

E-NEWSLETTER

MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

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Situation in Mass Media Field: August–November 2023. Review

Pressure on journalists and restrictions on freedom of speech continued in Belarus within the period under review. The applied methods included:

- criminal prosecution of media workers,
- the use of anti-extremism legislation as a formal basis for restricting freedom of speech,
- forcing bloggers to terminate their public activities, including the media workers, who are not focused on the political agenda,
- censorship or coercion into self-censorship in the still 'legal' Belarusian independent media.

The BAJ's activity in support of the independent Belarusian press was marked by the award of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, presented on November 14, 2023.

<https://baj.media/be/content/muzhnaya-praca-belaruskih-zhurnalistau-bazh-uznagarodzili-premiyay-ushodnyaga-partnyorstva>



Criminal prosecution

A criminal case for the alleged funding of extremist activities has been filed against the organizers and participants of “We care!” online charity marathon of solidarity with the Belarusian political prisoners, which was held at the end of July 2023 with the support of more than twenty independent media organizations. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus stated that about 60 people from among the marathon organizers and their assistants were regarded as suspects in the case.

<https://baj.by/be/content/na-udzelnikau-translyacyi-marafonu-solidarnasci-z-palitvyaznyami-mus-zavyalo-kryminalnuyu>

Three new sentences were pronounced on criminal cases against journalists. Larysa Shchyrakova, a former employee of ‘Belsat TV’ channel from Homiel was sentenced to three and a half years in prison on August 31, 2023. Her colleague from Vitsebsk Viachaslau Lazarau was sentenced to 5.5 years of imprisonment within the period under review.



<https://baj.by/ru/content/gomelskuyu-zhurnalistku-larisu-shchiryakovu-prigovorili-k-35-godam-kolonii>

<https://baj.by/ru/content/sud-prigovoril-videooperatora-vyacheslava-lazareva-k-55-godam-kolonii-za-sodeystvie>

Aliaksandr Mantsevich, the ‘Rehiyanalnaya Hazeta’ Editor-in-chief from Maladziechna (Minsk region) was punished with 4 years of imprisonment and a fine in the amount of BYN 14,800 (around

EUR 4,350) for the alleged “discreditation” of Belarus (article 369-1 of Belarus Criminal Code).

<https://baj.media/be/content/vyneseny-prysud-galounamu-redaktaru-regiyanalnay-gazety-alyksandru-mancevichu>



Following the consideration of appeals against the verdicts of Vitebsk Regional Court, which were submitted by a cameraman Viachaslau Lazarau and his spouse Tatsiana Pytsko on November 21-22, 2023, Lazarau’s sentence was reduced by half a year, i.e. to 5 years in prison. His wife Pytsko got the same sentence of three years in prison. However, it was suspended for the term of three years. It allows her to stay at home with certain restrictions.

<https://vitebskspring.org/news/sud/item/6126-vyarkhouny-sud-zmenshyu-termin-zhurnalistu-frylanseru-vyachaslavu-lazaravu-a-yago-zhonka-tatstsyana-pytsko-budze-vyzvalena-z-adterminoukaj-pakarannya>



A criminal case has been filed against a former freelance journalist Andrei Tolchyn under article 361-1 of Belarus Criminal Code (‘creation of

an extremist formation or participation in it') for the alleged collaboration with 'Belsat TV'.

<https://baj.media/be/content/byloga-videaaperatara-andreya-tolchyna-vinavacyac-u-ekstremizme>

Ihar Kazmerchak, the editor of orsha.eu independent news Website (Orsha, Vitsiebsk region) has learned that his apartment in Belarus was seized by the authorities. It is most likely that the seizure was caused by a criminal case for "insulting the president," which had been filed against him back in 2022.

<https://baj.media/be/content/u-belarusi-naklali-arysht-namayomasc-redaktara-arshanskaga-nezalezhnaga-sayta>

Persecution of bloggers

The authorities focused their close attention on the bloggers, who are not dealing with the political agenda, within the period under review.

Thus, Dzmitry Selviastruk, a sports blogger and author of the "Silver Age. Football of Belarus" Telegram channel as well as Aliaksandr Ihnatsiuk, the author of 'About



Slonim' blog and the former editor of Slonim's independent district newspaper were charged with "facilitation of extremist activities" (Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code) and placed in custody.

<https://mediazona.by/news/2023/09/25/selvestruk>
<https://baj.by/be/content/pravaabarony-pryznali-blogera-alyaksandra-ignacyuka-palivyaznem>

It was reported about the arrests of influential Minsk bloggers and media personalities within the period under review, including Anna Bond, who served 15 days of administrative arrest for "disobeying a police officer," Larysa Hrybaliova, who is on the so-called "black list" for condemning violence in Belarus in 2020, and Dzianis Kuryan, despite the fact that none of them dwell upon political issues in their work.



