

MASS MEDIA

in Belarus

E-NEWSLETTER

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MAY 3 – WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY



BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS
www.baj.by

“I believe that among other the ideology is formed by our books in the book trade system, by our “Belsayuzdruk” in the field of mass media distribution, and by the media themselves, as a matter of fact.”

Aleh Pralaskouski, Minister of Information of Belarus

http://www.mininform.gov.by/rus/publication/~page__m17=2~news__m17=545

“They are killing us. They’ve been crushing us morally as professionals so far. However, it is highly possible that they will start assassinating us shortly, if we fail to do anything to stop them. We can’t rely on anybody apart from our colleagues and ourselves. Journalists have more pressure tools in comparison with politicians and even in comparison with all politicians of the world, taken together. Do you remember how we released Pavel Sheremet from jail in 1997? It wasn’t done by the politicians. It wasn’t done by Boris Yeltsin or anybody else of the kind. It was done by us, as we wrote about it, we shouted about it, and we arranged solidarity actions in his support then.”

Iryna Khalip, an independent journalist

<http://baj.by/m-p-viewpub-tid-1-pid-8386.html>

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STATEMENT OF BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS, DEDICATED TO THE WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY

The Belarusian Association of Journalists Appeals to Colleagues on the World Press Freedom Day

Dear colleagues,

For the recent years, independent journalists in Belarus have had to carry out their professional duties in extremely adverse conditions. The national authorities totally control the information field and restrict the activities of independent media outlets, rejecting their access to information, banning press distribution and printing, practising prosecution and economic discrimination.

A new alarming tendency is open pressure put on journalists by law enforcement agencies and special services. Our colleagues got that sad experience in March 2008, when special services conducted a series of searches in offices and private apartments of independent journalists all around the country. Nowadays, the story repeats, since the journalists, who cover the sharpest topics are being interrogated and searched. Our colleagues, who cover street actions, face gross interference into their professional activity, as some 'people in plain clothes', allegedly police officers, cover their cameras with their hands, detain them and use force against them. Quite a few Belarusian journalists have received official warnings for their professional activity without accreditation.

Presently, as the presidential election campaign approaches, the authorities' fear of non-censored information has put the media field to the epicenter of repression. The governmental authorities intend to control everything, to restrict people's access to information that can lead them to understanding of reality.

It is probably the most important achievement in the present-day conditions that independent journalism has remained intact as a public institute in Belarus. Each of us has contributed to this accomplishment.

We have survived as a community only due to the fact we have always prioritized our conscious choice in favor of our trade as well as the understanding of personal responsibility for providing the society with true and unbiased information. This is the thing that heartens us, despite all the pressure and persecution.

We feel ourselves a part of international journalistic community, and we express our gratitude to our colleagues abroad for their support and solidarity. From our part, we understand and support journalists from other countries, who also work in difficult conditions and face persecution for their professional activity.

Dear colleagues! The Belarusian Association of Journalists would like to congratulate each of you on the World Press Freedom Day, globally celebrated on May 3rd. We extend our greetings to the media workers, who prove their commitment to high professional standards of journalism in their daily work as well as to the journalists, who consider independence and truth to be the greatest values and understand the importance of our profession for the society.

It is only our unity that can help us withstand all challenges and threats; it is only our solidarity that can help us stand up for our right to practise journalism!

Let's keep to the truth!

Let's keep to our profession!

Let's be together!



2. DEVELOPMENT OF SITUATION IN BELARUSIAN MEDIA FIELD (February – April 2010)

Situation in Belarusian media field continued to deteriorate in February – April 2010. The most alarming events in the period were as follows:

- police and KGB searches at journalists' apartments and editorial offices;
- adoption of Presidential Ordinance on Regulation of Belarusian segment of Internet;
- reinforced pressure on the journalists, cooperating with foreign media;
- retained official warning to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, aimed at restricting the possibilities of practicing journalistic activity in the country and directed to shrinking the opportunities of legal defense of BAJ members.

Police officers held searches at working places and private apartments of *Maryna Koktysh*, 'Narodnaya Vola' Deputy Editor-in-chief and *Sviatlana Kalinkina*, 'Narodnaya Vola' Chief Editor as well as at the editorial office of 'Charter'97' Web-site and at a private apartment, owned by an independent journalist Iryna Khalip in February – March 2010. The police confiscated information carriers, including PCs, CDs and DVDs, USB flash drives, and camera memory sticks in all these cases. Some intruders wore masks.

The policemen entered the 'Charter'97' editorial office with the use of force. One of the officers hit the Web-site Editor N. Radzina in the face. The Public Prosecutor's Office for Leninski City District of Minsk refused to file a suit in relation to the police officers, who attacked the media worker.



The searches were held within the criminal investigation on the fact of libel in the Internet in relation to Ivan Korzh, ex-Head of KGB Department for Homiel region, according to article 188 of Criminal Code of Belarus.

