

MASS MEDIA

in Belarus

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“The authorities have been bearing this depravity, accumulated on different ‘independent’ Web-sites and in the specified printed mass media, for a long period of time. However, there must have come the moment for the media to start answering for their words.”

*Mikhail Shubich,
Editor-in-chief “Nash Kray” newspaper,
founded by Baranavichy District Executive Committee*

[www](#) 

“Russian media spread the biggest hysteria. I have been watching our media, especially foreign ones, which began dominating the media market owing to the Presidential Administration, and foreign ones. Local media that are issued here take the second place. I would not mention their names not to raise their ratings. But please do something to make sure these mass media are removed from our country.”

*Alaksandr Lukashenka,
President of Belarus*

[www](#) 

«The authorities continue to intimidate and harass critical media. This worrisome trend, which strengthened after the 19 December 2010 Presidential election, has reached a critical point. These actions are a flagrant violation of Belarus OSCE commitments.»

*Dunja Mijatović,
the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media*

[www](#) 

“The request to close down mass media manifests the defectiveness of official propagandist machinery, regardless of all its activity and aggressiveness. Therefore, the authorities are trying to take away all potential ‘competitors’ of this propaganda campaign in the non-civilized way. It is a kind of a response to the high demand in uncensored information in the society. The people are eager to know, what is happening in reality.”

*Zhanna Litvina,
Chairperson, Belarusian Association of Journalists*

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STATISTICS / ANALYSIS

According to the Ministry of Information of Belarus, 1362 printed mass media (666 newspapers, 650 magazines, 38 newsletters, 7 catalogues, and 1 almanac), including 401 state-owned media outlets, were registered in Belarus as of April 1, 2011. Despite the quantitative prevalence of non-state media, the state media dominate in the Belarus' information field, since the majority of non-state media deal with advertising, entertainments etc. only. No more than 30 periodicals cover the socio-political problematic at that. 11 of them aren't distributed by the "Belposhta" and "Sayuzdruk" state monopolist press distributors by subscription and through news-stalls. (These media were ousted from the subscription catalogues and kiosks on the eve of the previous Presidential election in 2006.) [www](#)

The non-state media came across another severe economic problem within the period under review. The costs for printing services and the newsprint had increased by approximately 80%, because of the economic crisis and the abrupt devaluation of Belarusian ruble by May 2011. Surprisingly, Shklou Newsprint Factory started selling its production to the state-owned media at underestimated rates, 1.5 times lower in comparison to the prices for non-state periodical editions.

The situation with TV and radio broadcasting media is even less corresponding to democratic standards. Out of 240 electronic media (78 TV and 162 radio broadcasters), 168 media outlets belong to the state. The non-state electronic media are strictly controlled by the national and local authorities, due to the obligatory licensing of broadcasting in the country. Thus, the "Autoradio" FM station was arbitrarily deprived of its broadcasting license at the beginning of 2011. (See "Mass Media in Belarus" #1 (21) [www](#)).



DEVELOPMENT OF SITUATION IN THE MEDIA FIELD

Situation in media field continued to deteriorate and became critical in the period under review. Among other, independent journalists and media faced the following grave violations of their rights:

- issuance of guilty verdicts in relation to journalists for their participation in protest actions after the Presidential election 2011;
- criminal proceedings against Andrzej Paczobut, an independent journalist from Hrodna, for 'defaming' and 'casting aspersions' on the President of Belarus;
- institution of claims against "Narodnaya Vola" and "Nasha Niva" by the Ministry of Information of Belarus, aimed at closure of these independent periodical editions;
- prosecution of journalists and media for the coverage of a terrorist act on April 11, 2011 and the economic crisis in the country.

The judgments of guilty were returned to 7 journalists and BAJ members in April – May 2011. They were accused of participation in 'mass riots' or arrangement of actions that 'blatantly violated the public order' in the aftermath of the Presidential election 2010.

Alaksandr Atroshchankau was sentenced to 4 years of imprisonment in a reinforced regime colony. *Dzmitry Bandarenka* was sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment in a general regime colony. (He is waiting for consideration of his cassation in the investigative isolation ward.) *Pavel Sieviarynets* was sentenced to 3 years of restriction of liberty to be spent in a corrective prison camp. *Iryna Khalip* was sentenced to two years of imprisonment. The punishment was deferred for two years. The journalist was forced to sign a recognizance not to leave the place of her residence. *Siarhei Vazniak* and *Alaksandr Fiaduta* were handed down suspended sentences of two years



of imprisonment. Another repressed journalist *Natallia Radzina* fled Belarus at the end of March 2011.

At the same time, new criminal charges were laid against a journalist Andrzej Paczobut. The journalist was accused of defaming the President of Belarus (article 368 of Belarus' Criminal Code) and taken into custody in April 2011. Another criminal case for 'casting aspersions on the President of Belarus' (article 367 of Belarus' Criminal Code) was filed against the media worker, as reported on April 8, 2011. A. Paczobut can be sentenced up to 4 years of jail. The journalist is prosecuted for his critical articles, published in the "Gazeta Wyborcza" daily (Poland), on the "Belarusian Partisan" www.byltesta.net Web-site, as well as in his LJ blog poczobut.livejournal.com in 2010 – 2011. The criminal proceedings against A. Paczobut caused a high response both in Belarus and abroad. Thus, the problem of his legal defense was discussed by Barack Obama, the US President and Bronislaw Komorowski, the President of Poland during their recent meeting in Warsaw. The Editors-in-chief of more than 40 Polish media undersigned an appeal to Belarusian official authorities with a demand to release the journalist and exonerate him from all the laid charges immediately.

The first court session on A. Paczobut's case has been appointed to June 14, 2011. Following the Public Prosecutor's appeal, the session will be held behind closed doors.