<https://news.zerkalo.io/life/51579.html>

<https://baj.media/be/content/pc-vyasna-zyavilasya-infarmacya-pra-zatrymanne-televyadoucy-i-spyavachki-larysy-grybalyovay>

https://tochka.by/articles/life/denis_kuryan_oproverg_informatsiyu_o_svoem_zaderzhanii/

It looks like the authorities intend to get rid of all influential public personalities in the country if they are relatively independent of the regime in power. <https://nashaniva.com/329849>

Censorship and pressure on journalists and mass media

Six cases of detention were recorded during August–November 2023, which ended in administrative arrests in two cases.



A trend became evident when censorship went beyond political topics and began to extend to even the least critical materials concerning the activities of official circles. The first case in the series was the pogrom

of “Ranak” TV channel (Svetlahorsk, Homiel region), which included arrests and fines for its employees for spreading information about an accident at a local industrial enterprise.

<https://baj.media/be/content/teleradyyokampaniya-ranak-u-svetlagorsku-faktychna-razgromlenaya>

The Ministry of Information continued to exercise censorship, blocking access to the content of independent media. Thus, public access was disabled to the Websites “Plan B”, “Media IQ”, and “resport.by” (a new website of

“Pressball” newspaper about football, created after the previous Web resource had been blocked in June 2023).

<https://baj.by/ru/content/mininform-zablokiroval-sayt-plan-b>

<https://baj.by/be/content/ministerstva-infarmacyi-belarusi-abmezhavala-dostup-da-saytu-mediaiqinfo>

<https://baj.by/be/content/prapracavau-adzin-dzen-novy-sayt-presbola-zablakavau-mininfarm>

The “BrestNote” Website (Brest) was temporarily blocked, due to posting a hyperlink to an “extremist” media in the archived publication. The Website of “Zhytstsiu Palessia” (“Palessie Life”) district state newspaper from Mazyr (Homiel region) was blocked, too. The public access was disabled to the latter one due to an anonymous complaint that appeared in a Telegram channel, created by the police. Someone found it suspicious that an advertisement for recruitment to the Military Academy was placed next to an advertisement for funeral services in the newspaper issue, which was published on October 19, 2023.

<https://baj.by/be/content/ministerstva-infarmacyi-razblakavala-regiyanalny-sayt-brestnote>

<https://d1j52mw0aso44.cloudfront.net/by/regieny/posle-publikacii-milicejskoj-reklamy-sredi-objavlenij-grobovscikov-iz-seti-propal-sajt-mozyrskoj-rajonki.html>

An interesting phenomenon of “self-censorship” was registered in the case of “Vesnik Hlybochchyny” district newspaper’s editorial, which restricted access to their Website from abroad on their own initiative.

<https://baj.by/be/content/rayonnaya-gazeta-vesnik-glybochchyny-abmezhavala-dostup-da-svaygo-sayta-z-za-myazhy>



Against the background of systematic persecution for critical statements on the Internet, blocking access to dozens of independent media and classifying the online content of certain groups as “extremist,” the Belarusian authorities organized the “Internet Governance Forum” (“Belarus IGF”) in November 2023, in order to create the impression of normality and legitimize repressive practices. The event hadn’t been held from 2020 to 2023. A statement was issued by the Belarusian Association of Journalists together with other human rights organizations on this occasion.

<https://baj.media/be/content/pryznachany-legitymizavac-praktyku-znishchennya-svobody-slova-pravaabarony-pra-forum-pa>

The use of ‘anti-extremist’ legislation to persecute the distributors of ‘banned’ content of independent mass media and oppositional Web-resources

The “Ranak” TV channel (Svetlahorsk, Homiel region), “Ex-press. live” and “Homiel’skaya Viasna” human rights organization’s info-resources as well as several independent bloggers’ social media accounts were labeled as “extremist formations” by the Belarusian authorities in August–November 2023.

The Supreme Court recognized the Belarusian Investigative Center, an association of investigative journalists based outside Belarus, as an “extremist organization” within the period under review.

<https://baj.by/be/content/vyarhouny-sud-pryznau-belaruski-rassledavalnicki-centr-ekstremisckay-organizacyyay>

The convicted TUT.BY employees Lyudmila Chekina and Maryna Zolatava, journalists Larysa Shchyrakova, Yauhien Merkis, Pavel Padabed, Pavel Mazheyka, as well as Andrei Famin were included in the list of citizens “engaged in extremist activities.”

