

# E-NEWSLETTER: MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

*No.2 (April – May 2007)*



*No place for the serious press...*



*Belarusian Association of Journalists*

[www.baj.by](http://www.baj.by)

“The authorities appear to be worried that soon independent satellite television will start broadcasting programs to Belarus from Poland. Therefore the order to carry out the so-called inventory of private satellite dish aerals, aimed at cutting down the number of independent information receivers was issued in advance. In my opinion, the situation in the town of Lida was a sign of beginning the all-state campaign on extermination of another source of independent information – satellite TV.”

**Mikhail Pastukhou, Doctor of Law,  
a former Judge of Constitutional Court of Belarus,  
Head of BAJ Law Centre for Media Protection**

<http://www.baj.by> , May 16, 2007

Cover Photo: No place for the serious press...

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## 1. Statistics

1,230 printed periodical editions (704 newspapers, 489 magazines, 33 bulletins, 3 catalogues and 1 almanac) and 9 news agencies were officially registered in the Republic of Belarus on June 1, 2007. The list includes 388 state-owned editions (among other, 217 newspapers and 157 magazines) and 842 non-state printed periodicals (among other, 487 newspapers and 322 magazines). Thus, the number of officially registered printed media in Belarus increased to a certain extent in April – May 2007. However, according to calculations of Belarusian Association of Journalists, the number of social and political non-state media in Belarus with the print-run exceeding 1,000 copies is around thirty.

Only one state TV program was registered in April – May 2007 and another one changed the form of ownership to the state one. Consequently, there were 211 officially registered TV and radio broadcasting programs, including 155 radio programs and 56 TV programs, on June 1, 2007. The majority of registered TV and radio broadcasting media (159) belongs to the state. Only 52 of them have non-state proprietors.

The number of Internet users in Belarus amounts to nearly 30% of adult population of Belarus. The sociological survey was held by the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies (Lithuania) on May 5-15, 2007.



The survey showed the following results: 5.2% of inquired people use the Internet every day; 9.9% of inquired people enter the World Web several times a week and 10.9% - once a month; 4% of polled people use the Internet several times a year. At the same time, 58.3% of respondents never use the Internet and 10.5% of respondents do not know anything about its existence.

24.6% of Belarusian Internet users visit Russian sites and 20.2% respondents visit Belarusian sites. 9.9% of inquired people visit European sites, while 1.3% of respondents express their preference to the Web-resources from the United States of America.

## 2. Situation Development in Belarusian Media Field (April – May 2007)

A range of new facts of prosecution of citizens for expression of their opinions took place in April – May 2007.

A publicist and a politician Andrei Klimau was arrested in Minsk on *April 3, 2007*. The Public Prosecutor's Office accused him of public appeals to overthrow the political system (article 361 of Belarus' Criminal Code). The criminal case was caused by an Internet



publication, signed by A. Klimau. The Board of Belarusian Association of Journalists expressed decisive protest in connection with the criminal prosecution of A. Klimau on *April 10, 2007*. BAJ appealed to the authorities to release the political from the police ward and stop the practice of criminal prosecution for expression of private opinions. "Reporters without Borders" condemned the arrest of Andrei Klimau in their statement of *April 23, 2007*.



It became known that a legal accusation in accordance with article 189 of Belarus' Criminal Code ("Offence") got presented to a journalist and human rights defender Valery Shchukin on *May 7, 2007*.

The legal investigation found the journalist guilty of distributing leaflets with "offensive information" during the recent local election campaign in December 2006. In reality, the leaflets informed the public that the members of District Election Committees in Vitsiebsk were violating the legislation. A criminal case against V. Shchukin was filed by Public Prosecutors' Offices for Piershamayski and Chyhunachny City Districts in Vitsiebsk in December 2006.

A newly introduced Code on Administrative Torts of March 1, 2007 was widely applied in April – May, 2007. Journalists and private distributors of

independent press were penalized accordingly in Vorsha (Vitsiebsk region) and Svietlahorsk (Homiel region).

Police officers detained three journalists and two independent press distributors during a student protest action against cancellation of discounts and benefits on *May 22, 2007*. However, they were released in an hour.

Several media outlets managed to uphold their rights in April – May 2007.

On *April 18, 2007*, Siarhei Zamara, Public Prosecutor for Hantsavichy district urged the “Hantsavitski Chas” non-state newspaper editorial to direct “control copies” of this periodical, verified with the editorial stamp to the Public Prosecutor’s Office. The state official had officially warned Aliaksei Biely, the newspaper’s Editor-in-chief and Piotra Huzayeuski, the newspaper’s Deputy Editor-in-chief in the past.

The “Hantsavitski Chas” editorial claimed against the Public Prosecutor’s demand.

Consequently, the Public Prosecutor’s Office in Brest region satisfied the editorial’s claim and sent a written instruction to S. Zamara to withdraw his demand. In particular, A. Tachko, Deputy Public Prosecutor for Brest region asked S. Zamara to take decisions in precise accordance with the current legislation. As a result, the Public Prosecutor for Hantsavichy district called back his demand.

