

Belarusian Association of Journalists

**Mass Media in Belarus
2021**

2022

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CONDITIONS FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA SECTOR ACTIVITY IN 2021

Despite the harsh suppression of peaceful protests after the presidential election in 2020 and the officially declared ‘stabilization’ of internal situation in Belarus, the pressure on independent media and civil society became more intense in the country in 2021. The repressions against non-state journalists and media became systemic. And they were aimed at the actual destruction of independent media sector in Belarus.

Consequently, a lot of independent media outlets were forced to take a decision on relocation and continuation of their activity from abroad. At the same time, they remain a part of the unified media sector of Belarus.

Also, the activities of Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) in defense of journalists’ rights were hampered by the pressure on the part of official authorities. In February and July 2021, the BAJ office in Minsk and the apartments of its employees were searched. The searches were accompanied by the seizure of documents and technical equipment, the arrest of the BAJ office and bank accounts. Following a lawsuit filed by the Ministry of Justice of Belarus, the Supreme Court of Belarus liquidated the Belarusian Association of Journalists Public Association in August 2021. The BAJ was liquidated among several hundred other non-governmental organizations named by the authorities as a “tumor that needs to be eliminated”.

Quite a few of BAJ leaders and employees were forced to leave the country for security reasons as well as in order to continue their activity.

CHANGES IN LEGISLATION

Interference in the journalists’ work by law enforcement agencies was accompanied by the tightening of legal regulation of mass media and journalists’ activity.

A range of legislative changes in 2021 were aimed at simplifying the interference of the state in the journalists’ and media work as well as at the strengthening responsibility for statements on the Web.

The year of 2021 had a record number of legislative changes in Belarus. Quite a few of them affected the media workers’ activity in the country.

A new edition of the **Code of Administrative Offences** came into force on **March 1, 2021**.

The article on 'Defamation' was excluded from the Code of Administrative Offenses (Article 9.2 of the previous edition). However, defamation is prosecuted criminally nowadays (Article 188 of the Criminal Code). A person may be found guilty of 'spreading knowingly false information that defames another person in a public speech, or in a printed or publicly displayed work, or in mass media, or in the information posted on the global computer network of the Internet, or other public telecommunications network or the dedicated telecommunications network, or contains an accusation of committing a serious or particularly serious crime.'

The maximum fine for an insult (Article 10.2) increased from 20 to 30 base amounts. This article was supplemented by the second part: 'Defamation in a public speech, or in a printed or publicly displayed work, or in mass media, or in a post disseminated on the global computer network of the Internet, or other public telecommunications network, or dedicated telecommunications network entails the imposition of a fine in the amount of ten to two hundred base amounts, or community service, or administrative arrest [for individuals], and the imposition of a fine in the amount of thirty to two hundred base amounts on a legal entity.'

The introduction of the second part is explained by the deletion of Article 189 'Insult' from the new edition of the Criminal Code. The excluded article provided for the criminal punishment in the form of a fine, or correctional labor for the term of up to two years, or arrest, or restriction of freedom for the term of up to three years. Thus, a penalty for legal entities was introduced (in the form of a fine). Accordingly, the editorial teams of mass media and the owners of Internet resources that published offensive statements may be prosecuted on these charges.

Article 23.5 (violation of media law) underwent several changes in 2021. Fines were reduced for illegal restriction of freedom of mass information, violation of the specified procedure for the mandatory sending of free copies of periodicals, as well as 'illegal production and (or) distribution of mass media products.' (It is according to this legal norm that since 2014 freelance journalists who cooperate with foreign media without accreditation have been fined).

The liability for violation of the specified procedure for distribution of erotic publications and the procedure for publishing a rebuttal by mass media was excluded from the law. The third part of the article, which envisaged responsibility for 'violation of mass media law by a media outlet repeatedly within one year after the issuance of a written warning against it', was excluded from the law as well.

Article 23.7 (violation of personal data protection legislation) defined liability in the form of fines for illegal collection, processing, storage or transfer of personal data. A person who learned the personal data in connection with his / her professional activity and collected it illegally may be fined four to one hundred base amounts. Deliberate illegal

distribution of personal data entails the imposition of a fine of up to two hundred base amounts.

Article 24.23 (violation of the order of organizing or holding mass events) is not directly related to journalists' activities. However, it was actively used to prosecute those of them, who covered mass events in 2020.

Contrary to the tendency to decrease fines for individuals, which is observed in most other articles of the new edition of the Code of Administrative Offenses, the maximum fine for violation of the specified procedure for holding a mass event as well as for public calls to organize or hold a mass event in violation of the specified procedure for their arrangement or holding was increased more than three times – from 30 to 100 base amounts and up to 200 base amounts, in case of repeated prosecution within a year.

Amendments to the Criminal Code were introduced three times in 2021. Corresponding laws were adopted on **January 6, 2021**, **May 26, 2021**, and **December 14, 2021**.

Some of them were aimed at restricting freedom of speech and criminalizing the activities of mass media, journalists and other media agents. Such changes significantly increased the liability for defamation crimes and the expanded list of crimes related to the concept of "extremism". Practically all articles of this kind provide for the possibility to impose punishment in the form of deprivation of liberty. A person may be deprived of liberty regardless of the severity of the committed action and the presence of calls for violence in some cases.

