Criminal Code) and sentenced her to **three years in a strict regime colony to be served under the general regime**. Inna Mozhchanka was detained in September 2021 in connection with her negative statements on social media about the deceased KGB officer.

### **The case of Yauhien Merkis**

On September 14, 2022, journalist and local historian Yauhien Merkis, who had previously worked for the Belsat TV channel, was detained in Homiel. It was reported that his case concerned alleged calls for sanctions. Later it became known that the journalist was charged under Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code (promotion of extremist activity). He remained in custody.

### **The case of Dzmitry Semchanka**

On September 16, 2022, Dzmitry Semchanka, a former employee of the ONT TV channel, who headed the presidential pool of journalists, was detained and sentenced twice to administrative arrest (in August 2020, he resigned in protest against violence, after which he worked in the PR sphere, being an employee of Belagro). When Semchanka was not released on October 13, 2022, it became known that a criminal case was opened against him under Article 130 (part 1) of the Criminal Code for inciting hatred. His case was heard in Minsk City Court on 23 March 2023, with the judge sentencing him to **three years in prison**.

### **The case of Aliaksandr Lychauka and Snezhana Inanets**

The spouse journalists Aliaksandr Lychauka and Sniazhana Inanets, who were detained on October 6, 2022, were charged under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them) in connection with participation in protests in 2020 and subscription to "destructive" Telegram channels. On January 13, 2023, Inanets was sentenced to **two years'** and **Lychauka to three years of restricted freedom without referral to an open prison**.

### **Criminal prosecution of bloggers**

In 2022, the institution of "special proceedings" under the new Article 468-27 of the Criminal Procedure Code - criminal proceedings against an accused person who is outside the Republic of Belarus and evades appearing before the body conducting the criminal proceedings - started to be applied. As a result of its introduction it became possible to convict political emigrants in absentia, in particular opposition-minded bloggers.

On September 27, 2022 the Investigative Committee initiated the first "special proceeding" - a case under Article 130 (inciting hatred) and Article 203-1 (illegal collection and distribution of personal data) against five "administrators" of the Telegram channel Black Book of Belarus, which published information about government representatives, accused of being involved in the persecution of the opposition. Among them was **Dzmitry Navosha**, public figure and journalist, co-founder of Sports.ru. On January 18, 2023 all of the accused were sentenced in absentia to 12 years of imprisonment.

On December 30, 2022, the Prosecutor General's Office announced that the criminal case against the bloggers Stsiapan Putsila, Yan Rudzik, and Raman Pratasievich, who had been involved in the activities of the NEXTA and 'Belarus of the Brain'

Telegram channels was directed to court. (The Telegram channels actively covered the post-election protests of 2020.)

The case consideration started in February 2023. It was held in the order of special proceedings in relation to Stsiapan Putsila and Yan Rudzik, who were outside Belarus. Raman Pratasevich was under house arrest in Belarus since he had been detained following a forced landing of a Ryanair plane flying from Athens to Vilnius in Minsk on May 23, 2021, and appeared before the court. The accused were charged with committing at least 1,586 crimes under ten articles of the Criminal Code, allegedly, “in order to implement a common conspiratorial plan to seize state power in Belarus in an unconstitutional way.”

### **Prosecution of informal press distributors**

On December 12, 2022, Aleh Haurylau, a trainer from Salihorsk (Minsk region), was sentenced to 10 years in prison in a high security colony. He had been detained for distributing protest newspapers in December 2021. Initially, he was charged with slandering the president (Article 367 of the Criminal Code). However, following the results of the “examination” of “Chestnaya Gazeta” publications, the list of charges was supplemented by four more articles of the Criminal Code: Article 361 (‘calls for actions aimed at causing harm to the national security of the Republic of Belarus’), Article 341 (‘defilement of buildings and damage to property’), Article 361- 4 (‘facilitation of extremist activity’), and Article 130 (incitement of hostility or discord).

On October 26, 2022, Andrei Fomin was detained, presented charges under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (‘arrangement and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them’), and placed in custody. The person admitted being the editor and author of articles for the ‘Vestniki’ network of protest newspapers, published and distributed by activists of local initiatives. (The network publications merged into one ‘Belaruski Vestnik’ newspaper in March 2022.)

### **Detentions and administrative prosecution of journalists**

The Belarusian Association of Journalists registered **40 cases of detention of journalists and 55 searches (5 of them were conducted in media editorial offices)** in 2022. Also, the journalists were imprisoned 20 times and fined four times **on administrative charges** during the year. Moreover, representatives of law enforcement agencies summoned journalists for interrogations, visited the relatives and searched the homes of journalists who had left Belarus. In fact, all non-state media and independent journalists, as alternative sources of information, were under close control of law enforcement agencies within the period under review.

