

E-NEWSLETTER

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# MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

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## THREE YEARS AFTER THE ELECTIONS





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# **SITUATION IN MASS MEDIA FIELD IN MAY–JULY 2023 (REVIEW)**

Even though three years have passed since the presidential elections in Belarus and the suppression of mass protests, the repressions against civil society and the media in the country have not decreased.

This situation is confirmed by the Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders on May 3rd. Accordingly, Belarus has dropped by four points in the rating list over the recent year, holding the 157th position in the list of 180 countries.

Once again, repressive norms were introduced into the law “On Mass Media” within the period under review. It happened for the second time in two years.

The criminal prosecution of journalists continued. The number of media professionals behind bars increased to 36 people at the end of July 2023. A number of publications faced censorship restrictions, up to the actual termination of their activities.

The authorities justified the persecution for distributing information distribution as the fight against extremism. Independent media were labeled as ‘extremist formations’, which means criminal prosecution for any interaction with them. The media content was recognized as ‘extremist materials’.

Independent media and civil society responded to the pressure and repression with solidarity and mutual support.



Thus, the Belarusian Association of Journalists organized a Marathon of Solidarity with the journalists in prison.

<https://baj.by/ru/events/115>

<https://baj.by/ru/content/we-stand-truth-we-stand-together-marathon-solidarity-inprisoned-journalists-started-vilnius>

Also, the BAJ took part in “We care!” online charity marathon in support of political prisoners, which was conducted by influential independent media and bloggers on July 29, 2023. The organizers managed to raise donations that exceeded EUR 574,000 during the event.

<https://d2o41s90g1m7rs.cloudfront.net/mobile/322899/>

## **MAIN EVENTS IN MASS MEDIA FIELD IN MAY–JULY 2023**

### **Changes in the Law on Regulation of Mass Media Activity**

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On July 1, 2023, Lukashenka approved amendments to Law No. 274-3 “On Mass Media”, which would come into force in three months. They further restrict the press activities. The authorities claim that, allegedly, the amendments are necessary for “an adequate response to destructive processes in the media field.” In particular,



- the possibility of applying retaliatory measures against foreign media has been established. The Ministry of Information has received the right to prohibit the activities of foreign media and their journalists in Belarus on the basis of updates from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that includes the introduction of bans on the media content dissemination through other media and the Internet;
- the requirements for news aggregators have been transferred to the law from the corresponding decree. Among other things, they provide for the possibility of disabling access to the news aggregators in case they disseminate media content from the blocked Web-resources;
- the list of grounds for canceling state registration certificates of mass media, as well as restricting access to Web-resources, online publications, and news aggregators has been expanded. Among other things, it includes publication of unregistered TV and radio broadcasting media production;
- decisions to restrict access to news Web-sites can be made within six months from the date the grounds arise; they may specify the period, during which access to the corresponding media cannot be restored.

<https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12300274>

## Criminal prosecution of journalists

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Four sentences were pronounced on criminal cases within the period under review. Consequently, journalists were sent to prison for the terms of 4–7 years.

<https://baj.by/be/analytics/represii-suprac-zhurnalistau-i-medyya-u-2023-godze-spis-znyavolenyh>



On **May 30**, 2023, Homiel Regional Court announced the verdict to Yauhien Merkis, a local freelance journalist and historian. He was sentenced to 4 years in prison in a strict regime colony under Art. 361-4 of the Criminal Code of

Belarus ('assistance to extremist activities'), as well as Art. 361-1 ('participation in an extremist formation'). The exact circumstances of the case are unknown since the trial was held behind closed doors.

<https://baj.by/ru/content/zhurnalista-evgeniya-merkisa-prigovorili-k-4-godam-kolonii>

A political prisoner Andrei Famin was sentenced to seven years in a strict regime colony on **June 21**, 2023. He had been arrested in October 2022 and, consequently, he confessed that he was the editor and author of articles for a network of 'Vesniki' civil protest newspapers, published and distributed by activists of local initiatives. He was presented charges under three articles of Belarus Criminal Code, namely, Art. 361 ('calls to sanctions'), Art. 342 ('participation in actions that grossly violate public order'), and Art. 361-1 ('establishment of an extremist formation').

<https://baj.by/be/content/palitznyavolenamu-andrey-faminu-za-samvydat-vesniki-pryznachyli-7-gadou-kalonii>



Pavel Padabed, a journalist from Minsk, who cooperated with a number of independent media, was accused of being part of an extremist formation (Art. 361-1

of Belarus Criminal Code). On June 30, 2023, he was sentenced to four years of imprisonment.

