

MASS MEDIA

in Belarus

E-NEWSLETTER

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BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS
www.baj.by

On September 17, 2010, the Chamber of Representatives set the date of Presidential election in Belarus. It was decided that the ballot day would take place on *December 19, 2010*. (According to the Belarus' Electoral Law, the polling could be held as late as in February 2011.) The deputies to the Chamber of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus were summoned to a special session to fix the Presidential election date. The MPs explained the necessity to transfer the ballot day to the earlier term with the intention to end up the election campaign before the New Year holidays. However, should the second round of Presidential election be required, it will have to be arranged no later than on January 2, 2011. (In other words, the election process will be carried on during the Roman Catholic Christmas holidays and the New Year Eve in this case.)

Regular updates on violations of journalist and media rights during the election campaign can be found in a special Web-section - "The Press and Elections" - on the BAJ Web-site (<http://baj.by>). Moreover, the Belarusian Association of Journalists is implementing a content analysis of **Coverage of the 2010 Presidential Election in the Belarusian Media**. Its outcome is presented in the "Monitoring" section on www.baj.by.

"The presidential election was far from a top subject for the state-owned electronic and printed media, judging by the fact that the election related topics received twice or thrice less coverage than the weather."

Bulletin #1, Belarusian Association of Journalists - Monitoring: Coverage of the 2010 Presidential Election in the Belarusian Media, November 1, 2010
(<http://baj.by/index.php?module=p&tid=6>)

"There is no need to ring the bells and catch journalists by the throat to make them write more about the elections!"

Aleh Pralaskouski, Minister of Information of Belarus
[http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/society/
V-belorusskix-SMI-dostatochno-informatsii-o-vyborax---
Proleskovskij_i_530442.html](http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/society/V-belorusskix-SMI-dostatochno-informatsii-o-vyborax---Proleskovskij_i_530442.html)

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1. STATISTICS / ANALYTICS

As of October 1, 2010, 1320 printed media outlets were officially registered in the Republic of Belarus. The list included 397 state-owned and 923 non-state media: 653 newspapers (209 state-owned and 444 non-state periodicals), 623 magazines (175 state-owned and 448 non-state editions), a number of newsletters, catalogues, and almanacs.

The Belarusian official authorities traditionally highlight the quantitative prevalence of non-state periodicals over the state-owned press. However, according to the calculations of BAJ, the overwhelming majority of non-state media deal with entertaining, advertising etc. Socio-political issues are covered in less than 30 independent periodicals. 13 of them have been ousted from the state-owned press distribution systems. (It happened on the eve of the previous Presidential elections in 2005.) Consequently, the editorials have had scarcely any possibilities to disseminate their periodicals by subscription and through the news-stalls since then. It has to be emphasized that independent periodical editions can't be found in quite a few Belarusian regions nowadays.

135 new printed periodical editions, including 48 newspapers and 81 magazines have been registered in Belarus since the beginning of 2010. Most of them are non-state periodicals. However, 27 printed periodical editions, including 24 non-state media were closed down within the same period of time.

Moreover, 9 news agencies, including 7 non-state enterprises, have been registered in Belarus since the year start.

The state-owned media enjoy economic and legal preferences and receive direct support from the state budget. Thus, on June 3, 2010, the Council of Ministers of Belarus adopted a list of printed media to be subsidized from the state budget in the year 2010. Surprisingly, the list was completed without announcing a competition. (According to the State Budget Law 2010, the general sum of state subsidies to

the national printed media totals 16.7 billion Belarusian rubles, i.e. USD 6 million). The subsidies will be granted to 13 magazines and 11 newspapers, including the “Sovietskaya Belorussiya” daily with the largest circulation in the country, published by the Belarus Presidential Administration as well as the “leading” state-owned newspapers “Zvezda”, “Znamya Yunosti”, “Narodnaya Gazeta”, and “Respublika”.

