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MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

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SPECIAL ISSUE

MASS MEDIA OF BELARUS DURING COVID-19 HEALTH CRISIS



The KGB should be tougher here, and the police, and the Ministry of Information should monitor everyone... And they shouldn't be afraid that we may be accused of some undemocratic actions. It will be over one day, and we will see, who has been escalating the psychosis.

[Aliaksandr Lukashenka,](#)
[President of Belarus](#)



Journalists should not be intimidated, prosecuted or detained for reporting on issues of public interest and on the COVID-19 situation. In Belarus, like in all countries, journalists have a key role to play in reporting on the pandemic and in providing important information to the public.

[Harlem Désir, the OSCE Representative](#)
[on Freedom of the Media](#)



Belarus appeared among the few European countries that refused to announce a lock-down in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. But for that, the government rejected the seriousness of this deadly disease for a long period of time. The President of Belarus Aliaksandr Lukashenka called the pandemic a ‘psychosis’ and ‘infodemia’ and [called on the Ministry of Information and law enforcement agencies to fight the spread of ‘hype’ on the subject of coronavirus.](#)

On March 21, A. Lukashenka [publicly appealed to Valery Vakulchyk, the chairman of the State Security Committee of Belarus](#) to deal with ‘the villains who spread fakes’ (about deaths related to COVID-19): ‘It is enough to look at it. We need to check carefully all these sites and channels.’

Consequently, an investigative journalist Siarhei Satsuk was detained in four days after the President’s appeal, on March 25, 2020. He is the editor of Yezhednevnik Private Online Web-resource. [The ‘Reporters without Borders’ international organization connected the journalist’s detention](#) with his open questioning of ‘Belarusian government’s healthcare policies.’

Criminal Investigation against Siarhei Satsuk

Siarhei Satsuk is a well-known journalist and editor, who deals with investigative journalism. One of his high-profile investigations about



corruption in the Health Care system of Belarus appeared as a series of publications in the 'Yezhednevnik' online edition. A number of high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Health Care were later convicted of corruption. In August 2019, Siarhei Satsuk stated in his interview to the BelaPAN News Agency that he had received threats because of his journalistic activity.

Following the editor's detention, [his house and the office of 'Yezhednevnik' online edition were searched](#). The office equipment and documents were seized.

[The State Controlling Committee commented](#) on the detention only 6 days later, accusing the journalist of receiving a large bribe 'for preparing and posting on his website an article that contained compromising information about the legal entity's competitors.'

S. Satsuk's detention and the criminal case against him provoked serious criticism from the Belarusian and international community. [Harlem Désir, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media](#) and [the Belarusian Association of Journalists](#) linked the filing of a criminal case against S. Satsuk with his previous materials on corruption in the Belarusian health care sector. The demand to release the investigative journalist was also [disseminated by](#)



[the European Parliament's Delegation on relations with Belarus](#), the Belarusian [human rights organizations](#), [the International Federation of Journalists](#) and the [European Federation of Journalists](#), as well as [the Steering Committee](#) of the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

[The Public Prosecutor General of Belarus canceled the decision](#) to detain the editor of 'Yezhednevnik' online edition Siarhei Satsuk on the 10th day since he had been taken into custody.

However, the criminal case against him hasn't been dismissed yet.

Administrative Prosecution of 'Media Palessie' Online Edition

On April 6, [the Ministry of Information of Belarus issued an official warning](#) in the written form to the owner of 'Media-Palessie' Web-site ([Media-polesye.by](#)) in connection with a publication about COVID-19 epidemic development in the region that appeared on the online Web-resource.

The Ministry of Information noted that 'it was found during the inspection, which had been conducted jointly with Brest Regional Executive Committee, that the publication contained inaccurate information about a patient's death, and that the spread of this information could harm the state and public interests.'

The editorial acknowledged the mistake, but noted that the information was corrected within 15 minutes after its appearance on the Web-site and that neither the patient, nor his family expressed any claims.

However, a few days later a police inspector of Luninets District Department of Internal Affairs initiated administrative proceedings in this case. He accused the 'Media-Palesie' editorial of publishing information on the website that caused damage to the national interests of the Republic of Belarus and 'contributed to the escalation of social tensions and panic in the society as well as led to mass disinformation of the population.'

→ *It should be mentioned in this respect that the COVID-19 epidemic situation is very complicated in the area. Moreover, [the 'Media-Palesie' journalist Vasil Matskevich passed away with the symptoms, which were similar to the COVID-19 symptoms, lately. The COVID-19 tests were negative at that.](#)*

Nevertheless, on May 13, [Luninets District Court fined the 'Media-Palesie' Web-site editorial 120 base](#) amounts that equals around EUR 1 250, according to the official exchange rate of the National



Bank of Belarus. The media outlet was charged for 'Dissemination of information by the media, which is banned for dissemination in the media' (article 22.9, part 3-1 of Belarus Code of Administrative Offenses).

According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists,

it was the first case, when the legal norm was applied. It was introduced to the Code of Administrative Offenses in 2018.

Restriction of Media Access to Information about Epidemiological Situation

These events took place against the background of widespread refusals of official authorities to provide journalists with information about the real epidemiological situation in Belarus.

On March 30, [the Belarusian Association of Journalists published a statement](#) about the necessity of providing up-to-date and truthful information about the COVID-19 epidemic development in the country.

The BAJ statement was supported by [TUT.BY, which is apparently the largest online Web-resource of Belarus](#), the [BelaPAN News Agency](#) and [Naviny.by Web-site](#).

However, these appeals remained unheard. The last briefing of the Ministry of Health Care for journalists, where they could pose questions to the ministerial officials, took place on April 17, 2020. As of the end of May 2020, none of such events with an open dialogue have been held again. The Ministry of Health Care limited itself to reading a press release without the opportunity for journalists

to ask their questions during the following briefing a week later. Consequently, the Ministry started providing information through its press-releases only.





**THE BELARUSIAN
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Publisher:
Belarusian Association
of Journalists (BAJ)
Kalvariyskaya Str., 16-265,
220004, Minsk, BELARUS

Phone/Fax:
(+375 17) 317-56-85.
E-mail: press@baj.by
Web: www.baj.by

Contact:
Mr. Andrei Bastunets,
BAJ Chairperson