The journalists M. Koktysh, I. Khalip, S. Kalinkina, and N. Radzina were repeatedly summoned for interrogations. Their computers were sent for expert examination that didn't bring any results that could satisfy the detectives. However, instead of returning the professional technical equipment to the owners, the legal investigators made up their minds to subject it to re-examination.

The recent events have resembled a broad range of KGB and police searches, held at private apartments of independent journalists across Belarus in March 2008. The law-enforcement agencies used another criminal case on defamation of the President of Belarus as pretext to search the apartments and offices of independent journalists then.

On March 22, 2010, the Belarusian Association of Journalists stated that it considered the police searches and interrogations of colleagues as a part of a special operation, directed against independent journalism in Belarus and demanded the responsible authorities to return immediately the journalists' personal belongings, required for carrying out their professional activity.

Nevertheless, the situation was steadily deteriorating. Thus, a famous Belarusian journalist Pavel Shermet was deprived of Belarusian citizenship at the turn of March 2010. (He resides and works in Russia nowadays.)

P. Sheremet covered a confrontation of Belarusian police and KGB officials on www.belaruspartisan.org that led to filing a criminal case on general I. Korzh's claim and resulted in further persecution of journalists and media that dared report on the conflict.

As reported on April 29, 2010, another suit had been filed against 'Charter'97' Website. It was caused by visitors' comments under a reprinted article, published on the Web-resource.

These facts confirm a desire of Belarusian authorities to take over the control of the Internet-space in Belarus. The required legislative measures have been taken already. In particular, the President of Belarus signed his ordinance No. 60 'On the Measures to Improve the Use of the National Segment of the Internet Network' on February 1, 2010.

Among other, the ordinance provides for:

- registration of on-line resources that deal with rendering different services;
- identification of Internet-users in Web-cafes as well as registration and storage of data about the visited Web-pages;
- identification of user equipment, applied in the process of rendering the Web-connection services;
- absence of divided responsibility between the people, who present certain information in the Internet, and the Web-resources;
- disabling / limitation of access to the "banned" information on the Web upon the users' requests as well as upon the requests, received from the "authorized state structures".

The Presidential ordinance creates broad opportunities for restricting the freedom of expression in the Internet. It will be possible to judge on the real perspectives of putting these opportunities into practice by Belarusian officials as soon as coherent by-laws and governmental regulations get adopted by May 1, 2010. The Presidential ordinance will come into effect on July 1, 2010.

The office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has implemented a legal expertise of the Presidential ordinance, regulating the Internet in Belarus (<http://baj.by/m-p-viewpub-tid-1-pid-8140.html>).

The state authorities continued systematic persecution of Belarusian media workers, cooperating with foreign media outlets in 2010. (The BelSat TV channel's correspondents have faced most of repression since the year start.) The KGB and the public prosecution bodies continued to issue official warnings to the journalists. Moreover, the law-enforcement agents tried to apply coercive methods at the beginning of the year in relation to them. Thus, police officers made an attempt to intrude into a private apartment, hired by Mikhas Yanchuk, a BelSat representative in Belarus, on February 3, 2010. A group of journalists spent nearly an hour and a half under a police siege in the apartment. A journalist Ivan Shulha was detained near the apartment door and sentenced to 10 days of custody for "disorderly conduct", that is quite an ordinary accusation in such cases, later on.



The state authorities tried to accuse I. Shulha of offering resistance to the police officers and inflicting bodily injuries to them that could lead to filing a suit. However, taking into account enormous publicity over the case, the authorities decided to restrict themselves to taking the journalist into custody for 10 days only <http://baj.by/m-p-viewpub-tid-1-pid-7982.html>.

The Supreme Court of Belarus declined an appeal, submitted by the Belarusian Association of Journalists against an official warning, issued by the Ministry of Justice of Belarus, in full on March 22, 2010. The Supreme Court confirmed a ban on the use of BAJ membership cards with the word “PRESS”, previously issued by the Ministry of Justice of Belarus. (These membership cards were of utmost importance for freelancers in the country.) Moreover, the Supreme Court confirmed the illegality of activities, implemented by the Law Center for Media Protection at the Belarusian Association of Journalists. Another warning to BAJ within a year may lead to the Association closure in the long run.

It was before the trial that the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) expressed deep concern with the official warning, addressed by the Ministry of Justice of Belarus to the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

According to PACE, the official warning “challenged the association’s internationally recognised work in the interests of journalists, media and media freedom.” Taking into consideration that Belarus is an associated member of the Venice Commission, PACE addressed to the institution with a request to look into the case and conclude if the ministerial warning could be regarded as a violation of generally accepted standards in the field of human rights. <http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta10/eREC1897.htm>

Ad notam

According to the recent report, prepared by [«Freedom House»](#) human rights watchdog, Belarus shares the 189th position (out of 196 positions possible) with Uzbekistan in the global Freedom of the Press Index 2010 (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=16>).