The situation appears to be even less corresponding to democratic standards with the electronic media (TV and radio broadcasters) in Belarus. There are 164 state-owned TV and radio programs out of 234 registered electronic media in the country. (Nine new TV and radio programs, including 8 non-state electronic media have been registered since the year start at that.) However, the statistics do not change the situation in general, since all 70 non-state electronic media are fully controlled by the local and national state authorities, owing to the existing mandatory licensing of broadcasting.

Actually, none of independent electronic media can be found in Belarus nowadays. The independent European Radio for Belarus, Radio Racyja, and “Belsat” satellite TV channel, broadcasting from the territory of Poland to Belarus, are making attempts to fill in the gap. Their programs are prepared predominantly by Belarusians for the Belarusian audience. However, it is only the European Radio for Belarus that has managed to get legalized in Belarus. (The broadcaster has an office with 12 accredited correspondents in the country. However, the credentials have to be prolonged shortly, since they get expired in November 2010.

The journalists, cooperating with Radio Racyja and especially with “Belsat” TV channel are persistently pressurized by the state. (They are summoned to the Public Prosecutor’s office and the KGB. Also, they get officially warned, detained etc.)

The Internet remains to be the most liberalized sector of information space in Belarus. The number of Internet users exceeds 4 million people in Belarus nowadays. (The number of regular Internet users is considerably smaller. However, it is gradually increasing with time.)

The Belarusian official authorities have reacted to the reinforced importance of Internet for the Belarusian people by making attempts to take control over the Web. Consequently, Presidential Decree No. 60 of February 1, 2010 “On the Measures to Improve the Use of the National Segment of the Internet Network” came into effect on July 1, 2010. 12 by-laws were adopted in the pursuance of the decree. Accordingly, all Web-resources, providing their services in Belarus, were obliged to get transferred to Belarusian servers and get officially registered in the country. Also, there was introduced obligatory identification of Wi-Fi users and cybercafé visitors. Moreover, the modems of individual Internet users were to get identified. The authorities were to complete “black lists” of Web-sites, banned for visiting from the state institutions as well as educational and cultural establishments. (It was envisaged that other Internet users could apply for disabling access to the Web-pages from their computers.) The list of banned Web-resources outside the “.by” Web-zone is kept in secret from users at that.

Undoubtedly, the above-mentioned attempts to “regulate” the Web as well as put more pressure on the media are connected with the coming Presidential elections to be held on December 19, 2010.



2. DEVELOPMENT OF SITUATION IN THE BELARUS' MEDIA FIELD

The most significant facts of pressure on the media and journalists within the period under consideration were as follows:

- official warnings to independent periodical editions from the Ministry of Information of Belarus;
- the tragic death of a journalist and civil activist Aleh Biabienin and threats to his colleagues, who doubted the official version of his death (suicide);
- the suspended publishing of "Bobruyskiy Kuryer" newspaper (Babruysk, Mahilou region) in consequence of its economic discrimination;
- persecution of "Vitebskiy Kuryer" and "Nash Dom" distributors in Vitsiebsk.

The Ministry of Information issued politically motivated letters of caution to the leading democratic newspapers "Nasha Niva", "Narodnaya Vola", and "Novy Chas" in July – September 2010.

The official warning to "Nasha Niva" was preceded by publishing the newspaper issue, dedicated to the highly critical "God Father" documentary about A. Lukashenka, filmed and broadcast by NTV (Russia). The film was extremely negatively perceived by Belarusian governmental authorities. The newspaper issue was printed. However, according to the "Nasha Niva" editorial, the newspaper copies didn't appear in the majority of "Sayuzdruk" news-stalls for some "unknown" reasons. As soon as the newspaper attracted the readers' attention to the scandalous situation, the Ministry of Information of Belarus issued a letter of caution to the newspaper editorial, dated July 22, 2010. The publisher was blamed for disseminating false information. Another letter of caution was issued to "Nasha Niva" on July 26, 2010. It was similarly

connected with the above-mentioned documentary coverage. Thus, all in all, the newspaper publisher received three letters of caution within a year's course by the start of Presidential election campaign 2010. It is worth mentioning, that the Ministry of Information can lodge a claim against the newspaper editorial with a demand to close down a newspaper on issuing two letters of caution for any reason.