The renewal of publishing a non-state social and political newspaper “Novy Chas” should be mentioned among the positive events in the Belarusian media field in the spring 2007. The periodical’s Editor-in-chief Alaksei Karol had been editing the “Zhoda” newspaper, closed down upon a claim, submitted by the Ministry of Information in March 26, 2007. A presentation ceremony of “Novy Chas” was to take place on *May 25, 2007*. However, it was upset because of the renter’s refusal.

A draft law “On Information, Informatization and Information Defense” was considered precisely by the Belarusian journalist community in April 2007. The Belarusian Association of Journalists addressed to the Chamber of

Representatives with a request to get the text of the draft bill for expert revision. Consequently, BAJ received the draft law and an invitation to review the document on *April 2, 2007*. The BAJ media experts held a press-conference, dedicated to the draft law on *April 12, 2007*. A range of significant remarks and proposals on changes in the draft law was presented during the event. The BAJ lawyers noted the draft law contained a large number of reference rules (109 references to other legal acts in 58 articles). They drew the public attention to the fact the draft law was introducing restrictions on information receipt, storage and distribution and, thus, it had to be revised. Having regarded the draft law and the submitted notes to the document, the Committee at the Chamber of Representatives agreed with BAJ and sent the draft bill back to the law elaborators for revision.

### **3. The Main Problem**

Problems with distribution of information in Belarus from abroad as well as legal troubles of foreign correspondents in the country were domineering in April – May 2007.

A Homiel journalist Anatol Hatouchyts was called to account for continuation of “activity in the interests of foreign media”. He claimed against the verdict of Central City District Court of Homiel. However, a superior Homiel Regional Court dismissed his appeal on *April 27, 2007*. Finally, the journalist was fined for preparing audio materials for Radio Liberty/RFE without a proper accreditation. It should be mentioned, the Public Prosecutor’s Office in Homiel region had officially warned the correspondent for similar actions in the past.

On April 19, 2007, it became known that the Department on Ideology at Mahileu Regional Executive Committee ordered to stop broadcasting a Russian TV channel “TV-1000” through the cable network and to replace it with the “Blagoviest” (‘Annunciation’) Orthodox TV channel (Russia). The decision was reasoned with “TV-viewers’ requests”. Allegedly, the latter were irritated with erotic programs, presented during the night hours.

The mechanism of obligatory approval of TV programs, transmitted by cable operators, on the part of local ideological authorities is an efficient means of putting control upon the contents of TV broadcasting and cable networks, widely available to Belarusian TV-viewers.

Another means of restricting the information flow to Belarus from abroad is formed by a permissive procedure of distribution of printed media, registered in foreign countries (except Russia). The distributors of such periodical editions have to obtain a special license at the Ministry of Information of Belarus.

The Belarusian state authorities paid especial attention to the satellite broadcasting in April 2007. Almost simultaneously, local state administrations in several cities disseminated a demand to uninstall satellite dishes from facades and roofs of houses. In particular, the local 'anti-satellite' campaigns were started by local authorities in Lida (Hrodna region), Pinsk (Brest region) and Minsk. The state officials explained their demands with a necessity of keeping city streets tidy and aesthetically-looking. The local dwellers that refused to follow the instructions were threatened with fines. Article 21.13 of the newly adopted Code on Administrative Torts envisages responsibility for installing satellite dishes and other receivers at facades, balconies, loggias, and roofs (this norm was absent in the previous version of the Code).

Many people connect the state campaign on uninstalling satellite dishes with the expected introduction of "BELSAT" satellite TV channel that has to start broadcasting from the territory of Poland on October 15, 2007. The TV channel is aimed at the Belarusian population. It is supposed to become an alternative to the Belarusian state TV. The "BELSAT" programs will be prepared by Belarusian journalists.

#### **4. Ratings and Events**

A regular exhibition "Mass Media in Belarus" started its work on *May 2, 2007*. The state press of social and political as well as entertaining character as well as the state radio stations and TV companies were widely represented



at the event. The non-state social and political newspapers and magazines have not been exposed at the special exhibition for several years already

On May 2, 2007, it became known that a human rights organization “Freedom House” put Belarus to the list of countries with the lack of press freedom in its annual report 2006. Belarus is holding the 186<sup>th</sup> position out of 195 countries of the world. “Freedom House” states that the Belarusian authorities make use of the state monopoly on printing and distribution of periodical editions. In comparison with Belarus, the situation with the freedom of speech and freedom of press is still worse in North Korea, Turkmenistan, Libya, Cuba, Eritrea, Uzbekistan, Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea.



On May 3, the Editor-in-chief of National non-state social and political newspaper “Narodnaya Vola” J. Syaredzich became a laureate of Ihar Hiermienchuk Honorary Diploma “For adherence to principles of freedom of speech” in 2007. The award had been founded by the Belarusian Association of Journalists in cooperation with the Norwegian PEN-center and a Norwegian human rights organization “Human Rights House”.

Andrei Dynko, the “Nasha Niva” Chief Editor was awarded a highly prestigious Natalie Lorenzo prize 2006 for writing a prison diary that got published in “Nasha Niva” weekly before his release from jail. (Andrei Dynko was baselessly sentenced to administrative arrest during the protest actions that took place after Presidential election 2006.)