E.g., Siarhei Serabro, the 'Vitsiebsk People's News' Web-site editor and photographer was detained at Vitsiebsk railway station on February 28. The authorities assumed that he was going to shoot a protest against the war in Ukraine there. The media worker's mobile phone was taken away from him, and he spent about two hours at the police station. On August 23, he was also summoned to the Vitebsk regional department of GUBOPiK (Main Department for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption of the Ministry of Internal Affairs), where he was interrogated for an hour, and then they took his written explanations about the coverage of protest rallies after the presidential elections in 2020.

The independent Web-publication 'Babruyski Kuryer' and its Editor-in-chief Anatol Sanatsenka were subjected to large-scale persecution in 2022, too. The journalist was twice detained and sentenced to administrative arrest in mid-September. Police searches were conducted in his and his colleagues' apartments. The technical equipment was seized. Public access to 'Babruyski Kuryer' newspaper Website was blocked on September 19, 2022. And Babruysk City and District Court labeled its content as 'extremist materials' on September 26, 2022.

A five-minute story about the 'Babruyski Kuryer' newspaper and its employees appeared on the Telegram channel of the 'ZefirFM' local state radio on October 6, 2022. The text of the story was read by Mikalay Silkou, the 'Babruyskaye Zhytstsiu' pro-government newspaper's editor-in-chief. The main attention in the story was given to Anatol Sanatsenka, who was serving an administrative arrest at that time. In particular, he was unfoundedly accused of begging for money from the United States and Germany, publishing "fake news" about the terrorist attack in the Minsk metro and having links with the Belsat TV channel that had been recognized as an "extremist formation".

This approach became typical for liquidation or 'censoring' independent media in Belarus: searches at editorial offices, seizure of technical equipment, detentions and interrogations of employees as well as their prosecution with the practically simultaneous recognition of the content as 'extremist materials'.

Consequently, it was impossible to continue the activity of the affected media outlets either partially or in full.

### **Application of legislation on counteraction to extremism**

The trend of using anti-extremist legislation to restrict access to information distributed by independent media and to hold people accountable for any participation in their activities continued and expanded in 2022.

Thus, on June 14, 2022, the Supreme Court of Belarus recognized the 'TUT BY MEDIA' Ltd., which used to be the largest online resource of Belarus, as an

'extremist organization'. The company employees are under criminal investigation now. Ihar Lutski, the ex-Minister of Information stated in this respect as follows:

*"There took place a direct encroachment on the sovereignty and independence of our country. The funding of these non-state media was carried out from abroad, and it was also coordinated from abroad. The current verdict on TUT.BY is a vivid example of that. They have been recognized as extremist!"*

The Minister's position concerned practically all non-state mass media that was confirmed by the governmental policies.

The authorities continued to include the content of Websites and pages in the social media, owned by independent publications, to the lists of 'extremist materials' and label the independent media as 'extremist formations', as well as include their criminally prosecuted employees to the lists of 'extremists' and 'terrorists'. The Websites and online communities of the overwhelming majority of Belarusian independent mass media (over 40 media outlets, all in all), appeared in the list of 'extremist materials'. Moreover, the 'Church' Website and social media that covered the activities of Greek Catholic congregation in Belarus were included in the 'extremist' list, too.

The independent media 'Nasha Niva', 'Flagstock', 'KYKY.ORG', 'Euroradio', 'Charter'97' as well as the so-called 'samizdat', i.e. the printed protest newspapers, which were published and distributed by non-professional journalists ('Honest Newspaper', 'Belarusian Newsletter', 'Protest Belarus', 'Protest Homiel', 'The Belarusians' Word', and "'7Chizhey' Newspaper') were **labeled as 'extremist formations'** by decisions of KGB and the Ministry of Interior during the year of 2022.

By March 2023, 18 media organizations were labeled as 'extremist formations', including the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

More than 1,500 Web-resources were labeled as 'extremist formations' during the year of 2022. Moreover, publications of approximately 1,500 Web-resources (mainly, Telegram channels and Web-communities) were recognized by courts as 'extremist materials.'

As before, it entailed mass administrative prosecution of Web-users for the distribution of "extremist" media content (in particular, under Article 19.11 of the Code of Administrative Offenses, which provides for up to 15 days of administrative arrest). The application of this article was peculiar enough, since the authorities presented administrative charges to people for reposts of materials, which had been published many years earlier and which weren't included in the list of extremist materials at the moment of their distribution.

The "struggle with extremism" was used as the basis for bringing a large number of citizens to criminal responsibility. More than 5,000 "extremist crimes" were recorded by the Prosecutor General's Office in the first eleven months of 2022. At the same

time, 76% of this number of cases were expressions of opinion on the Web, usually in the context of the events of 2020, which were defined by the authorities as 'slandering the state and top governmental leadership, insulting government officials, deliberately inciting hatred, discrediting the Republic of Belarus'.

