



THE BELARUSIAN
ASSOCIATION
OF JOURNALISTS

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MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

E-NEWSLETTER

MAY – JUNE 2013



“Belarus is often blamed for absence of freedom of speech. It is funny to have such reproach after the Internet appeared. Usually these are insincere people who say it. They know it well that there is no absolute freedom in the world. Because those who do not depend on government – they depend on the owner of the outlet, advertisers, caprices of the public, finally, on mistakes, emotions and delusions of their own journalists.”

*Alexander Lukashenko,
President of the Republic of Belarus*

“Curiously enough, the president is right when he says that freedom of expression exists in Belarus thanks to the Internet. In fact the web stays the only sphere where information circulates freely. But this does not justify at all the draconian laws, the economic discrimination of independent mass media, physical, violence against journalists exercised by law enforcement agencies – these facts confirm that the situation of freedom of expression is far from ideal. And the Bynet stays relatively free in spite of the obvious attempts made by the authorities to take it under control.”

*Andrei Aliaksandrau,
Index on Censorship, London*



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MAIN EVENTS IN THE MASS MEDIA FIELD IN MAY – JUNE 2013

- **The judicial ruling on the Belarus Press Photos 2011 albums came into legal force: the albums were recognized extremist and destined to destruction;**
- **Some journalists were detained or arrested;**
- **Some journalists were blamed for contribution to foreign mass media without accreditation;**
- **The prosecutor's office issued an official warning to the Radio Svboda for discrediting the Republic of Belarus;**
- **The KGB officially announced that the criminal case of the photo journalist Anton Surapin had been closed;**
- **The regional newspaper Borisovskije Novosti was included again into the subscription catalogue of Belposhta.**

THE RULING ON RECOGNIZING THE BELARUS PRESS PHOTO 2011 EXTREMIST MATERIALS CAME INTO LEGAL FORCE

On **June 24** the appeal board of the Hrodna Regional Court dismissed the appeal of the photo journalists Julia Darashkevich and Vadzim Zamirouski against the court ruling of the Ashmiany district court, according to which the Belarus Press Photo 2011 albums had been recognized extremist and destined to be destroyed. The court ruling came into legal force.



The photo album Belarus Press Photo 2011 was published upon the results of the yearly contest of press photography in Belarus held since 2011. The jury of the contest consists of famous photographers from different countries. The album was published and freely distributed in the country. Photos of the contest (works of the contest finalists) had been published in Belarusian periodic outlets and in newsfeeds of informational agencies without any negative consequences. In November 2012, on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border 41 copies of the album were confiscated from the journalists Julia Darashkevich , Aliaksandr Vasiukovich and Vadzim Zamirouski. On April 18, 2013 the Asmianny district court of Hrodna region found the album extremist and ruled to destroy it, this way satisfying the legal suit of the KGB Department in Hrodna region.



DETENTION AND ARRESTS OF JOURNALISTS

On **May 6** a blogger Dzmitry Halko and a journalist Aliaksandr Yarashevich were detained by police officers without obvious reasons. A little before the detention they were covering the release of the civil and political activists who had been arrested after the Chernobyl Way mass action on April 26. On **May 7** they were found guilty of petty hooliganism (art. 17.1) and disobedience to police (art. 23.4) and sentenced to 10 and 12 days' arrest respectively (judges Yauhen Hatkevich and Tatsiana Matyl, Maskouski district court of Minsk). Evidence in court was provided only by the police officers who had detained the journalists.

The arbitrary detention and arrest of the journalists followed the same scenario as on April 26 when the same journalist Aliaksandr Yarashevich and his colleague Henadz Barbarych were arrested for three days for allegedly disobedience to demands of the police officers. The court ignored the obvious contradictions in the police testimonies who failed to name correctly the place of detention. Since the journalists were detained on

Friday evening and stayed for two days in the isolator before the hearing, they were set free on Monday, several hours after the court ruling was announced.

On **May 8** the [Belarusian Association of Journalists](#) made a [protest](#) statement regarding the arbitrary detentions and arrests of journalists who were performing their professional duties. BAJ petitioned to the Ministry of the Interior, the prosecutor's office, the Investigative Committee and the Ministry of Justice, demanding to restore the rights of journalists and hold those guilty officials liable. [The state bodies confined themselves to a banal runaround reply.](#) They were going to appeal the court ruling following the procedure.

On **June 16** a journalist Aliaksandr Silich was detained in Stowbtsy district, Minsk region, while making a report from a venue of the African swine plague outbreak. The journalist was set free three hours later, after a protocol of administrative detention was drawn up.