At the same time, the unscheduled tax inspection was started at the "Nasha Niva" newspaper editorial. The attempts to appeal against the letters of caution to the Supreme Economic Court were fruitless. It should be emphasized that the Supreme Economic Court has been dismissing absolutely all claims against the Ministry of Information, lodged by independent media outlets for several years already.

"Narodnaya Vola" received the fourth letter of caution from the Ministry of Information within the year's course on September 13, 2010. It was reasoned by "Narodnaya Vola" publications about detentions of State Controlling Committee representatives by the KGB officers as well as about a new corruption scandal, connected with them. It was pretty evident that the state authorities attempted to suppress the facts of corruption and conflicts between the defence and law enforcement agencies in the country. (Similarly, the official authorities felt like hushing up the tension in mutual relations with the Russian political leadership in the case with "Nasha Niva" weekly.)

The "Novy Chas" newspaper editorial received two letters of caution within a short period of time. The first letter came from the Ministry of Information on June 10, 2010 and the second letter came from the Ministry of Trade on June 11, 2010. The Ministry of Information presented formal complaints to the editorial. The Ministry of Trade accused the media outlet of advertizing the "Belsat" TV channel, carrying broadcasts from the territory of Poland. The Belarusian official authorities treat "Belsat" in the extremely negative way. Despite submitting numerous appeals, the TV channel hasn't received a permission to open its office and get its correspondents accredited in Belarus. The "Belsat" journalists are regularly persecuted in the country. Thus, e.g. a journalist from Homiel Tatsiana Bublikava received a letter of caution from the Public Prosecutor's office for cooperation with the TV channel.

The "Bobruyskiy Kuryer" independent newspaper was forced to suspend publishing for economic reasons in August 2010. The suspension was preceded by numerous facts of pressure on the part of local Executive Committee and Tax Inspectorate.

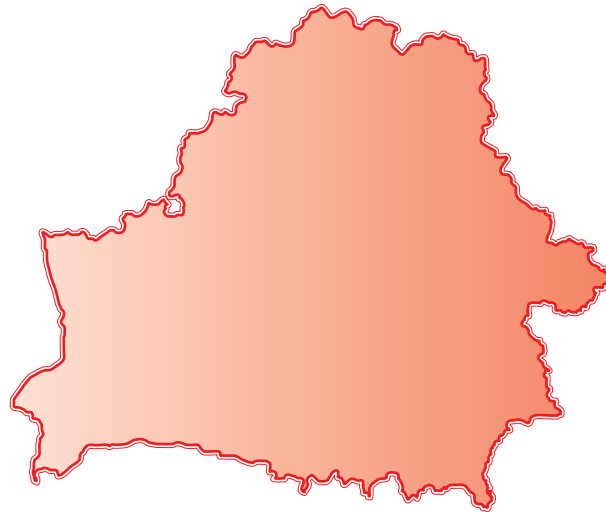
The state authorities continued to exert unremitting pressure on the "Vitebskiy Kuryer" and "Nash Dom" newspapers' editorials and private distributors. These two newspapers were registered in Russia and got printed in the Russian town of Smolensk, as soon as the "Vitebskiy Kuryer M" newspaper was closed down by the local authorities for far-fetched reasons (the periodical had been published legally in the city of Vitsiebsk for a long period of time before that) and as soon as the Ministry of Information refused to register new independent periodical editions in the area.

The Belarusian police often detain the print-runs of the above-mentioned newspapers, printed in the neighboring country. Their distributors are penalized. In particular, Aleh Barshcheuski was fined 700,000 Belarusian rubles (approximately USD 230)

on June 7, 2010 and Krystsina Shatsikava was fined the same amount on June 27, 2010. The judges disregarded a treaty between Belarus and Russia on cooperation in the printing field. According to this document, the national governments assumed a commitment to abstain from impeding the distribution of printed periodicals, registered in both states.

Apart from detaining and fining the journalists and press distributors, the local authorities applied the Tax Inspectorate as another tool of pressure on the disliked periodicals. Thus, the unscheduled tax inspection was started in the organizations, connected with distribution of "Vitebskiy Kuryer" and "Nash Dom" newspapers.