The first criminal case under the "extremist" Article 130-2 ('denial of the genocide of the Belarusian people') included in the Criminal Code in 2022 was filed in connection with publications in independent media - "Flagstock" (Homiel) and "Zerkalo" - concerning the burial places of the victims of Stalinist repressions.

**The authorities started criminal prosecution for any form of cooperation with Internet resources recognized as extremist formations** (see more details in 'Criminal Cases'). Sharing information, including photos and videos, registration in bots, giving an interview, etc. were the grounds for initiating cases under Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code ('facilitation of extremist activity'), which provides for punishment of up to seven years in prison. Thus, Yury Hantsarevich, a correspondent of 'Intex-Press' newspaper (Baranavichy, Brest region) was sentenced to 2.5 years in prison for sharing photos of Russian military equipment with 'Zerkalo' and 'Radio Liberty'. Yahor Lebiadok, a military expert and Darya Losik, the wife of Igor Losik (a political prisoner and employee of Radio Liberty), were convicted for being interviewed by the media, recognized as "extremist formations", to five and two years in prison, respectively.

The employees of media outlets recognized as "extremist formations" were often prosecuted under Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code ('creating or participating in an extremist formation'), which provides for a sanction of up to 10 years in prison. Most of them were detained before the organizations to which they were associated would be recognized as "extremist groups", that is, the article is retroactive. For example, Andrei Aliaksandrau (detained in January 2021), Dzmitry Navazhylau, and Iryna Leushyna (detained in August 2021) were accused of creating an extremist group from among the BelaPAN employees and other persons, as well as leading such a formation, although the BelaPAN News Agency was labeled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs on November 1, 2021 only (see more details in 'Criminal cases').

**The List of citizens of the Republic of Belarus, foreign citizens or stateless persons involved in extremist activities was published by the Belarusian authorities for the first time in history on March 23, 2022.** It turned out to include bloggers Siarhey Piaturkhin and Aliaksandr Kabanau, who were serving prison sentences at that time. A journalist Katsiaryna Andreyeva and a philosopher Uladzimir Matskevich were classified as such persons some time later.

Inclusion in this list imposes a number of restrictions regarding financial transactions, as well as the right to engage in certain occupations and hold certain positions.

A blogger and a 'Radio Liberty' employee Ihar Losik, who was sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment in a high security colony, a journalist and a leader of the Poles'

Union in Belarus Andrzej Poczobut, former employees of TUT.BY (Maryna Zolatava, Editor-in-chief, Liudmila Chekina, Director, and journalists Volha Loika and Alena Talkachova), who were under criminal investigation, as well as Aleh Haurylau, the distributor of the "Chestnaya Gazeta" samizdat publication, were included in the List of organizations and individuals involved in terrorist activities by the KGB, which means a ban on financial transactions with their participation.

## **RESTRICTION OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

The Ministry of Information continued its repressive activity on restricting access to the 'undesirable' information by taking administrative measures, banning the activity of independent media and carrying out the censor's functions.

It affected the operation of Belarusian and foreign mass media in 2022. The Russian aggression against Ukraine started on February 24, 2022, and it played its role in this process.

Thus, public access to 6 Ukrainian news Web-resources was blocked on the territory of Belarus as soon as the war started, including 'Gordon', 'Obozrevatel', RBK-Ukraine, InfoResist, 'Novoye Vremya' ('New Time'), and 'Focus', since the Web-resources covered the military conflict in Ukraine in the way that differed from the official interpretation of Russian-Belarusian propaganda.

The blocking of users' access from Russia to the Belarusian Web-resources for the same reason was a new phenomenon in 2022.

By decisions of the Federal Service for Communications, Information Technology and Mass Communications (Roskomnadzor) or the General Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation, the news websites Zerkalo.io, Nasha Niva, Euroradio, Media-Polesie, Solidarnasts and others were blocked on the territory of Russia. The "VKontakte" social media blocked a number of pages and groups of Belarusian independent Web-resources, including "Charter-97" and "Flagstock" on the complaint of the Ministry of Information of Belarus, "Zerkalo" and the Belarusian "Mediazona" at the request of the Prosecutor General's Office of Russia.

According to the official statistics, the government **restricted access, to 3,002 Web-resources** (mainly Telegram channels and chats), either in whole or in part, in January-November 2022. At the same time, just over 5,000 Web-resources were subject to such restrictions over the previous seven years. Among the media that suffered from the blockage of public access to their websites were Vecherny Bobruisk, Bobruisk Courier, Narodnaya Volya, Polish Radio, CityDog.io, s13.ru and others.

The year 2022 was marked by changes in the procedure for blocking the unwanted sites, as well as in arranging the access of special services to the content of Internet resources (see more details in “Changes in legislation”).

