

E-NEWSLETTER



THE BELARUSIAN  
ASSOCIATION  
OF JOURNALISTS

# MASS MEDIA in Belarus

APRIL - JUNE 2012



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**“The print media [in Belarus – BAJ] face enormous challenges, concerning both the possibilities to print newspapers that remain the only independent media in the country and distribute them. The official authorities in Belarus have managed to marginalize the print media to a great extent.**

**If over  $\frac{3}{4}$  or even 80% of population receive the news and other information from TV, it makes a pressing problem for the alternative media – firstly, on-line media, – to create an alternative to the media hegemony in such a country as Belarus.”**

Christopher Walker,  
Vice President for Strategy and Analysis,  
Freedom House

[http://www.svaboda.org/  
content/article/24565047.html](http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/24565047.html)

## Development of Situation in the Belarusian Media Field



The situation in Belarusian mass media field somewhat stabilized at the extremely low level in April and the first half of May 2012. However, the pressure on independent journalism increased again since the end of May 2012. Taking into consideration the absence of any significant socio-political events in the country during the period under review, it can be suggested that the toughening of Belarusian governmental policies in relation to independent media is connected with the foreign-policy factors.

**The imprisonment and criminal proceedings against an independent journalist Andrzej Paczobut from Hrodna constituted the most serious violation of freedom of speech within the reporting period. The reporter was accused of defaming the President of Belarus.**

**The other worrying events and negative trends in the Belarusian media field in April – June 2012 included:**

- continuation of pressure on the journalists, who cooperate with foreign media;
- countrywide detentions of journalists, seizure or breakage of professional equipment.

## CRIMINAL PROSECUTION AGAINST ANDRZEJ PACZOBUT

**A** ndrzej Paczobut, a ‘Gazeta Wyborcza’ daily’s (Poland) correspondent in Hrodna and a member of BAJ was taken into custody on June 21, 2012. The police conducted a search of his apartment. The reporter’s PC was seized.

On June 27, 2012, another search within the criminal case was conducted in the premises of the Union of Poles in Belarus, unrecognized by the Belarusian official authorities. (A. Paczobut is among the Union leaders.) 9 system units were seized from the office during the search.

A. Paczobut is charged with the repeated defamation of the President of Belarus (article 367, part 2 of Belarusian Criminal Code). The criminal case was grounded on A. Paczobut’s articles, published on the “Belarusian Partisan” and “Charter’97” Web-sites. More information about the publications can be found under the link: <http://baj.by/en/node/12844>.

It’s worth mentioning that both popular informational Web-resources have been included into the ‘black lists’ of Web-sites by Belarusian authorities. Consequently, the public access to the Web-pages is denied from the majority





of governmental bodies and state organizations as well as from educational and cultural establishments in Belarus.

**The situation is aggravated by the fact that A. Paczobut was criminally prosecuted for the same charges and sentenced to three years of imprisonment in the recent past. (The punishment was delayed for two years then.) Presently, the journalist can be sentenced to up to 5 years of jail to be added to the previously pronounced prison term.**

The criminal case against A. Paczobut caused a broad response both in Belarus and abroad. Apart from the Belarusian Association of Journalists and the Union of Poles in Belarus, a range of VIP politicians and decision-makers, including Catherine Ashton, Baroness Ashton of Upholland, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the Prime-Minister of Poland Donald Tusk, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović as well as a number of international organizations, including the International Federation of Journalists, 'Reporters without Borders', the Committee to Protect Journalists etc. The organizations and politicians regarded the charges against the media worker as politically motivated. In response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus pointed at the pressure on the part of Poland and other Western democracies and noted that A. Paczobut didn't enjoy immunity. Nevertheless, the journalist was released from jail on June 30th on recognizance not to leave the place



of his residence. However, A. Paczobut had been officially arraigned under article 367, part 2 of Belarusian Criminal Code before that.

## PRESSURE ON JOURNALISTS, CONTRIBUTING TO FOREIGN MASS MEDIA

The official authorities continued to put pressure on journalists, cooperating with foreign media within the period under review.

**The reporters, who contribute to the Polish media, suffered most of all.**

Three media organizations purposefully broadcast their programs from Poland to Belarus – ‘BelSat’ TV channel, ‘Radio Racyja’, and ‘The European Radio for Belarus’.

Only the last of them has the official status in Belarus that enabled the radio-station to open a correspondents’ office and accredit journalists in the country. All attempts of two other media outlets to obtain the official registration in Belarus were all in vain, owing to refusals from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus.

On May 2, 2012, the police examined the office premises, where the ‘Radio Racyja’ correspondents work in Minsk. They seized a laptop and a system unit “for inspection”. It is possible that the incident was undeliberate and connected with the general check of private apartments, located in a close distance from the place of the planned official military parade in the city center of Minsk, dedicated to the Victory Day, celebrated on May 9th. The seized property was returned to owners on June 4, 2012.