The Belarusian society was upset and shocked at the news about the tragic death of Aleh Biabienin, an independent journalist, a civil activist, and a co-founder of Charter'97 Web-site (www.charter97.org). He was found hanged in his summer house on September 3, 2010. The Belarusian official authorities stated hastily that the media worker had committed a suicide. The immediate conclusions appeared despite a range of contradictory facts and circumstances, revealed and highlighted by A. Biabienin's colleagues and friends. Sviatlana Kalinkina ("Narodnaya Vola"), Natallia Radzina ("Charter'97"), as well as a journalist and a playwright Mikalay Khalezin received a number of threats to their lives after such publications. Numerous international organizations, HR watchdogs and journalist associations appealed to the Belarusian government with a demand to conduct a thorough and unbiased legal investigation. Among other, the European Federation of Journalists noted that the previous high-profile cases on the crimes in relation to Belarusian journalists remained unsolved. In particular, the EFJ recollected the case of Dzmitry Zavadzki, who disappeared without a trace on July 7, 2000 and the case of Vieranika Charkasava, cruelly assassinated in her private apartment on October 20, 2004.



3. EVENTS / RATING LISTS

10 years passed after the kidnapping of TV cameraman Dzmitry Zavadski on July 7, 2010. A group of people was found guilty of committing the crime in 2002. Consequently, the “Almaz” riot police detachment officers Valery Ihnatovich and Maksim Malik were sentenced to life imprisonment with the regard for this and other crimes. A former cadet of Police Academy at the Ministry of Interior Alaksey Huz was condemned to 25 years of jail. Another imprisoned person Siarhey Savushkin has already been released from prison. None of the convicts admitted their guilt. D. Zavadski’s body hasn’t been found so far. Although the court officially acknowledged that D. Zavadski wasn’t alive in 2003, nobody has been charged of committing the murder yet.

“Narodnaya Vola”, a leading independent newspaper celebrated its 15th anniversary on July 11, 2010. The Ministry of Information issued the fourth letter of caution within a year’s course as a peculiar ‘present’ to the periodical edition (see above: **Development of Situation in the Belarus’ Media Field**). Presently, the circulation of “Narodnaya Vola” totals approximately 20,000 copies. The newspaper’s [Web-site](#) has been functioning since the year of 2006.

Dunja Mijatovic, the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom referred to the situation in Belarus in her first report to the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna at the beginning of July 2010. D. Mijatovic expressed her concern with interrogations and confiscations of PCs from the Belarusian journalists Sviatlana Kalinkina, Maryna Koktysh, Natallia Radzina, and Iryna Khalip, treated as witnesses within a defamation case, filed by a former KGB general (see more “Mass Media in Belarus” ## 2 (17), 3 (18) <http://baj.by/index.php?module=p&tid=6>). Also, the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom expressed her regret at the adoption of Web-regulating legal acts without due consultations with the Belarusian civil community.

The 5th annual conference under the title of “Business Internet” was held near Minsk on October 14-17, 2010. The forum co-organizer Yury Zisser, Director General of *Reliable Software* Company (TUT.BY Web-portal) noted in his speech that the previous year had been “the year of growth and the year of the unprecedented state interference into Bynet.”

The Belarusian Association of Journalists celebrated its 15th anniversary on September 16, 2010. BAJ was founded by 38 journalists in the year of 1995. Presently, the number of BAJ members exceeds 1,000 people. BAJ has been an associate member of International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) since 1997.

The efficiency of cooperation between BAJ and IFJ / EFJ is confirmed by the [statements](#) of these international organizations, dedicated to the 15th anniversary of BAJ:

“Since its launch the BAJ has become not only the most important defender of the values of journalism in Belarus but also one of the best known and most highly regarded campaigning journalists’ organizations in Europe...”

The World Association of Newspapers (WAN) awarded BAJ with the Golden Pen of Freedom prize in 2003.

The European Parliament presented A. Sakharov Prize “For Freedom of Thought” to BAJ in 2004.