On April 27, 2011, the Ministry of Information of Belarus filed claims on closure of two leading independent periodical editions – "Narodnaya Vola" and "Nasha Niva" – to the Supreme Economic Court of Belarus. (It is worth mentioning that Belarusian official authorities returned these periodicals to the state-owned "Belposhta" and "Belsayuzdruk" press distribution networks as an expression of their readiness to start a dialogue with the EU structures in 2009.) Formally, the media can be closed under article 51 of Belarus' Media Law that enables the Ministry of Information to file claims on closing down media outlets in case of issuance of two and more official warnings

to the corresponding editorials within a year's course. The seriousness of charges is disregarded at that. "Nasha Niva" and "Narodnaya Vola" received three and four official warnings correspondingly within a year. The latest warnings were received on April 14, 2011 and April 15, 2011. The editorials appealed against the warnings. Consequently, the consideration of cases on their closure was suspended until the verdict on the appeals was returned. It should be emphasized that the courts have supported the Ministry of Information in 100% of cases within the recent years, disregarding the relevance of claims.

The only recent court verdict in favor of a media company was handed down to a popular "Autoradio" FM station at the beginning of the year 2011. ("Autoradio" had claimed against the Ministry of Information that deprived the company of its broadcasting license.) However, the positive verdict was cancelled by the Panel of Judges of the Supreme Economic Court of Belarus later on.



The Minister of Information Aleh Pralaskouski connected the claims on closure of "Narodnaya Vola" and "Nasha Niva" newspapers with their 'indecent' coverage of the terrorist attack in Minsk underground on April 11, 2011, despite the fact that the ministerial warnings to "Narodnaya Vola" had been caused by other reasons. The act of terror led to reinforcement of administrative pressure on independent media workers in Belarus in general. Thus, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of Information and KGB issued 10 warnings to concrete journalists and media outlets within a week's term since April 12 till April 19, 2011. The state officials carry on threatening journalists with legal liability for the 'dances on the bones.' It looks like the governmental authorities treat all comments and version they dislike this way. A similar negative response of official authorities is caused by the unbiased media coverage of the economic crisis in the country. Thus, on May 27, 2011, the President



of Belarus Alaksandr Lukashenka urged the government to close down the media that stirred up the craze in consumer and currency markets. He called Russian media 'rabid' at that. [www](#)

The Minister of Information A. Pralaskouski has noted recently it is high time "to put an end to irresponsibility in blogs, social networks, and other Web-forums."

The Procurator-General's office has passed a resolution on restriction of public access to [www.charter97.org](#) [www](#) and [www.belaruspartisan.org](#) [www](#) Web-sites, referring to their violation of Belarusian Law "On Mass Events in the Republic of Belarus." Also, the Procurator-General's office restricted public access to [www.prokopovi.ch](#) [www](#) Web-resource, since, according to the Procurator-General's representative Pavel Radziyonau, the Web-site popularized "the activity on illegal currency exchange." The Web-providers were ordered to disable access to these Web-sites from the state organizations as well as from educational and cultural establishments. According to the "Charter'97" updates, the Life:) GSM mobile phone operator ("BeST" Close Corporation) has already disabled access to [www.charter97.org](#), [www.belaruspartisan.org](#), and [www.prokopovi.ch](#) Web-sites.



RATING LISTS / EVENTS

The **"Freedom House"** international human rights organization www.freedomhouse.org put Belarus on the list of countries, lacking media freedom, in its annual report. Accordingly, Belarus is holding the 190th position between Cuba (189th pos.) and Burma (191st pos.).

Moreover, **"Freedom House"** distributed its **"Freedom on the Net 2011"** report within the period under review. It was dedicated to the assessment of Internet and Digital Media freedom in 37 countries of the world in 2009-2010. Belarus appeared among 11 states, where the use of Internet was not free. Among other, it was noted that Belarus was on the list of countries with censorship of political and social issues on the Web. It was underscored that the official authorities kept blocking access to the disliked Web-resources. Moreover, it was stated that the oppositional Web-pages were persistently encountering cyber-attacks.

But for that, it was stressed that the centralized state control over international Web-traffic enabled Belarusian governmental authorities to restrict access to the unfavorable Web-resources. Belarus appeared on the 29th position among 37 countries, analyzed in the report. www.freedomhouse.org

The 15th International Specialized Exhibition *"Mass Media in Belarus"* was held in Minsk on May 4-7, 2011. The non-state socio-political periodicals weren't represented at the exhibition this year. The exhibition organizers had turned down an application for participation in the event, submitted by "The United Mass Media" Regional Press Association that unites more than 20 independent regional newspapers. (Most of them were excluded from the state monopolist press distribution networks in 2006.) The event organizer ("Dom Presy" National Unitary Enterprise) failed to provide lucid

explanations for its refusal. “The “Dom Presy” National Unitary Enterprise cannot fulfill contractual obligations on providing you with the reserved exhibition space for participation of your organization in the 15th International Specialized Exhibition “*Mass Media in Belarus*” for organizational and technical reasons,” the response said.

It is worth mentioning that the Association participated quite successfully in the exhibition last year. In particular, it was presented an honorary diploma for the best debut then. [www](#)

A solemn ceremony of presenting awards to the ‘**Free Word – 2010**’ contest winners was held under the auspices of the British Embassy at the UK Ambassador’s residence in Minsk on May 6, 2011. [www](#). The Belarusian Association of Journalists announced the creative contest for the fourth year in a row. Two contest winners couldn’t attend the ceremony of presenting awards: *Iryna Khalip* was kept under house arrest, waiting for the trial and *Siarhei Vazniak* was tried on charges of “arrangement of actions that blatantly violated the public order” during mass protest actions on December 19, 2010.