As opposed to the abovementioned episode, the journalists, cooperating with the locally legalized 'European Radio for Belarus', were intentionally persecuted within the reporting period. Thus, the radio correspondent Pavel Sviardlou was detained close to his home on June 22, 2012. On the same day, he was sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest, allegedly for curses. The police officers witnessed to the case. The plain-clothes law enforcement agents made an attempt to detain another correspondent of 'European Radio for Belarus' Vital Ruhain on the same day. They were waiting for the journalist next to the ERB office in Minsk almost for a whole day. However, Vital's colleagues helped the reporter to escape and flee to Warsaw.

The ERB management links the arrest of P. Sviardlou <http://baj.by/ru/node/12877> and the attempt of special services to detain V. Ruhain with a critical video report about the police activity, published on [the ERB Web-site](#) a day before.



## DETENTIONS OF JOURNALISTS

**D**etentions were the main form of pressure on journalists, cooperating with foreign and Belarusian media within the period under review.

**Around 20 journalists were detained by police and special services in April - June 2012.**

In particular, two journalists were detained without any good reason in Minsk on May 1, 2012. (One of them didn't find a memory stick from his video camera, following the search. The other found his laptop blocked.)

Four reporters were detained in Svietlahorsk district (Homiel region) on May 23, 2012. Two more journalists were detained in the same district on May 31, 2012. Two correspondents were detained in Minsk on June 1, 2012. Four journalists were detained in Hrodna on the same day. As mentioned above, P. Sviardlou was detained in Minsk on June 22, 2012. Two reporters were detained in Minsk on June 29, 2012.

The journalists were released from custody in two-three hours after the moment of detention. However, Grazhyna Shalkievich and Yulia Kalada from Hrodna were fined for ‘participation in a non-authorized meeting’. Also, P. Sviardlou was sentenced to 15 days of administrative arrest, as mentioned above.

Two more journalists – Natallia Vierashchagina and Marina Koktysh – were detained at a border-crossing on May 25, 2012 and May 26, 2012 correspondingly. The customs officers made them pass through the personal customs examination. A laptop computer and cash money were seized from N. Vierashchagina “for examination” after the search.



## OTHER EVENTS IN APRIL – JUNE 2012

**A** BAJ member Dzmitry Bandarenka was released from a colony on April 14, 2012. He was among the key figures in the former presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau’s election team. The media worker was sentenced to two years of jail for participation in mass protest actions on December 19, 2010. D. Bandarenka was released from prison by virtue of a Presidential pardon.

A cut hen’s head was thrown to Iryna Khalip’s mailbox on June 22, 2012. The ‘Novaya Gazeta’ journalist (Russia) regarded the incident as “a direct death threat” and



submitted a corresponding statement to the Partyzanski City District Police Department in Minsk.

It's worth reminding that I. Khalip was sentenced to two years of imprisonment with the penalty execution delay for participation in mass protest actions on December 19, 2010. Consequently, the journalist cannot leave the country and has to stay in her private apartment after 10 pm. She is constantly inspected by police.

## RATING LISTS / EVENTS

### BELARUS MENTIONED AMONG THE ENEMIES OF THE PRESS

Freedom House traditionally placed Belarus among the countries with the poorest situation with freedom of speech in its annual review 'Freedom of the Press 2012: A Global Survey of Media Independence. In particular, Belarus was given the 193rd position among 197 countries and territories, where situation with freedom of speech was examined. According to the Freedom House analysts, the worse situation with freedom of the press is only in Eritrea, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and North Korea <http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/24565047.html>.

The opinion is shared by the Committee to Protect Journalists (USA). The organization placed Belarus on the list of 10 countries with the worst censorship in its report, dedicated to the World Press Freedom Day <http://www.cpj.org/ru/2012/05/10-1.php>.



### THE NUMBER OF INTERNET USERS CONSTANTLY GROWS IN BELARUS. THE NUMBER OF NEWSPAPER READERS DECREASES

According to the National Statistic Committee of Belarus (Belstat), the number of Internet-users in Belarus totaled 6.8 million IPs, including 6.1 million individuals' IPs at the beginning of 2012, the *Interfax News Agency* reported. The number of Web-users has grown by 34.2% within a year's course. Around 4.5 million of Belarusians use Wi-Fi Internet connections. 97.4% of organiza-

tions use computers in their activity. 94.6% of them have Internet access at that. Computers are owned by approximately 40.3% of households in the country.

On the contrary, the number of newspaper readers is constantly decreasing. The Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), registered in Lithuania, conducted a sociological survey, dedicated to the newspaper readership in Belarus in March 2012. According to the sociological survey results, 24.8% of Belarusians don't read newspapers at all. Only 1.7% of respondents did not read newspapers in 1992.



According to the IISEPS findings, more than a half of Belarusians at the age of 18 and older used the Internet with different frequency in December 2011. However, the political information didn't enjoy high popularity with the Belarusian Web-users at that.



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