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# Media in Belarus: on Brink of Breakthrough

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In the last 15 years Belarus has moved steadily down the world rankings as regards freedom of expression and other civil liberties. At the same time, it was one of the world's fastest growing economies and had one of the highest standards of living in the CIS, nearing the level of some European countries. The country was influenced by the information technology boom continuing in the developed countries and the development of mass communications based on new technologies and traditional media, including newspapers. Not only have restrictions on the media had subjective effects, they have also slowed the development of Belarus as a European nation.

## Media law: lawlessness and censorship

As a result of a study of media laws in the former Soviet republics, the Moscow-based Institute of Media Law Issues (IMLI) ranked Belarus 13<sup>th</sup> in media freedom in a report released at the end

of 2006. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are the only two countries where the media are less free than in Belarus, according to the ranking.

The IMLI analyzed the following aspects to determine a degree of media freedom — constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, a constitutional ban on censorship, national laws governing the media, laws regarding access to information, television broadcasting and public television, media registration procedures, criminal prosecution for defaming or slandering individuals, especially officials and the president etc., according to a report posted by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) on January 3, 2007.

Apart from the first two points (the Belarusian constitution bans media censorship), the analysis of all other aspects proved the restrictive nature of Belarusian laws. The country has laws that make it a crime to defame or dishonour officials. The legislation was used to punish two Hrodna-based journalists, Mikoła Markievič and Pavał Mažejka, with two years and six months “of re-

stricted freedom” for “defaming and dishonouring” the Belarusian leader in an article seized by the police before being printed in the newspaper *Pahonia*.

Even guarantees declared by the constitution and the media law are not respected in practice. For instance, Belarus' state-run and private media are declared equal, including in terms of access to information, but in fact state media outlets enjoy “more equal rights” than the private ones.

The Ministry of Information closed down two newspapers, *Navinki* and *Molodyozhny Prospekt*, in 2005, said BAJ. The Belarusian Supreme Economic Court on 17 March 2006 ordered the closure of the *Zhoda* weekly, the newspaper of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party “Hramada” over reprinted Mohammad cartoons. *BDG. Delovaya Gazeta* stopped coming out in print the same year and is available online ([www.bdg.by](http://www.bdg.by)) only. The weekly was not banned officially, but damages imposed by courts for alleged libel against officials of various levels undermined its financial position. Financial constraints forced another weekly, *Salidarnasć* ([www.gazetaby.com](http://www.gazetaby.com)), to abandon its print version and go online. In June, Navapolack-based *Chimik* suspended

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publication six months after state-run retail and subscription distribution monopolies Bielsajuzdruk and Bielposhta refused to renew contracts with the bi-weekly. The authorities also closed down a local newspaper in Barysau, while a weekly in Vaukavysk shut down after its editor asked for political asylum in Ukraine saying he and his newspaper had been harassed by authorities in Belarus.

One should not be deceived by the small number of newspapers closed down in the last two years. Few critical newspapers survived the “purges” carried out by the authorities in the run-up to the 2004 parliamentary election and referendum that enabled President Alaksandr Łukašenka to run for reelection as many times as he wants.

In the eight months before the referendum, the total number of registered periodicals dropped by 160, according to an article by A. Tamkovič published under the headline “Holidays Become Politics” in the 48-49<sup>th</sup> issue of BAJ’s *Abažur* magazine. During that election, the authorities suspended 12 periodicals with a total circulation of 100,000 copies.

In 2006, the Ministry of Information suspended the *Arche* magazine for three months. The intellectual periodical had a circulation of 1,100 copies.

A few years before, the government introduced the post of deputy chairpersons responsible for ideology in regional, city and district executive committees. A new regulation was enacted requiring the media to obtain permission from local authorities for renting an office at a particular address. The regulation, which runs counter to the Media Law, gives deputy chairpersons for ideology powers to decide the fate of independent periodicals.

For instance, the noose on *Nasha Niva* tightened when the ideology chief of the Minsk City Executive Committee declared that he considered the presence of the 100-year-old paper’s in Minsk “inexpedient”.

## Harassment of journalists and public reaction; ban on independent polls

The draconian media legislation and numerous human rights abuses reported by human rights groups in Belarus are accompanied by large-scale harassment of journalists. In an unprecedented crackdown, authorities arrested more than 40 journalists during a week of protests following Łukašenka’s reelection for a third consecutive presidential term in March 2006, according to BAJ. The journalists, who were sentenced to jail terms of up to 15 days, included Aleksandr Podrobinek, editor-in-chief of Russia’s *Prima News* wire service (15 days in jail); Andrzej Pisalnik of the newspaper *Głos znad Niemna na uchodźstwie* (12 days); Weronika Samolińska of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (10 days); Georgian public television journalists, Canadian freelancer Frederic Lavoie who worked without accreditation with the foreign ministry; and *Nasha Niva* editor-in-chief Andrej Dyńko (10 days).

Later, a city official used the jailing of Dyńko, convicted like many other journalists on a trumped-up charge of swearing, as a pretext to deny his weekly formal approval of his office address.