<https://www.mvd.gov.by/ru/news/8642>

The KGB included a political commentator Tatsiana Kuzina to the list of persons “engaged in terrorist activities” within

the period under review. She had been sentenced to 10 years in prison on charges of conspiracy to seize state power, calls for sanctions and incitement of enmity.

<http://kgb.by/ru/perechen-inf-ru/>

Numerous publications were recognized as “extremist materials” by the Belarusian authorities, including the content of “Hantsavitski Chas” newspaper, the Instagram account of TV presenter Katsiaryna Pytleva etc. in August–November 2023.

<http://mininform.gov.by/documents/respublikanskiy-spisok-ekstremistskikh-materialov/>

Courts continued to pronounce verdicts for “dissemination of extremist materials” that included subscription to prohibited information sources apart from publication or distribution of certain content. As it was explained on the YouTube channel associated with the Belarusian security forces, it is not formally a crime to be subscribed to prohibited Web-resources. However, it was noted, that “it is as clear as day that if a person is interested in these kind of things, other legal violations will definitely be found. The formal absence of corpus delicti is not an excuse to ignore an offender.”



<https://nashaniva.com/325115>

Developments in the state media field

The Journalism Department of the Belarusian State University enrolled students only to the subsidized places in 2023. The department dean Aliaksei Bialayeu stated that there was no need in the students, who pay for their studies, since “the Journalism Department fulfills the state order and trains specialists for the state media.”

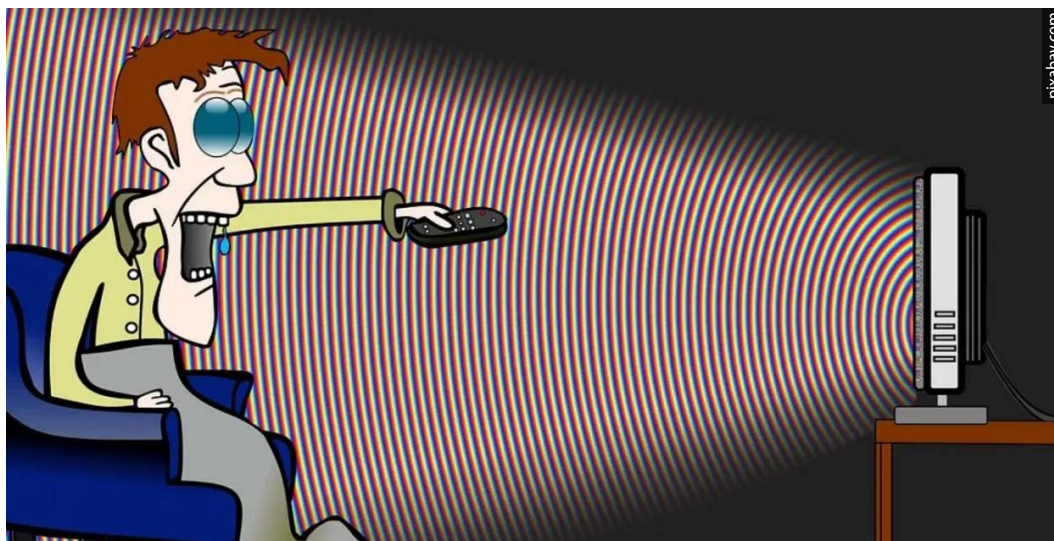
<https://www.belta.by/society/view/79-zajavlenij-na-60-mest-dekan-zhurfaka-bgu-o-priemnoj-kampanii-na-fakultete-580460-2023/>

The Minister of Information Uladzimir Piartsou called the first-year students of the Journalism Department “fighting bayonets in the information war” during a meeting with them.

<https://nashaniva.com/325492>

On August 3, 2023, in connection with the adoption of another package of EU sanctions against Russia and Belarus, restrictive measures were introduced against several Belarusian propagandists, employed by the state TV, including Kseniya Lebedzieva, Yauhien Pustavy, Anastasiya Benedzisiuk as well as Vadzim Hihin, who is the current chair of the “Vedy” (‘Knowledge’) society.

<https://baj.by/be/content/es-nalozhil-sankcii-na-belorusskih-propagandistov-v-spiske-gigin-lebedeva-pustovoy-kto-oni>



Two TV channels operating in the Gagauz Autonomous Region of Moldova were fined for rebroadcasting the “Belarus 24” TV programs in October 2023.

On this occasion, the Ministry of Information of Belarus expressed its indignation at “the desire of the official authorities of Moldova to deprive the citizens of their country of access to any alternative information.”

<https://amp-euroradio-fm.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/amp.euroradio.fm/u-maldove-ashtrafawali-telekanaly-za-retranslyacyyu-program-belarus-24>



**THE BELARUSIAN
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