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BAJ represents the media sector, so the new domain name is [baj.media](http://baj.media)

E-NEWSLETTER

# MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

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*in 2023*





## **The Belarusian independent journalists, bloggers and media outlets faced increasing pressure and restrictions in 2023:**

- ycriminal prosecution of independent journalists and bloggers;
- a new wave of repression on the part of security forces, which began in March 2023 (apparently, it was related to the sabotage that occurred at a military airfield near Minsk on February 26th);
- the fight against “extremism” as a basis for censorship and persecution (e.g., access to the content of media outlets that continued to operate from abroad was blocked, and any cooperation with them was considered a manifestation of extremism);
- the application of administrative and legislative measures to restrict access to information and, in particular, the adoption of restrictive amendments to the law “On Mass Media”;
- the governmental policy to formalize and ideologize the activities of state-owned media as tools of propaganda and struggle with dissent in the conditions of the alleged “hybrid war against Belarus and Russia”.

Belarus dropped by four positions over the year in the Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, holding the 157th place among 180 countries of the world. It can be found among 31 countries rated as ‘very poor’ for press freedom, between Palestine and Nicaragua.

The position of Belarus in the Freedom on the Net annual global ranking list, compiled and published by a human rights organization Freedom House, has deteriorated, too. As a country lacking free Internet, it received only 25 points out of 100 possible, compared to 28 points a year before.



The independent media and civil society, which continued their activities from abroad, responded to pressure and repression with solidarity and mutual support. Thus, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) arranged the international *“Marathon of Solidarity”* with imprisoned journalists and took part in “We care!” online charity marathon of solidarity with the Belarusian political prisoners, arranged by influential independent mass media and bloggers. The sum of collected donations during the fundraising event exceeded EUR 574,000.

The BAJ’s activity in support of the independent Belarusian press was marked by the award of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, presented on November 14, 2023. At the same time, the BAJ was labeled by the KGB as an “extremist formation” last year. The BAJ’s website, pages on social media, and logo were arbitrarily recognized as “extremist materials.” Moreover, access to the BAJ’s website was prohibited in Russia on the grounds of military censorship.

Also, the Belarusian authorities seized the domain name of BAJ at the end of 2023 - beginning of 2024. Since the beginning of 2024, the Belarusian Association of Journalists has changed the address of its website to <https://baj.media/>, and its email address to [office@baj.media](mailto:office@baj.media) (for international mailing - [intercomm@baj.media](mailto:intercomm@baj.media)).

**Criminal prosecution.** 16 court verdicts were pronounced against journalists in criminal cases during the year of 2023. At least six other journalists were accused of committing criminal offences.

32 journalists *were in jail* at the end of 2023. The list of media workers included the heads of TUT.by News Portal Maryna Zolatava and Lyudmila Chekina, both

sentenced to 12 years in prison as well as a political scientist and editor of the “Belarusian Yearbook” periodical Valeryia Kastsiuhova, sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Criminal prosecution of bloggers continued. The first case of conviction in absentia in the framework of “special proceedings” was a case initiated under Article 130 (‘incitement of hatred’) and Article 203-1 (‘illegal collection and distribution of personal data’) of Belarus Criminal Code against five “administrators” of the “Black Book of Belarus” Telegram channel, which published information about governmental officials allegedly involved in the persecution of the opposition. All defendants, including Sports.ru co-founder Dzmitry Navosha, were sentenced in absentia to 12 years in prison. On May 3, 2023, a verdict was pronounced in absentia in the criminal case of well-known bloggers, who edited the ‘Nexta’ and ‘Belarus of the Brain’ Telegram channels. Stsiapan Putsila was sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment in a high security colony and Yan Rudzik was sentenced to 19 years in prison. Raman Pratasevich, who collaborated with the legal investigation, was sentenced to 8 years in a general regime prison colony and pardoned by Aliaksandr Lukashenka later.

Journalists were subjected to pressure and inhumane treatment in custody.



Reportedly, Siarhei Satsuk, Dzianis Ivashyn, and Andrzej Poczobut had problems obtaining medications and accessing qualified medical care in 2023. According to human rights activists, Ihar Losik went on a hunger strike for a long period of



time, while in the Navapolatsk colony. Then, he cut his hands and neck. And consequently, he was taken to hospital.

A blogger from Pinsk Mikalai Klimovich, 61, died in the prison colony 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’, while he had a very serious heart condition, which was known to the court.