On **June 27** in Minsk a correspondent of the Radio Svaboda Ihar Karney, a correspondent of Narodnaya Volya Ales' Sivy, and a journalist of TUT.by Natallia Kastsiukevich were detained while preparing a report about the all-national strike of entrepreneurs: on June 27 sole traders were protesting against the technical regulations of the Customs Union "On safety of light industry" which envisages obtaining a certificate guaranteeing the good quality of goods imported from Russia. Together with the journalists, the police detained the leader of the businessmen organization Perspective Anatol Shumchanka. The journalists' car was blocked by plain-clothed people on the way from the Zhdanovichy market; they were dragged out from the car, forced into a minibus and taken to the police department. The duty officers of the Central and Soviet district police departments denied receiving any detainees. In fact the journalists were taken to the central district police department where they stayed for one hour and set free without any procedural protocols (the organizer of the strike A. Shumchanka received a five-day administrative arrest).

JOURNALISTS BLAMED FOR CONTRIBUTION TO FOREIGN MASS MEDIA




БЕЛСАТ tv
BELSAT

On **May 22** the October district police department of Mahilou questioned the independent journalist Alina Skrabunova regarding her work for the Polish-based channel Belsat. The journalist refused to answer any questions referring to article 27 of the Constitution (the right no to testify against oneself and one's relatives).

On **May 24** the chairperson of a branch of BAJ in the Homel region Anatol Hatouchyts was summoned to the regional prosecutor's office to give explanations about a video report broadcast on April 24 on Belsat. The journalist answered that he was an employee of the informational agency BelaPAN and had no relation to the episode.

On **May 30** the journalist Volha Chaychyts was given a written warning from the prosecutor's office of Smaliavichy district against work for foreign mass media without accreditation. The warning concerned her attendance at a public discussion around the Chinese industrial park project in April. A similar warning on the same grounds was issued to Aliaksandr Silich on **June 7**.

At least one more journalist received a warning from the prosecutor's office in June, according to the information from BAJ.



Belsat has broadcast for Belarus since 2007 from the territory of Poland; its informational materials are produced by Belarusian journalists for Belarusian citizens. Starting from 2008, the channel has tried several times to obtain a permit to open a correspondent point in Belarus. Journalists contributing to Belsat are often subject to persecution from Belarusian authorities under the pretext that the Belarusian media law forbids journalists of foreign mass media (including the Belarusian citizens) to work in the territory of Belarus without accreditation. This law contradicts article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which has been ratified by Belarus.

THE PUBLIC PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE ISSUED AN OFFICIAL WARNING TO THE 'RADIO LIBERTY' JOURNALIST FOR 'DEFAMING THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS'

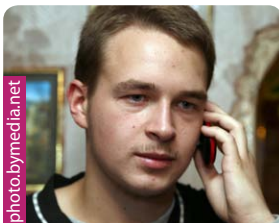
The Public Prosecutor's Office of Minsk issued an official warning to the 'Radio Liberty' journalist Aleh Hruzdilovich on **May 8, 2013**. It was grounded on Hruzdilovich's materials about Minsk metro security service, written on the basis of his journalist experiment as well as his book 'Who Blasted Minsk Metro?' The book and the journalist materials dwelt upon the explosion in Minsk metro in April 2011. It is worth mentioning that two Belarusian nationals were charged with the crime and sentenced to death penalty. Reportedly, the execution was carried out in 2012.

The official warning was signed by the First Deputy Prosecutor of Minsk Uladzimir Ramanouski. Among other, the RFE/RL reporter was accused of distributing the biased and purposefully distorted information about Belarus. Also, the journalist was blamed for *'disputing the objectiveness of official criminal investigation results on the terror attack in Minsk metro as well as the fairness of Belarusian judicial system in general'*.



THE KGB ANNOUNCED TERMINATION OF CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS AGAINST A PHOTO JOURNALIST ANTON SURAPIN

On **June 28, 2013**, the BelTA News Agency reported on termination of criminal proceedings on the 'teddy bear paratroop landing', referring to the First Deputy Head of KGB Ihar Siarheyenka. A photo journalist Anton Surapin was said to be involved in the case.



On **June 29, 2013**, the KGB Spokesman Artur Strehk informed the Interfax News Agency about 'the motivated termination' of criminal proceedings in relation to A. Surapin.

The 20-year-old student of Journalism Department at the Belarusian State University was the first to upload photos of teddy bears with slogans in defense of freedom of speech, dropped from a small airplane after an illegal crossing of Belarus-Lithuanian state border on June 4, 2012. (According to the Studio Total PR-company representatives, the action was aimed at support of freedom of speech in Belarus.) A KGB search was conducted in Anton Surapin rented apartment on July 13, 2012. He was detained later on. The journalist's laptop and photo camera were seized from him. A. Surapin was kept in custody more than a month. His attorney was banned to report on the legal investigatory actions with the journalist and even inform the public about his procedural status. **It was only on August 7, 2012 that the KGB announced presentation of charges to A. Surapin.** The student was accused of aiding a group of foreigners to cross illegally the state border of Belarus. **The arrest of Anton Surapin led the Top-10 list of absurd arrests - 2012, compiled by the Amnesty International.**

Following a wave of solidarity statements in defence of A. Surapin, expressed by the Belarusian and international community, the student was released from custody on August 17, 2012. He had been forced to sign a recognizance not to leave the place of his residence before that. None of legal investigatory actions with participation of A. Surapin were conducted since the time of his liberation from custody. The student's procedural status remained unknown.



