

E-NEWSLETTER



THE BELARUSIAN
ASSOCIATION
OF JOURNALISTS

MASS MEDIA in Belarus

'2012

MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS – 2012: A Brief Review and Analysis



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DEVELOPMENT OF SITUATION IN THE MASS MEDIA FIELD



General situation in the Belarusian mass media field was changing in 2012 alongside the social, political, and economic situation in the country.

The first half-year was characterized by aggravation of tension in relations between the authorities and the press. The main tools of pressure on journalists and media outlets included issuance of official warnings by the KGB and public prosecution bodies, issuance of bans on foreign trips to a number of media workers and activists, and a propagandist campaign against the Belarusian Association of Journalists (further - BAJ) on the Belarusian state TV.

The critical point of Belarusian mass media year 2012 came in the summer, when three suits against journalists were filed.

Certain reduction of general pressure on the media by the beginning of elections to the Chamber of Representatives at the National Assembly of Belarus was caused by importance of getting international recognition to the Belarusian government. The criminal proceedings against the

media workers were “frozen”. One of the cases was closed. The illegal bans on media workers’ foreign trips were lifted. However, there took place separate conflicts in the media field, connected with access to information and news distribution, every now and then. Quite a few of them happened during the election period.

The end of the year was characterized by the shift of emphasis on economic issues, including foundation of state newspaper holding companies and provision of financial support to the state-owned media, on the one hand, and prosecution of independent publishers under the pretext of their “engagement in illegal business” or violation of state standards, on the other hand.

CRIMINAL PROSECUTION OF JOURNALISTS



Three suits against media workers were filed in different Belarusian regions in the summer of 2012. All of them were related to the journalists’ professional activity.

In particular, Andrzej Paczobut (Hrodna) was accused of casting aspersions on the President of Belarus. Anton Surapin (Slutsk, Minsk region) was accused of assisting a group of people to cross illegally the Belarusian state border. Mikalay Petrushenka (Vitsiebsk) was charged with defaming a public officer.

Criminal proceedings against a journalist and civil activist Mikalay Petrushenka (Vitsiebsk) were initiated by

Vorsha City Department of Legal Investigation Committee on August 17, 2012. Initially, the media worker used to be charged with defaming a public officer (article 369 of Belarus Criminal Code). The criminal charges were grounded on M. Petrushenka's article, published on nash-dom.info Web-site on August 8, 2012 that, allegedly, contained offensive public statements in relation to Deputy Chairperson of Vorsha City Executive Committee.

The criminal case was passed to Vitsiebsk Regional Department of Legal Investigation Committee. On October 17, 2012, the criminal proceedings against M. Petrushenka were terminated due to the absence of corpus delicti, confirmed by linguistic examination of the text.



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Anton Surapin, 20, a student of Journalism at the Belarusian State University was the first to upload and publish on-line photos of teddy bears with slogans in support of freedom of speech, dropped from a small airplane that crossed illegally the Belarusian-Lithuanian state border on July 4, 2012. A Swedish PR-company Studio Total took responsibility for the action "in support of democratic values in Belarus".

A KGB search was conducted at A. Surapin's rented apartment on July 13, 2012. His photo camera and PC were seized.

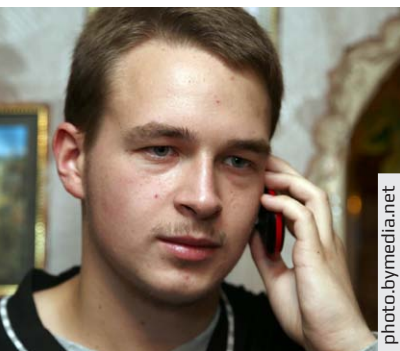
A. Surapin spent more than a month in the KGB pre-trial jail in Minsk afterwards. His attorney wasn't permitted to inform the press and the journalist's relatives about the legal investigation procedures and even about the detainee's judicial status at that.

It was only on August 7, 2012 that the KGB of Belarus informed the public about presentation of criminal charges to A. Surapin for assisting a group of people to cross illegally the Belarusian state border.

The young journalist was released from custody on August 17, 2012, following a wave of appeals on the part of Belarusian and international civil society structures. However, he was forced to sign a recognizance not to leave the place of his residence.

None of legal investigation procedures have been implemented with the media worker since then. He is still regarded as the alleged offender by the Belarusian judicial authorities and he cannot leave the place of his residence.