It should be noted that many Minsk residents expressed solidarity with embattled independent newspapers (for in-

stance, a series of flash-mob protests took place in the capital and other cities in support of *Nasha Niva*). Some opposition protesters could not control their anger at state television journalists for biased reporting. The author of this article saw angry youths hurling snowballs at a cameraman of the *ANT* television channel when he was filming outside Minsk’s Akrescina prison, in which arrested protesters and journalists were held.

The tent-camp demonstration on Kastryčnickaja Square caused deep divisions in society because many people did not support the protesters. Even some parents and relatives, who brought parcels for young prisoners, did not share their political views. But their favourable attitude to Belarusian state television networks, *BT* and *ANT* in particular, gave way to aversion due to the biased coverage and also because they were waiting outside the prison wall for hours trying to find out news about their loved ones or pass things on for prisoners, while state television journalists enjoyed free access to prison premises. To many television viewers *BT* symbolized lies, bias and immorality at the time. State television journalists are suspected of having planted empty liquor bottles, pornographic magazines and syringes allegedly used for injecting illicit drugs to humiliate and incriminate opposition activists in their report from Kastryčnickaja Square filmed when police tore down the protesters’ tent camp.

A poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) a year before this protest found that an overwhelming majority of Belarusians (85.7 percent) rely on Belarusian state television for news about the country. Much fewer respondents relied on independent and Russian media for information. Nearly 63 percent of respondents said that Belarus’ state-run media were the most credible source of information. The pollster noted a rise in the credibility of the media that disseminated official information, while



Anatol Klaččuk

**Žanna Litvina, head of the Belarusian Association of Journalists.**



Andrej Lankievič

**Chiefs of presidential ideology services visit an exhibition.**

*ANT* was found to be the nation's most watched television channel, according to a story posted on [www.soyuz.by](http://www.soyuz.by) on May 17, 2005.

Surveys conducted by the IISEPS and Novak, another independent pollster, in the late 1990s and early 2000s always showed that a majority of Belarusians considered state media more credible than independent outlets.

Three factors may help explain the findings.

First, Belarus' sociology is in crisis. It is almost impossible to conduct an independent survey because pollsters need to obtain permission from the authorities. The IISEPS was outlawed in Belarus and forced to register in Lithuania to continue operation. The head of the institute was threatened criminal prosecution after he published results of polls conducted in the country without official permission.

Second, polls conducted under the conditions of mistrust, fear, harassment of dissidents, cannot be accurate. Some respondents may not reveal that they read and trust the independent media for fear of repercussions. The fear factor affects the results of opinion polls.

Third, because of a short supply (of unbiased, timely and many-sided information) the demand for such information is also limited. Most Belarusians do not have access to independent newspapers and many are unaware of their existence.

The circulation of *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, a newspaper founded by the Presidential Administration, exceeds 500,000 copies. This is five times the circulation of all independent newspapers taken together. However, there is a big difference between the circulation and readership. Many copies of *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* are sold through

forced subscription and people do not read them. The newspaper *Pravda* was marketed the same way in the Soviet Union. Before elections, *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* prints millions of copies of special issues delivered to nearly all adult residents of the country.

The Presidential Administration's newspaper like many other state periodicals — *Narodnaja Hazeta*, *Respublika*, *Znanyia i Yunisti* etc. — are subsidized by the government, which supplies them with cheap newsprint, provides equipment and electricity at discounted rates, and offers high salaries and social security benefits to journalists.

Naturally, state newspapers never risk confiscation, whereas *Narodnaja vola* and *Tovarishch* had entire print runs seized in the run-up to the 2006 presidential election.

Well-paid and socially secure as they are, state media journalists are unlike-

ly to write something that may put their job, status and privileges at risk. They perform functions that were assigned to censors in the Soviet Union. They engage in self-censorship. Readers will never come across manifestations of freethinking or a message concealed by Aesopisms in state-controlled newspapers. One needs to know culture to write an Aesopian message. In Belarus, a good command of Belarusian language, knowledge of Belarusian history and culture is taken with suspicion and treated as a sign of disloyalty for the authorities and even dissent.

The Belarusian-language independent newspaper, *Nasha Niva*, found itself on the brink of closure when it was celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

### Independent distribution networks and underground printing

Guaranteed access to services of Bielposhta, a state postal company that delivers newspapers to subscribers, and Bielsajuzdruk, another state-run company selling newspapers through kiosks and newsstands across the country, gives state-controlled newspapers another advantage over the independent ones. The government has been using its monopoly over the distribution systems to separate independent newspapers from their readers. Bielposhta removed a range of private periodicals from its subscription catalogue and Bielsajuzdruk refused to sell independent newspapers through its retail chain.

At the end of 2006, House of Representatives member Valancina Kačan asked the Ministry of Communications to explain the reasons for the expulsion of the Brest-based weekly *Brestsky Kurier* from the local Bielposhta subsidiary's subscription catalogue for 2007. In her reply Deputy Communications Minister N. Hauryłava claimed that the weekly "failed to meet fully its contractual obligations causing additional financial and labour losses



The independent BelSat TV is expected with hope.

to the postal service" in 2006, according to BAJ. Mikalaj Alaksandrau, editor-in-chief of *Brestsky Kurier*, denied the charge in an interview with the BAJ monitoring service. "Last year just like during the 16 years of the newspaper's existence, the *Brestsky Kurier* editorial staff has not received a single complaint from the postal service management about the newspaper's failure to meet its contractual obligations," he said.