<https://baj.by/ru/content/zhurnalista-pavla-podobeda-prigovorili-k-4-godam-kolonii>

On **July 26**, 2023, Hrodna Regional Court sentenced a journalist Pavel Mazheika and an attorney Yulia Yurhilevich to six years of imprisonment in the strict and common regime colonies, respectively. They were found guilty of facilitating extremist



activities repeatedly (Article 361-4 of Belarus Criminal Code). The court established that Pavel Mazheika posted information on Belsat TV channel, which he had received from Yulia Yurgilevich, about her resignation from the bar of attorneys and about the verdict against the artist Ales Pushkin.

<https://iceberg-wakening-334013.appspot.com/news/2023/07/26/mozheyko>

A new criminal case was filed against Tatsiana Pytsko, the wife of a cameraman Viachaslau Lazarau. (The latter was already in pre-trial custody at the moment of his spouse's detention on **June 6**, 2023.) Tatsiana Pytsko was charged under Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code ('establishment or participation in an extremist formation') in connection with her alleged collaboration with the Belsat TV channel. Tatsiana and Vyachaslau's daughter, who was a year and a month old at the time of her mother's detention, was placed under the care of the state and sent to a children's hospital.

<https://baj.by/ru/content/novaya-predstavitelnica-smi-za-reshetkoy-v-belarusi-tatyana-pytko-seychas-v-nevole>



Another criminal case was filed against a freelance journalist Ihar Karney within the period under review. He was detained and sent to a pre-trial custody in Minsk on **July 17**, 2023. The charges against the arrested freelance reporter remain unknown since his lawyer signed a non-disclosure agreement.

<https://baj.by/ru/content/na-zhurnalista-igorya-karneya-zaveli-ugolovnoe-delo>

A court verdict was passed in a criminal case against well-known bloggers and editors of the 'Nexta' and 'Belarus Brain' Telegram channels on **May 3**, 2023. The case consideration began in February 2023. It was held in the order of special proceedings in relation to Stsiapan Putsila and Yan Rudzik, who are currently outside Belarus. Consequently, Stsiapan Putsila was sentenced to 20 years in prison, Yan Rudzik – to 19 years in prison, and Raman Pratasevich – to 8 years of imprisonment in a strict regime colony.

The court claimed that the defendants were directly involved in organizing mass riots, which were accompanied by arson, pogroms, road traffic blocking, as well as deliberate incitement of social hatred and calls for terrorist acts during the 2020 election campaign. Since these resources were recognized by the authorities as 'extremist formations', their management entailed additional charges.

The court stipulated a shorter term of imprisonment for Raman Pratasevich, since he 'fulfilled unconditionally the terms of the deal with the investigation.' The court left the previous measure of restraint in the form of house arrest for Raman Pratasevich

until the verdict entered into force. On May 22, 2023, it became known that he had been pardoned by Aliaksandar Lukashenka.

<https://baj.by/ru/content/sud-vynes-prigovor-po-delu-nexta-obvinyaemye-poluchili-ot-8-do-20-let-kolonii>

<https://baj.by/ru/content/lukashenko-pomiloval-romana-protasevicha>

## Other pressure on journalists and media

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12 cases of detention of media workers were registered in Belarus in May–July 2023. Journalists were punished on administrative charges in the form of arrest (6 cases), fines (5 cases), and other forms of pressure within the period under review.

<https://baj.by/be/analytics/represii-suprac-zhurnalistau-i-medyya-u-2023-godze-spis-znyavolenyh>

Thus, two policemen came to the apartment of Homiel journalist Anatol Hatouchyts to find out if he was subscribed to extremist Telegram channels in the evening on **May 23**, 2023.

Since 2020, this was already the sixth visit by the police. Four of them were accompanied by searches and seizure of technical equipment.

<https://baj.by/be/content/vecharovy-vizit-milicyi-dazhurnalista-anatolya-gatouchyca-shosty-za-dva-gady>

The imprisoned journalists were subjected to pressure and inhuman treatment in the penal colonies.

Thus, Mikalai Klimovich, a blogger from Pinsk, 69, died in Vitebsk



Colony No. 3 on May 7, 2023. At the end of February 2023, he was sentenced to one year in prison on charges of “insulting the President of the Republic of Belarus.” He had a serious heart condition, which was known to the court.

<https://baj.by/be/content/u-vicebskay-kalonii-pamyor-bloger-mikalay-klimovich>

A blogger Uladzimir Tsyhanovich was detained in June 2020. He spent almost three years in jail serving the initial prison term, when the judge convicted him supplementary under Article 411 of the Criminal Code for ‘malicious disobedience to the requirements of the colony administration’ on April 10, 2023. Consequently, one more year was added to the initially pronounced verdict of 15 years in prison.