A NON-STATE NEWSPAPER RETURNED TO THE 'BELPOSHTA' SUBSCRIPTION IN 8 YEARS SINCE EXCLUSION FROM THE CATALOGUE

Since June 2013, it has become possible again to subscribe to the '**Borisovskiye novosti**' weekly, due to the newspaper's return to the 'Belposhta' state monopolist's subscription catalogues. Like the majority of other independent newspapers, the periodical edition

was ousted from the state-owned press distribution networks and the 'Belsayuzdruk' news-stalls on the eve of the Presidential election – 2006. The problems with retail distribution of 'Borisovskiye novosti' remain the same.

The newspaper is mainly distributed through the editorial subscription as well as with the assistance of private distributors and sales outlets (shops, markets etc.) The latter are highly pressurized by local authorities.

“Borisovskiye novosti” is a social and political weekly. Its circulation totals approx. 6,000 copies a week. The newspaper print-run amounted to 19,000 copies a week in 1998-1999. “Belposhta” excluded 16 non-state periodical editions from the subscription catalogues on the eve of the Presidential election 2006. “Belsayuzdruk” enterprise ousted 19 newspapers from the nation-wide monopolist network of news-stalls. The courts refused to consider the claims, submitted by the repressed media outlets and their readers.

The problem with distribution through the 'Belposhta' and/or 'Belsayuzdruk' networks remains to be unsolved for more than 10 social and political newspapers in Belarus. According to the BAJ estimates, there are no more than 25 independent printed periodical editions, dealing with social and political problems in the country nowadays.



RATING LISTS, INDEXES, STATISTICS

THE NUMBER OF INTERNET USERS HAS INCREASED BY MORE THAN 22% WITHIN A YEAR'S COURSE

On the eve of the Global Telecommunications and Information Community Day, celebrated on May 17th, the National Statistic Committee of Belarus ('Belstat') announced the growth of Web-users by nearly 22.8% in 2012. (Source: [BelaPAN News Agency](#))

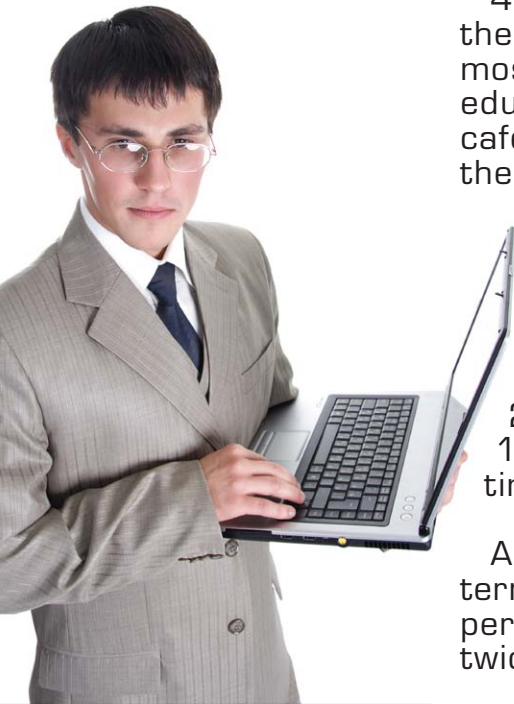
In particular, the number of Web-users totaled 8.4 million, including 7.5 million individuals at the beginning of 2013. 97% of organizations in the country had access to the Internet.

According to the selective investigation results, the number of households with PCs totaled 51.3% in Belarus. The number of households with access to the Internet amounted to 48.3%.

46.9% of Belarusian population used the Internet at the beginning of 2013. The people entered the Web most frequently from home – 42.1%, from work / educational establishments – 2.4%, from Internet-cafes (clubs) and post offices – 0.2% as well as from the relatives and friends' apartments – 0.3%.

The number of mobile Internet-users has significantly increased. It is connected with proliferation of mobile communication subscribers in the country. Thus, there were only 436 mobile phones per 1,000 people in Belarus at the beginning of 2006 to be compared to 1,128 mobile phones per 1,000 people at the beginning of 2013, i.e. 2.6 times more.

As of January 1, 2013, the carrier capacity of external Internet-access channels amounted to 350 Gbit per second. Thus, the bandwidth increased almost twice within a year.



FREEDOM HOUSE PLACED BELARUS AMONG THE COUNTRIES WITH THE WORST SITUATION WITH MEDIA FREEDOMS IN THE WORLD



The international Freedom House human rights organization published its 'Press Freedom 2013' thematic report on the eve of the Global Press Freedom Day, celebrated on May 3rd.

Belarus was mentioned in the report among the countries, where on the one hand, independent mass media don't exist at all or work in immensely complicated conditions and on the other hand, the state-owned media serve the regimes in power. The country neighbors the Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Iran, Cuba, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and North Korea on the list.

Belarus earned 93 points in the scale, where "0" indicated the best situation and "100" indicated the worst situation possible.



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