The arrest of Anton Surapin by KGB led the top-ten list of the most absurd and unjust arrests of 2012, published by Amnesty International.



A. Paczobut's fate arouses anxiety most of all. A criminal case was filed against the Belarusian correspondent of "Gazeta Wyborcza" (Poland), following a mass examination of analytical articles, contributed by the journalist to a number of on-line news resources within the preceding half a year term.

Consequently, A. Paczobut was 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 publications on various Web-sites.

The journalist was taken into custody on June 21, 2012. The police conducted a search of his apartment. The reporter's PC was seized.



A. Paczobut was released from pre-trial jail on signing a recognizance not to leave the place of his residence on June 30, 2012. He had been brought an indictment on article 367, part 2 of Belarusian Criminal Code before that.

The terms of legal investigation on the case were prolonged several times. However, none of investigatory actions have been conducted with the media worker yet.

On November 29, 2012, the journalist was informed by Hrodna Regional Department of Legal Investigation Committee officers that the fourth linguistic examination had been initiated within the case. Reportedly, legal investigation on the case was suspended for the period of linguistic examination. However, the journalist still cannot leave the city of Hrodna, since he has been forced to sign the recognizance not to leave the place of his residence.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that A. Paczobut was sentenced to three years of jail with deferment of execution for two years for casting aspersions on the President of Belarus in 2011. Presently, the journalist can be sentenced to up to 5 years of jail to be added to the previously pronounced prison term.

It has to be underscored that all three suits against media workers in 2012 were filed on the grounds of their Web publications.

OTHER FORMS OF PRESSURE ON JOURNALISTS

Detentions and official warnings from KGB and public prosecution bodies remained to be the main forms of pressure on journalists in 2012.

BAJ registered around 60 cases of detentions of journalists, independent press distributors, and active social networkers by representatives of different law-enforcement bodies in 2012.

The detained journalists were usually released in 2-3 hours. However, there were registered cases, when the detained media workers were taken to court and sentenced to fines and different terms of arrest (up to 15 days) under administrative law.

At least 13 journalists were officially warned by public prosecution offices for cooperation with foreign media without valid press credentials in 2012. At least 4 journalists were urged to come for 'a talk' to the local KGB departments. The peak of warnings was registered in February – March 2012.



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A rather new form of pressure on journalists, politicians, and civil activists in the form of illegal foreign travel bans was practiced by the Belarusian official authorities in 2012.

Thus, among other, the BAJ Chairperson Zhanna Litvina, the BelSat TV channel representative Mikhail Yan-chuk, and the 'Nasha Niva' newspaper's Chief Editor Andrei Dynko were deprived of their right to leave Belarus in March 2012. The bans were lifted as soon as the journalists went to law in August – September 2012. The Citizenship and Migration Department officers explained the ban by a software bug.



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OBSTACLES TO FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS' PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY

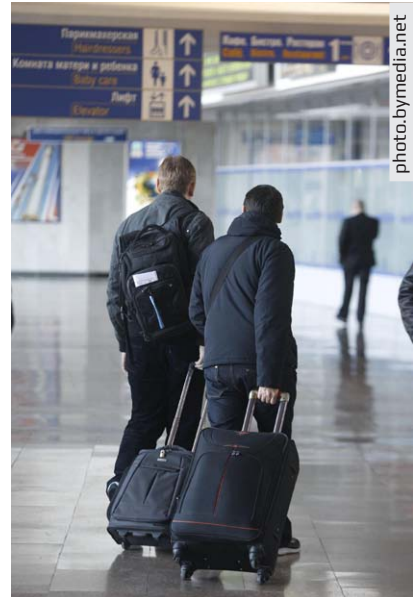
Apart from issuing official warnings to the Belarusian journalists that contribute to foreign media, the Belarusian official authorities also implemented other measures to tighten control over international distribution of information about events in Belarus. Thus, the officially accredited TV crews of TV3 (Estonia) and SVT (Sweden) channels were detained in Minsk in March 2012.

Some foreign correspondents faced problems with coverage of elections to the Chamber of Representatives at the National Assembly of Belarus, held on September 23, 2012.

More than 350 foreign journalists were officially accredited at the parliamentary elections in Belarus. However, four journalists from Germany and Sweden were banned entrance to the country.

But for that, Swedish correspondents Erik Von Platen and Gustaff Andresson had to spend approximately 16 hours at the national airport of Minsk, waiting for their airport visas and press credentials, on September 21, 2012.