<https://nashaniva.com/315694>



On **July 18**, 2023, it became known that a journalist Dzianis Ivashyn had been transferred from the colony to a strict regime prison by a court decision. Neither the journalist’s relatives nor his lawyer was aware of the trial or its circumstances.

<https://baj.by/ru/content/zhurnalista-ivashina-tayno-sudili-v-kolonii>

The representatives of GUBAZIK (Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Belarus) detained nine employees of ‘Ranak’ private TV and radio company in Svetlahorsk, Homiel region on **June 9**, 2023.

The company published news and issued the ‘Ranak-Plus’ newspaper. Also, it dealt with advertising. Police protocols were drawn up against the detainees for the alleged distribution of ‘extremist’ materials. The court sentenced the men to 7 days of administrative arrest and imposed fines on the women. The official reason for the administrative persecution was the company employees’ subscription to a group in the ‘Odnoklassniki’ social media. However, it is most likely that the TV company’s coverage of the accident at the Svetlahorsk Pulp and Cardboard Mill, which occurred on June 7, 2023, and led to the death of three factory workers, was most likely the real motive of these repressive actions.

As soon as the employees were detained, the Ministry of Information blocked access to the channel’s website. On **July 4**, 2023, it was recognized as “extremist materials.” In fact, it looked like a case of ruining just another independent media that had existed for twenty years.



<https://baj.by/be/content/teleradyyokampaniya-ranak-u-svetlagorsku-faktychna-razgromlenaya>

The media that continued to operate in Belarus were subjected to censorship and other forms of restrictions. Thus, following the Ministry of Information decision, public access was blocked to a number of regional Web-resources,



including Intex-press.by, newgrodnob.by, brestnote.by, as well as the IT-industry news Web-site Dev.by, and a sport periodical 'Pressball'.

<https://baj.by/be/content/dostup-da-sayta-intex-pressby-zablakavali>

<https://baj.by/be/content/zachystka-regiyonau-pracyagvaeccamininfarm-abmezhavau-dostup-da-sayta-newgrodnoby>

<https://baj.by/be/content/aycishny-internet-resurs-devby-zablakavany-u-belarusi>

<https://baj.by/be/content/plyus-yashche-adno-abmezhavanne-admininfarma-na-gety-raz-dastalosya-saytu-vydannya-presbol>

<https://baj.by/be/content/ministerstva-infarmacyi-zablakavala-regiyanalny-sayt-z-bresta>

A similar decision was taken by the Ministry in relation to Kamunikat.org that is the largest online library of Belarusian literature nowadays.

<https://news.zerkalo.io/life/44445.html?c>

The Ministry of Information of Belarus issued warnings to 'Our TV' channel from Vitsiebsk, the founders of the 'BelMuzTV' and 'Europa Plus' TV programs. Propaganda Telegram channels reported that in the latter case, the TV channel was "punished" for presenting Larysa Hrybalova live. The latter used to be included in the unofficial list of 80 "banned" performers, who were the Belarusian cultural figures who spoke out against violence in 2020.

<https://baj.by/be/content/ministerstva-infarmacyi-vyneslapapyaredzhanne-telekanalu-nashe-tv-yakoe-pracue-u-vicebsku>

<https://baj.by/be/content/mininfarm-vynes-pismovae-papyaredzhanne-zasnavalniku-telepragramy-belmuztv>

<https://news.zerkalo.io/life/38415.html?c>



On **June 16, 2023**, the Ministry of Information of Belarus cancelled the certificate of state registration of 'Narodnaya Volya' newspaper due to the fact that its printed

version had not been published for six months in a row, due to the impossibility of getting it printed either in Belarus or in Russia.

<https://baj.by/ru/content/mininform-annuliroval-registraciyu-narodnay-voli>

## The use of anti-extremist legislation to restrict freedom of expression and access to information

The Belarusian authorities continued to label independent media resources as 'extremist formations' within the period under review. Thus, 'Rudabelskaya Pakazukha', a highly popular media project, led by a blogger-pranker Andrey Pavuk appeared on the list alongside the MOST info portal and its pages on social media, as well as the projects and personal social media accounts, run by a



journalist from Hrodna Ruslan Kulevich, the ‘Mirror’ (‘Zerkalo’) website and online platforms of the Mirror Web-resource. A new phenomenon was the emergence of foreign media among extremist groups. These are the pages on Telegram, YouTube and TikTok, which are maintained by a popular Ukrainian blogger Aliaksandr Rykau (BalaganOff). He pays considerable attention to Belarusian issues in his videos).