### **The security forces kept up the pressure on independent journalists and the media.**

According to the BAJ’s [calculations](#), journalists were arrested 16 times on administrative charges in 2023. It was registered for the first time that a journalist’s property was seized in connection with a criminal charge. It happened to a media worker Ihar Kazmiarchak, who resides abroad.

All in all, it was registered that journalists were detained 46 times, and 34 searches were conducted in their homes and offices in 2023. Thus, in February-March 2023, the searches took place in the editorial offices of “Intex-press” (Baranavichy, Brest region), “Infa-Kuryer” (Slutsk, Minsk region), and “Rehiyanalnaya Gazeta” (Maladziechna, Minsk region) regional newspapers. They were accompanied by arrests, prosecution of employees and recognition of publications as “extremist materials.” Consequently, all these media outlets were forced to cease their activities.

Since June 2023, the authorities started ruining the ‘Ranak’ private TV and Radio company in the city of Svetlahorsk (Homiel region). They conducted a search in the editorial office and prosecuted nine of its employees on administrative charges. The TV company was recognized as an “extremist formation” later. Consequently, three of its journalists faced criminal charges.





The 'Ranak' employees' subscription to a local group on 'Odnoklassniki' social media was presented by the authorities as the official reason for the administrative prosecution. However, most likely, the real motive was the TV company's coverage of the accident at the Svetlahorsk pulp and cardboard mill, which happened on June 7th and led to the death of three factory workers.

The de-facto takeover of some popular local media resources took place in 2023. Correspondingly, their management was transferred to the odious 'Minskaya Pravda' media outlet with the purpose of publishing propaganda content. There were registered at least three cases of the kind, which affected operation of 'Our Native Land of Lahoysk' Telegram channel (Lahoysk, Minsk region), 'Stoubtsy City' Instagram channel (Stoubtsy, Minsk region), and 'Kraj.by' Website (Maladziechna, Minsk region).

**The authorities broadened the use of anti-extremism legislation, in order to restrict freedom of expression in the media and on the Web and prosecute any disloyalty.** [The Criminal Code](#) was supplemented with new "extremist" crimes. Thus, Article 289-1 introduced liability for "propaganda of terrorism

or its public justification" (max. punishment - 7 years in prison). Article 369-1 ("discrediting the Republic of Belarus") was supplemented with liability for disseminating knowingly false information, discrediting the armed forces of the Republic of Belarus, other troops and military formations, as well as paramilitary organizations of the Republic of Belarus.

Criminal charges were presented more frequently for any form of cooperation with independent media, labeled as "extremist formations", in 2023. According to a new trend, the ordinary citizens who commented on any socio-political events for journalists faced charges alongside the civil society representatives. Thus, Darya Losik, the wife of Radio Liberty employee Ihar Losik, was sentenced to two years in prison in January 2023 for an interview with the Belsat TV channel about her husband's situation.



The Belarusian Association of Journalists and 10 independent media outlets were labeled as "extremist formations" in Belarus in 2023. The number of affected media organizations increased twice in comparison with the previous year.

33 convicted media workers were included in the official list of "extremists" and 12 imprisoned media workers were included in the list of "terrorists" in 2023.

It was for the first time that a foreign media resource was included in the list of "extremist formations" by the Belarusian authorities last year. These were the Telegram, YouTube and TikTok accounts of the popular Ukrainian blogger Alexander Rykov (BalaganOff). He pays significant attention to the Belarusian issues in his videos.

As before, the publications of independent media were frequently included in the list of extremist materials. Thus, the Belarusian authorities started labeling publications from the print media, some of which had been published decades ago, as “extremist materials” alongside online in 2023. The same labeling happened to a number of personal pages of independent journalists on social media.

The number of cases of bringing people to administrative responsibility for the distribution of “extremist materials” (Article 19.11 of the Code of Administrative Offenses) has increased significantly since the beginning of 2023. It increased 1.7 times in the first half of the year compared to the same period in 2022 (at least 1274 vs 721 cases), since almost all leading information resources were “banned” by the regime in power. Thus, regardless of how old the publication is, practically anyone can be convicted for having it on the electronic device.

### **The mass media that continued to operate in Belarus, were subjected to various restrictions and censorship.**

Apart from the publications on political issues, they also affected critical expressions in relation to governmental authorities.