### **Censorship was de-facto present in Belarus, including the state media sector**

In March 2022, the Ministry of Information issued warnings to two popular Belarusian radio stations, ‘Radio Rocks-M’ and ‘Radio B A’, in connection with the ‘distribution of materials that don’t belong to the contents of the specialization, which is outlined in the radio outlet’s registration documents.’

The news Website Blizko.by was temporarily blocked for public access by decision of the Ministry of Information of Belarus. As soon as it was unblocked, the Web-users couldn’t find political news items, including the archived ones, on its pages any longer.

At least three state media workers were fired for making statements deemed disloyal by the regime in power, while other employees were subjected to reprimands.

The ***BelBusinessChannel TV*** stopped broadcasting its programs without explanation of reasons in 2022. It was the only TV channel on business in Belarus, dealing with rebroadcasting the programs of the Russian RBC TV channel and filming original programs on Belarusian issues. **The ‘UzHorak’ regional newspaper (Horki, Mahilou region) terminated its publication**, refraining from the explanation of reasons in public, in 2022. **The oldest Belarusian newspaper ‘Belarusy i Rynak’ ceased its publication** in 2022, following the order, issued by the Minister of Information of Belarus.

**The number of non-state print media registered by the Ministry of Information significantly decreased** from 764 to 560 media outlets in 2022. (At the same time, the number of state-owned media outlets changed from 414 to 403 within the same period of time.). It should be noted that the absolute majority of non-state printed publications that have retained their registration deal with advertising, commercials, represent the so-called “yellow press” and do not deal with socio-political issues.

### **EVENTS IN THE STATE MEDIA SECTOR**

On March 25, 2022, a governmental meeting was held with the participation of Aliaksandr Lukashenka on current issues of the mass media activities. Among other topics, the meeting participants discussed the draft Decree No. 131 concerning advertising in the media (see more details in “Changes in Legislation”). Lukashenka stated that *“advertising should be on patriotic pro-government (not in terms of ownership) channels that protect the state.”* The meeting participants also talked



about the difficulties of funding state-owned media in the context of international sanctions and the need to optimize their activities in the context of a “full-scale information war” against the Belarusian state. It was claimed that state-run media were increasingly intercepting the agenda on the Internet. However, it was noted that they were not domineering there yet.

On August 26, 2022, Uladzimir Piartsou, Minister of Information of Belarus stated that the experience of creating a media holding in the Minsk region would be implemented in all regions of the country, since, according to his words, "it is the only way to keep the audience of respective districts under the current conditions of transformation." Accordingly, the editorial offices of district state-owned newspapers will be enlarged. They will have centralized management and a unified editorial policy for all.

Despite the fact that state-owned print media are funded from the budget, the practice of compulsory subscription to such publications for employees of state-owned enterprises and institutions continued in the country. (The employees were threatened with non-renewal of their contracts, deprivation of bonuses or underpayment in the amount of the subscription cost.) Also, it was reported that post offices received assignments on subscribing people to governmental publications with the specific planned number of subscriptions indicated there.

It is planned to spend 162.4 million Belarusian rubles from the state budget on state media in 2023. Out of this amount, 133.6 million Belarusian rubles have been allocated for television and radio, 9.1 million for print media, and 19.7 million for “other” media.

The funding of CJSC ‘Capital Television’ (CTV channel) will increase 4.7 times. It is planned to allocate 4.66 million Belarusian rubles for the needs of the Second National TV Channel, which is 44% more than in 2022. The Belarusian TV and Radio Company will receive 120.5 million Belarusian rubles. Although compared to last year, the increase in its funding amounted to only 5%, according to Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 751, it received the redistributed unspent funds from the state budget for 2022, which were initially intended to be used for paying the external debt of Belarus but were not spent subject to the refusal of Belarus government to pay the debt in foreign currency.

**Supplementary sanctions in relation to the Belarusian state-owned media were introduced at the international level** in 2022, since the country was considered as an aggressor in the Russian – Ukrainian conflict.

The ‘Globecast’ company took a decision to disconnect ‘Belarus-24’ TV channel from satellite broadcasting to a number of countries in the European and Pacific region in June 2022. This decision caused outrage from the Ministry of Information of Belarus.

The same reaction was caused by Telegram's decision to completely remove the odious pro-governmental channels 'Zheltые Slivy' ('Yellow Plums' / 'Yellow Leaks') and 'Vashi Slivy' ('Your Plums' / 'Your Leaks'), which published 'repentant' videos with detainees and insults against opponents of the authorities in Belarus.

The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) has excluded the Belarusian State TV and Radio Company from the list of official broadcasters of the League of Nations. Consequently, the matches of the national football team can no longer be watched on TV in Belarus. (They used to be broadcast by the 'Belarus 5' TV channel in the past.)