On the same day of September 21, 2012, the Belarusian customs officers seized all professional technical equipment and information carriers from an Australian journalist Amos Roberts (SBS Broadcasting Corporation) on his way home at the national airport of Minsk. They didn't explain the grounds for the seizure. Moreover, the seizure record wasn't presented to the media worker on his request. The journalist had a possibility to leave Belarus on the following day only. The technical equipment and records haven't been returned to him so far.



PRESSURE ON BOOK / MEDIA PUBLISHERS AND DISTRIBUTORS

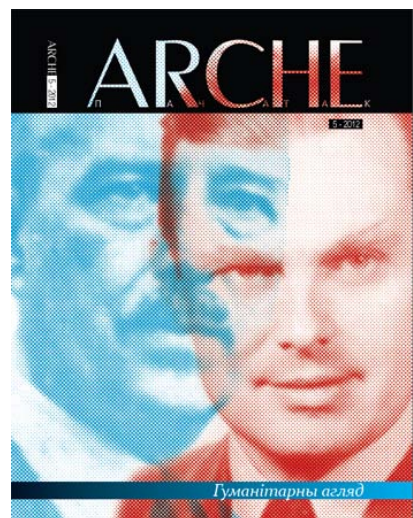
The official authorities resumed persecution of “ARCHE – Beginning” magazine in October 2012. It is worth mentioning that the intellectual magazine publishers were accused of distributing extremist materials in the aftermath of elections to the Chamber of Representatives in 2008. However, the criminal proceedings were terminated then. Presently, the wave of pressure on the “ARCHE-Beginning” intellectual magazine publishers and editorial has been initiated, following the detention of its Editor-in-chief Valery Bulhakau at the “Sovetization of Western Belarus” book presentation in Hrodna on September 14, 2012. He was accused of breaking the law on business activity by means of selling books at the presentation event and fined afterwards.

A large-scale financial examination of “ARCHE” Establishment that acts as the founder and editorial of “ARCHE-Beginning” magazine started immediately afterwards.

On October 4, 2012, the Department of Financial Investigations blocked accounts of “ARCHE” Establishment. Consequently, publication of “ARCHE-Beginning” magazine had to be suspended. The Belarusian state TV broadcast two video-reports, dedicated to the ‘book case’, where V. Bulhakau was accused of distributing extremist literature. It was hinted unambiguously, that the case could be further considered under criminal law. V. Bulhakau was forced to flee Belarus in November 2012.

Another conflict, connected with mass media and book publishing, took place on November 12, 2012.

More than 40 copies of “Belarus Press-Photo 2011” photo album were seized from independent photo journal-



ists Yuliya Darashkevich and Aliaksandr Vasiukovich at the Belarus-Lithuanian border by Belarusian customs officers under the pretext of checking them for the presence of “information that may be dangerous to the Belarusian state”.

Consequently, Ashmiany Customs Department informed the journalists that the Department on Ideological Work at Hrodna Regional Executive Committee examined the album and found the printed production to be “illegal and subject to destruction”. However, following the BAJ appeal, Ashmiany Customs Department officials changed their mind and stated that the seized copies could be returned to their owners, since they didn’t contain extreme materials. Still, it could be done, as soon as Hrodna Regional Executive Committee returned the albums to Ashmiany Customs Department.

I INTERNET

According to the National Statistic Committee of Belarus (Belstat), the number of Belarusian Internet-users totaled 6.8 million, including 6.1 million individuals’ IPs, at the beginning of 2012, the [Interfax News Agency](#) reported. The number of Web-users had grown by 34.2% within a year’s course.

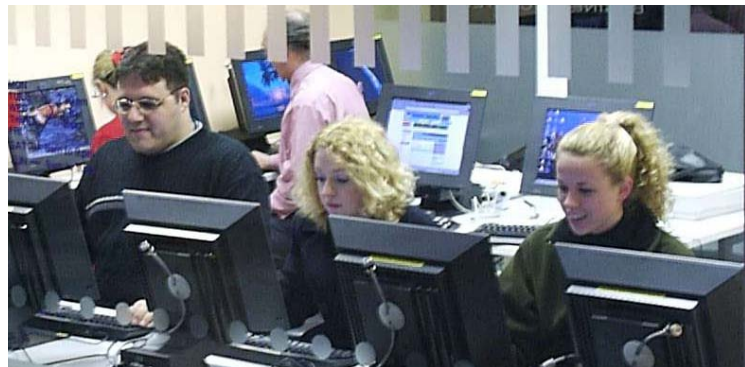
At the same time, the GemiusAudience statistic data for September 2012 was modest by far. Accordingly, no more than 4.4 million Belarusians used Internet in September 2012. The number of Web-users had increased by 14% within



a year's course. According to GemiusAudience, 80% of Belarusian Web-users enter the global network at least once a day.

