



THE BELARUSIAN
ASSOCIATION
OF JOURNALISTS

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MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

E-NEWSLETTER

JULY-SEPTEMBER 2015



It is at least irresponsible to talk about the absence of freedom of speech in Belarus nowadays.

*Liliya Ananich,
Minister of Information of Belarus*

The European Parliament... expects the authorities to stop the harassment of independent media for political reasons; urges a stop to the practice of administrative prosecution and the arbitrary use of Article 22.9, Part 2, of the Administrative Code against freelance journalists for working with foreign media without accreditation, which restrict the right to freedom of expression and the dissemination of information...

*European Parliament resolution
on the situation in Belarus*



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SITUATION IN BELARUSIAN MASS MEDIA FIELD IN JULY-SEPTEMBER 2015 (REVIEW)

The beginning of the 3rd quarter of 2015 was characterized by the strengthened pressure on mass media on the part of official authorities. The pressure somewhat decreased since the end of August 2015. Apparently, it was connected with the coming presidential election and the intention of Belarusian official authorities to get positive reaction on the political event from the international community. Still, the situation in the field of freedom of expression remained to be unfavorable subject to the overall governmental control over the national information space.

The situation with distribution of non-state social and political periodical editions deteriorated in the recent months. On the one hand, a new requirement of state registration for the press distributors came into force. On the other hand, the 'Belposhta' and 'Sayuzdruk' state-owned monopolist press distributors continued to discriminate independent editions in the country.



The prosecution of freelance journalists for cooperation with foreign mass media without accreditation dramatically intensified at the beginning of summer 2015. However, the trend somewhat declined closer to September 2015. However, nobody knows how the situation is going to develop after the Presidential election in the country.

There were registered several cases of detention of journalists on duty within the period under review.

MAIN EVENTS IN MASS MEDIA FIELD IN JULY-SEPTEMBER 2015

PROBLEMS WITH DISTRIBUTION OF INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS

The 'Belsayuzdruk' national unitary enterprise refused to distribute the 'Novy Chas' independent newspaper through its news stalls since the beginning of September 2015. The state monopolist enterprise in the field of retail press distribution noted it couldn't be done 'for technical reasons'.

The 'Belposhta' state monopolist enterprise in the field of press distribution by subscription in Belarus refused to include the 'Barysauskiya Naviny' newspaper into its subscription catalogue at the end of September 2015. Among other, the 'Belposhta' officials noted that it was their right, not responsibility to include periodicals into the catalogue. The newspaper publisher received similar explanations from the 'Minskabsayuzdruk' state unitary enterprise that had refused to distribute the newspaper through its kiosks.



Similar negative replies from 'Sayuzdruk' and 'Belposhta' state enterprises had been received earlier by 'Gazeta Slonimskaya' (Slonim, Hrodna region), 'Intex-press', 'Intex-press plus' (Baranavichy, Brest region), and 'SNPlus. Svobodnye novosti plus' weekly.

The problems with distribution of independent print media appeared on the eve of the Presidential election campaign 2006 almost 10 years ago. The 'Belposhta' national unitary enterprise and the 'Sayuzdruk' enterprises refused to include into subscription catalogues and sell through the network of news stalls around 20 independent social and political newspapers respectively. It was due to the temporary warming period in relations between the Belarusian government and the EU that 'Belposhta' and 'Sayuzdruk' enterprises resumed cooperation with 'Narodnaya Volia' and 'Nasha

Niva' newspapers in 2008. Suffering from economic discrimination, quite a few of these newspapers were forced to leave the media market. 9 non-governmental social and political periodical editions continue to face problems with distribution through 'Belpostha' and/or 'Sayuzdruk' at the present moment. (It is nearly a half of registered independent print mass media in Belarus.)

The situation is aggravated by the fact that since July 2015 all print and TV-radio broadcasting media distributors have been obliged [to register this activity at the Ministry of Information of Belarus](#). (The requirement doesn't concern the editorial subscription.)

Several independent periodicals that used to sell the major part of their print-runs through different trade companies and entrepreneurs have faced the reduction of their sales points, since a significant part of press distributors didn't agree to apply to the Ministry of Information of Belarus for the special permit.

PROSECUTION OF FREELANCE JOURNALISTS

7 journalists were prosecuted under administrative law for cooperation with foreign mass media without accreditation in July and August 2015. The media workers were fined 25 – 50 base amounts (around 250 – 500 EUR in equivalent) each.



On July 9, 2015, the Belarusian Association of Journalists sent appeals to the Supreme Court, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the General Prosecutor's Office, and the KGB of Belarus. [The BAJ leadership drew the public officials' attention](#) to the illegality and groundlessness of harassment of journalists for 'illegal production and distribution of mass media products' (article 22.9 of Belarus Code on Administrative Offenses). However, the governmental officials [failed to give concrete answers](#) and evaluate the situation.

The President of Belarus Aliaksandr Lukashenka [made a promise to look into the problem](#) during his interview to journalists of independent mass media at the beginning of August 2015. None of new cases

against freelance journalists were filed afterwards. However, the trials in process were continued, and the corresponding freelance reporters were subjected to administrative liability.

All in all, 28 journalists were fined for cooperation with foreign media in 2015. The overall sum of fines exceeded 146 million Belarusian rubles (approx. EUR 8,000 in equivalent). The freelance journalists were prosecuted for violating the mass media legislation (article 22.9, part 2 of Belarus Code on Administrative Offences) on the grounds of the mere appearance of their materials in the foreign media.

DETENTIONS OF JOURNALISTS

There were registered several cases of arbitrary detention of journalists in July – September 2015.

Thus, independent journalists Kustus Zhukouski and Natallia Kryvashei were detained in Rechytsa district (Homiel region) on July 16, 2015. They were preparing a video report about the outbreak of an unknown swine disease in the area. The same journalists were detained at the Central City District Department of Internal Affairs in Homiel on July 29, 2015. They were going to cover a picket of local residents there.



Katsiaryna Andreyeva, a freelance correspondence of 'Narodnaya Volya' newspaper was detained in Minsk on September 7, 2015. She was reporting from the deceived shareholders' picket at the Independence Palace. (The people invested their savings in the construction of real estate, but didn't get it.)



All the journalists were released without any police records within three hours, since the moment of their detention.

It is worth mentioning that the number of short-term detentions of journalists decreased in comparison with the previous years (11 arbitrary detentions within 9 months of 2015 to be compared to 29 arbitrary detentions in 2014).

STATISTICS, INDEXES, RATING LISTS

The Freedom House human rights defense organization published its 'Freedom of the Press 2015' annual report in September 2015. [Belarus was placed among 10 countries](#) and territories, where the situation with freedom of the press was the worst in the world. Apart from Belarus, the list included Iran, Cuba, the Crimea (as a territory), North Korea, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Equatorial Guinea, and Eritrea. According to the researchers, "in these settings, independent media are either nonexistent or barely able to operate, the press acts as a mouthpiece for the regime, citizens' access to unbiased information is severely limited, and dissent is crushed through imprisonment, torture, and other forms of repression."



The 'worst of the worst' position of Belarus on the global press freedom map has been explained by the continued pressure upon journalists, including the trials against freelance reporters for cooperation with foreign media and [the criminal prosecution in relation to a journalist Aliaksandr Alesin](#), the deterioration of media-related legislation, the blocking of access to a number of independent Web-resources within the year, the state monopoly on TV and radio broadcasting as well as the budget funding of state mass media in the country.



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