<https://baj.by/ru/content/proekt-blogera-andreya-pauka-rudabelskaya-pakazuha-priznali-ekstremistskim-formirovaniem>

<https://baj.by/ru/content/most-priznan-ekstremistskim-formirovaniem>

<https://baj.by/ru/content/mvd-priznal-zerkalo-ekstremistskim-formirovaniem>

<https://baj.by/be/content/ukrainski-bloger-balaganoff-pryznany-u-belarusi-ekstremistskim-farmavannem>

The list of “extremist materials” was constantly updated through independent Internet resources and their accounts in social networks (‘Nasha Niva’ online publication, Radio Unet, Solidarity newspaper, etc.).

<http://mininform.gov.by/documents/republikanskiy-spisok-ekstremistskikh-materialov/>

The Ministry of Information also added the BAJ website, its social media, and logo to the list of extremist materials at the request of Minsk Prosecutor’s Office for the following reasons: “Members of this association regularly published destructive materials on their own website and other resources on the Internet, including accounts on the social media – Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and the Telegram messenger. These resources purposefully contributed to the formation of sources of threats to national

security, incitement of social hatred and discord through the dissemination of false or deliberately distorted information.

<https://prokuratura.gov.by/ru/media/novosti/zashchita-sotsialnykh-prav-grazhdan/v-inykh-sferakh/po-zayavleniyu-proku1506/>

The Russian government's watchdog 'Roskomnadzor' banned access to a number of Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian websites on the grounds of military censorship, including the BAJ website and the 'Flagstock' online news Web-resource within the period under review.

<https://ovd.news/express-news/2023/06/18/v-rossii-zablokirovali-ryad-novostnyh-sitetov-iz-za-voennoy-cenzury-i>

A number of convicted journalists were included by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the list of citizens "involved in extremist activities." It includes sports manager Dzmitry Navosha, Dzmitry Semchanka, Andrey Pachobut, and Henadz Mazheika.

<https://www.mvd.gov.by/ru/news/8642>

The KGB, in turn, updated the list of persons "associated with terrorist activities" by including a journalist Henadz Mazheika and director of "Belorusy i Rynok" newspaper Kanstantsin Zalatykh into the list.

<http://kgb.by/ru/perechen-inf-ru/>

Since the beginning of 2023, there has been a sharp increase in the number of trials on administrative charges for the distribution of "extremist materials" (Article 19.11 of the Code of Administrative Offenses). In the first half of the year, it increased by 1.7 times compared to the same period in 2022 (721 cases



against 1274 cases). According to human rights activists, after the massive prosecution for participating in the 2020 protests, the number of administrative cases related to it has significantly decreased. Consequently, the infamous title of the “people’s” article has been transferred to the article about “extremist materials”. Since almost all leading information resources have become “banned” without regard to the time limits of publication, almost everyone can be held liable under Article 19.11.

<https://humanconstant.org/analiz-statistiki-pravonarushanij-po-ekstremistskim-statyam-koap-po-dannym-banka-sudebnyx-reshenij/>

## Developments in the state media field

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“Purges” continued among state-owned media workers. On May 5, 2023, employees of the Homiel Plus radio station, editor-in-chief Siarhei Krasnaboroda, radio hosts Zhanna Minina and Anastasia Grytsenka, as well as sound engineer Artem Vasilkou, were detained directly at their workplaces. They were subjected to administrative arrest for up to 15 days for distributing extremist materials (Article 19.11 of the Code of Administrative Offenses).



<https://baj.by/ru/content/v-gomele-zaderzhali-i-osudili-chetyreh-sotrudnikov-mestnogo-gosradio>

In early June 2022, Yana Tsehla, the writer and journalist of ‘Litaratura i Mastatsva’ newspaper, was fired from her job “for absenteeism” - this is how the editors interpreted the two months she spent in a pre-trial detention center (she was sentenced to two years of “home chemistry” for participating in protests against Article 342 of the Criminal Code). Since she worked in a newspaper for distribution after high school, she must pay the state more than 3.5 thousand rubles.

<https://baj.by/be/content/pisatelnica-provela-dva-mesyaca-v-sizo-posle-prigovora-ee-uvolili-s-raboty-za-proguly-teper>

## RATING LISTS, INDEXES, STATISTICS



Reporters Without Borders released the 2023 Press Freedom Index, which measures the working conditions of

journalists around the globe. Accordingly, Belarus has dropped by four points in the rating list over the recent year, holding the 157th position in the list of 180 countries. It is located among 31 countries rated as ‘very poor’ for press freedom, between Palestine and Nicaragua. The compilers of the Index note the negative impact of the war in Ukraine on media freedom, which contributed to the ‘cleansing’ of the media landscape in Russia and Belarus during 2022.

[https://rsf.org/en/2023-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-threatened-fake-content-industry?data\\_type=general&year=2023](https://rsf.org/en/2023-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-threatened-fake-content-industry?data_type=general&year=2023)



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