This way or another, the growth of Web-visitors in Belarus is evident.

The change of provisions on identification of visitors of Internet-cafes, Wi-Fi areas etc. was adopted at the end of 2012. In particular, the Council of Ministers of Belarus adopted executive order No. 1191 of December 22, 2012 that introduced alternative means of identifying Web-users, apart from ID or passport presentation, since the end of January 2013. Among other, the alternatives include photo- or video-registration, SMS-registration etc.



It is worth mentioning that the compulsory identification of Web-users in Internet-cafes and other places of collective Internet-connection got introduced by the Presidential decree of February 1, 2010 “On Measures to Improve the Use of the National Segment of Internet”.

STATE ECONOMIC POLICY IN MASS MEDIA FIELD

The Belarusian official authorities continued the economic discrimination policy in relation to independent media in 2012. None of periodical editions, which used to be ousted from the “Belposhta” and “Say-uzdruk” state-owned monopolist press distribution systems, have been returned to the news-stalls and subscription catalogues in 2012.



At the same time, there have been strengthened various forms of state support to the state-owned media, including compulsory subscription to the official press and direct financial backing. According to the Belarus law “On the National State Budget 2013”, adopted in October 2012, the state budget subsidies to the state-owned media totaled 669 206 189.2 thousand Belarusian rubles that equals to around EUR 60 million. The amount of subsidies is almost by EUR 15 million bigger in comparison with the year of 2012. The majority of budget funds are directed to support the state TV and radio broadcasters (approximately, EUR 46 million). Around EUR 6 million have been allocated to support the periodical press and publishing houses. EUR 7.5 million will be used for funding “other issues in the media field”.

The considerable increase of budget funding to the state-owned media contradicts to declarations of top governmental officials about the necessity of saving and cut-

ting budget investments in the media. Thus, the president of Belarus Aliaksandr Lukashenka noted during a reporting meeting with the head of the National State TV and Radio Company Henadzi Davydzka on November 27, 2012 that the state subsidies to the Belarusian TV channels could be significantly cut in 2013. (Surprisingly, the State Budget Law for 2013 had been signed by him before that.) However, on December 22, 2012, the president prolonged implementation of his decree on exemption of the National State TV and Radio Company with all affiliates from VAT and income taxation in 2013.

Similar processes take place in the field of periodical press of Belarus. Thus, the state officials declared amalgamation of 11 nation-wide printed periodical editions to two holding companies in the autumn of 2012.

Apart from “Zviazda” newspaper, the “Zviazda” Publishing House will gather cultural periodical editions, including “LiM” Publishing and Editing Enterprise, “Literature and Art” newspaper as well as “Polymia”, “Maladosts”, “Neman”, and “Vozhyk” magazines.

The social and political Publishing house will unite 5 largest nation-wide socio-political newspapers: “Sovetskaya Belorussia”, “Narodnaya Gazeta”, “Respublika”, “Belaruskaya Niva”, and “Znamya Yunosti”.

However, the declared “print media optimization” doesn’t lead to reduction of their support from the state budget. Just on the contrary, the state subsidies increase. It should be underscored that the budgetary funding is distributed on the out-of-competition basis. On December 13, 2012, the



Council of Ministers of Belarus adopted the List of Mass Media, to be supported from the state budget in 2013. The list consists of 25 periodicals, including the media outlets to be united in the holding companies, mentioned above.

It is worth mentioning that the financial support to the state-owned media appears to be quite inefficient. The Independent Institute for Social, Economic, and Political Studies surveyed the Belarusian residents in December 2012. The public opinion poll results showed significant decrease of confidence in the state owned media by approximately 14.8% of Belarusian respondents, compared to December 2010. *At the same time, the level of confidence in the independent media increased by 1.8%.*

Despite the incomparable print-runs of the print media and the existing state monopoly in the field of TV and radio broadcasting, non-state media enjoy confidence of 48.1% respondents. At the same time, the state-owned media can boast of 38.1% trusting respondents only.



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