[A range of amendments](#) to the Belarus Law “On Mass Media” was adopted on June 30, 2023. The changes were justified by the need for an “adequate response to destructive processes in the media space” and further limited the media activities. In particular, there were introduced requirements for the operation of news aggregators, including the possibility of blocking them for distributing content from the banned websites. The list of grounds for stripping media outlets of their official registration and restricting the public access to Web-resources was further expanded. Also, the authorities introduced the



possibility of using symmetrical measures in response to “anti-Belarusian” attacks by foreign media and journalists, etc.

The Ministry of Information continued to act as a censor. It monitored Web-content, initiated the blocking of websites, and issued warnings. Thus, onliner.by, officelife.by and some other Web-resources were forced to remove certain content in order to receive permission for regaining public access to their websites. Official warnings were issued to the “Nasha TV” (“Our TV”) channel (Vitsebsk) as well as to the founders of the “BelMuzTV” and “Europa Plus TV” programs.

The “Vkontakte” social media (Russia) blocked the communities of “Zerkalo,” “Mediazone. Belarus,” and “Nasha Niva” independent publications as well as Belsat TV channel at the request of the Ministry of Information of Belarus in 2023.

**The existing tendency to ideologize the activities of state media and their reorientation exclusively to propaganda continued.** The trend also extended to the field of journalism education in 2023. Thus, the Journalism Department of the Belarusian State University enrolled students only to the subsidized places in 2023. Consequently, the number of first-year students of this department reduced by 20%. The department dean Aliaksei Bialayeu [stated](#) that there was no need in the students, who pay for their studies, since “the Journalism Department fulfills the state order and trains specialists for the state media.”

The Minister of Information Uladzimir Piartsou [called](#) the first-year students of the Journalism Department “fighting bayonets in the information war” during a meeting with them.

“Purges” continued among the state media workers at that. They were detained directly at their workplaces, subjected to administrative prosecution, and fired.

Thus, three employees of the Homiel Plus radio station were subjected to administrative arrest for up to 15 days for the alleged “distribution of extremist materials” in May 2023.

New international sanctions were introduced against the state-owned media and propagandists in 2023.

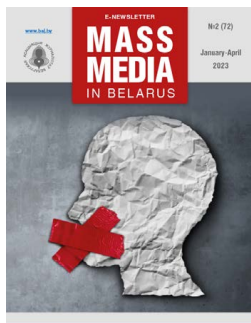
Thus, the Belarusian TV and Radio Company was excluded from the list of Olympic Games broadcasters for the term of 10 years. The TikTok social media blocked and then deleted the account of the chauvinistic propaganda newspaper “Minskaya Prauda”, which had about 70 thousand subscribers.



Ukraine imposed sanctions against odious propagandists Ryhor Azaronak, Ihar Tur, Aliaksandr Shpakouski as well as the CEO of STV channel Aliaksandr Aseyenka.

In connection with the adoption of another package of EU sanctions against Russia and Belarus, restrictive measures were introduced against several Belarusian propagandists, employed by the state TV broadcasters, including Kseniya Lebedzieva, Yauhien Pustavy, Anastasiya Benedzisiuk as well as Vadzim Hihin, who is the current chair of the “Vedy” (‘Knowledge’) society.

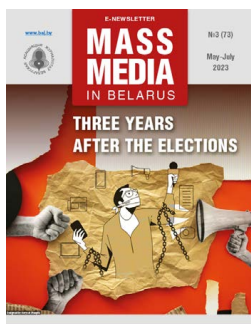
**More detailed information about the situation of Belarusian mass media in 2023 can be found under the following links:**



<https://baj.media/ru/analytics/elektronnyy-byulleten-smi-v-belarusi-no2-72>

<https://baj.media/en/analytics/e-newsletter-mass-media-belarus-no2-72>

<https://baj.media/be/analytics/elektronny-byulleten-smi-u-belarusi-no2-72>



<https://baj.media/ru/analytics/elektronnyy-byulleten-smi-v-belarusi-no3-73>

<https://baj.media/en/analytics/e-newsletter-mass-media-belarus-no3-73>

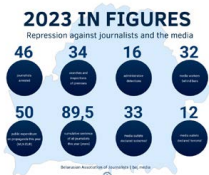
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<https://baj.media/be/analytics/lichby-goda-perasled-zhurnalistau-i-medyya-u-2023-godze>

<https://baj.media/en/analytics/figures-year-repression-media-and-journalists-belarus-2023>



**THE BELARUSIAN  
ASSOCIATION  
OF JOURNALISTS**

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