Bielposhta and Bielsajuzdruk refuse to distribute many local (*Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni*, *Chinik*, *Borisovskiye Novosti*, *Vitebskiy Kurier* and other) and national (*Zhoda*, *Nasha Niva*) newspapers. Critical periodicals were deleted from subscription catalogues on far-fetched grounds, while some newspapers were unable to obtain office address approval from local authorities.

On the other hand, periodicals that distance themselves from social and political issues are thriving (the number of papers that carry only crosswords, puzzles and classified ads has been growing in Belarus in the last few years).

There are some exceptions. For instance, the newspaper *Intex Press* in Baranavichy earns profits from advertising, but it also runs news about various local developments presented in a balanced way to attract readers. *Intex Press* has established its own retail distribution and subscription network.

*Nasha Niva* relies on the services of volunteers to deliver newspapers to subscribers. After losing access to the distribution networks, the weekly remains afloat thanks to private donations from its readers.

Some periodicals unregistered with the Ministry of Information also rely on alternative distribution networks, for instance *Svaboda*, formerly known as *Tut i Ciapier*, which targets areas where other independent newspapers are not available. The main problem of this project is insufficient funding. With a small circulation distributed in rural areas, the newspaper's presence is negligible even in the underdeveloped Belarusian print media market. The legislation currently in force carries penalties under the Administrative Offences and Criminal Codes for the sale of unregistered periodicals.

In any case, there is the need to find a way to print and distribute underground newspapers because there is no other option under the present conditions in Belarus.

### Uncensored radio stations and other alternatives

Radio stations operate in almost as difficult conditions as newspapers. In 2005 alone, the Ministry of Information issued 18 official warnings to Belarusian FM stations. At present, 30 FM stations broadcast in Belarus, 14 of them are based in the capital.

In 2005, the government limited broadcasting of foreign music to 25 per cent of the total number of aired tracks. In practice, however, the measure has not helped promote Belarusian music. The Ministry of Information approved a list of performers recommended for broadcasting, which is equivalent to music censorship.

In 2006, members of the staff of the *Novaje Radyjo* FM station, founded by the government-controlled Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, declared a strike on air in protest of the dismissal of the station's editor-in-chief. Not a single other station expressed solidarity with *Novaje Radyjo* during the protest that lasted for several hours. The FM station was purged of the rebellious personnel with the help of Security Council



representatives and resumed broadcasting in a few days.

Clearly, there is no alternative to FM stations in Belarus because FM is better adapted than AM to the transmission of quality audio signals, therefore it is more popular with modern radio listeners.

Taking into account the advantages of FM broadcasting, a new radio station, *European Radio for Belarus (ERB)*, was established in Poland. However, *ERB* like another rival station based in Poland, *Radio Racyja*, can be received in Minsk only in the medium-wave band in the early morning hours.

When *ERB* went on the air in March 2006, it really made a difference. *Radio Liberty*, also known as “crisis radio”, was often second to *ERB* in the coverage of the post-election protests in Minsk because the new station was broadcast-

ing more live reports making listeners feel as if they were present at the scene. Many listeners liked the emotional live reports by Kacia Zołatava from Kastryčnickaja Square. However, this turned out to be an episode rather than the rule in the operation of *ERB*.

*ERB*'s FM signal can be received in areas located close to the Belarusian-Polish border.

As for the much-talked-of television channel for Belarus, it is difficult to assess its chances of success.

Like *European Radio for Belarus*, the television project has been conceived in an atmosphere of secrecy. On the one hand, the secrecy is justified by security considerations, while on the other the lack of transparency makes it difficult for coordinators to avoid making the same mistakes as the organizers of radio

projects. For instance, only large corporations were allowed to submit bids for a contract to produce a radio program for Belarus. *RTVi*, which won the contract thanks to its connections in the media market, used the project for its own ends. The company offered jobs and provided training for Belarusian radio journalists, which is good. But what about Belarusian listeners for whom the new radio program was created?

This is why the questions to be answered before the television project gets off the ground should include the following: How many people will be able to watch it and how good will the channel's reception in Belarus be? Should it target a few dozen thousand households that have satellite dishes (although authorities in Iran forced the owners to remove satellite dishes), or a broader au-



photo.bymedia.net

Internet has become the only source of alternative information for many.

dience? Will this channel be informative and at the same time attractive to Belarusian viewers?

### **Instead of conclusion**

This article does not cover the Internet, an area free of censorship in Belarus. The Internet in general and blogs in par-

ticular have been growing rapidly in the past year. This is a sign that the authorities cannot take preemptive action and are losing in the field of new technologies all the time. It is necessary to take advantage of this fact in order to prepare for a breakthrough in media freedom in Belarus.

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