Article 198-1 (violation of mass media law) was added to the Criminal Code. It envisages responsibility for the owners of Internet resources, which are not registered as mass media, for the dissemination of prohibited information. (The list of prohibited information is open and very long.) In case of repeated violation of the law, the Website owner may be sentenced to imprisonment for the term of up to two years.

The maximum terms of imprisonment under Article 361 (calls for restrictive measures (sanctions), other actions aimed at harming the national security of the Republic of Belarus) were significantly increased – from three to six / ten years; and up to twelve years in case of performing these actions with the use of mass media or the Internet.

The new version of Article 369-3 (public calls to organize or hold an illegal assembly, gathering, outdoor march, rally or picketing or involvement of individuals in participation in such mass events) increased the maximum punishment for conducting these actions, if they entailed serious consequences, – from three to five years of imprisonment.

Severe criminal responsibility in the form of restriction of liberty or imprisonment was introduced in 2021 for new kinds of illegal actions that can foster in any way the 'extremist' activities, including 'creation of or participation in an extremist formation' (Article 361-1, up to 10 years in prison), 'funding of extremist activities' (Article 361-2, up to 8 years in prison), and 'facilitation of extremist activities' (Article 361-4, up to 7

years in prison). These legal norms potentially create the danger of punishment for the participation and financing of media organizations recognized as extremist formations.

The ban on 'discrediting the Republic of Belarus' envisaged by Article 369-1 was significantly expanded in 2021. It used to refer to the transmission of knowingly false information to foreign entities earlier. Hence, the new version of the article defines responsibility for disseminating information about "political, economic, social, military or international situation of the Republic of Belarus, the legal status of citizens in the Republic of Belarus, the activities of governmental bodies" to the undefined circle of individuals in any public form, including the mass media, if such statements are aimed at causing 'substantial damage to the state or public interests.' At the same time, the criminal liability under this article was increased to up to four years of imprisonment.

Criminal liability for defamatory statements was increased. Defamation (Article 188) entailed a maximum penalty of imprisonment for the term of up to three years. The penalty for slandering the president (Article 367) and insulting the president (Article 368) was increased to up to six and five years in prison respectively.

Article 375-1 on the illegal collection or receipt of information constituting state secrets with the purpose of their distribution was included in the Criminal Code. This article provides for excessive sanctions (up to five years of imprisonment) for the unspecified circle of individuals, that is, including journalists, although their professional duties are not related to the obligation to keep such secrets confidential.

On March 25, the resolution of the Operational Analytical Center under the President of the Republic of Belarus, the Ministry of Communications and Informatization of the Republic of Belarus and the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus No. 2/6/2 was published. It introduced the concept of "a copy of a Web-resource". Accordingly, it is 'a Web-resource similar to the degree of confusion with another Web-resource with the restricted public access.' The Ministry of Information was granted the right to send a message to the State Telecommunications Inspectorate of the Ministry of Communications 'to include the corresponding identifier of the Web-resource in the list of Web-resources with restricted access.'

On May 7, the law "On the Protection of Personal Data" was adopted. Most of its provisions came into force six months after its adoption, i.e., in November 2021. The new law contains the definitions of personal data and other basic concepts, the grounds for processing personal data, the mechanism of prosecution for violation of the rules of their handling, etc.

According to Article 6, the consent of the subject of personal data to the processing of personal data is not required, among other, 'for the purposes of carrying out a journalist's legal professional activity and (or) the activities of a mass media and an organization that carries out publishing activities aimed at protecting the public interest, which represents the need of the society to identify and disclose information about threats to national security, public order, public health and the environment, information that affects the performance of duties by responsible governmental officials and public

figures, except for the cases envisaged by the civil procedural law, the economic procedural law, the criminal-procedural legislation, as well as the legislation defining the order of the administrative process.'

This exception is provided only for journalists in a narrow interpretation of the law 'On mass media'. It does not apply to employees of online resources who are not registered as media outlets, freelance journalists, bloggers, and investigative reporting activists, who are at risk of being brought to administrative and criminal responsibility, especially taking into consideration the fact that employees of internal affairs bodies are authorized to draft protocols on administrative cases about violations of personal data processing rules.

The law '**On the Amendment of Laws on the Issues of Counteraction to Extremism**' came into force on **June 16, 2021**. It introduced changes to the Civil Procedural Code of the Republic of Belarus and to the law 'On Countering Extremism'.

Article 158 part 2 of the Civil Procedural Code of the Republic of Belarus established a special deadline of one month maximum for the accelerated consideration of cases on the recognition of an organization as extremist, its liquidation, prohibition of the use of its symbols and paraphernalia, as well as recognition of its symbols and paraphernalia as well as information products as extremist materials.

The new version of the law 'On the Issues of Counteraction to Extremism' broadened significantly the notion of 'extremism' that created new possibilities of persecution for expression of opinion. In particular, the following kinds of 'extremist activity' were included into the list:

- insulting or discrediting public authorities or governmental officials;
- dissemination of knowingly false information about the political, economic, social, military or international state of the Republic of Belarus;
- illegal actions against public order and public morality, the order of government, life and health, personal freedom, honor and dignity, as well as the property, committed in order to incite hostility.

Certain definitions were amended in the new version of the law. Particularly, not only the media production that contains extremist calls and promotes extremist activity is regarded as 'extremist materials', but also the media production that 'fosters' extremist activities and contains 'extremist symbols and attributes' is regarded as 'extremist'. Moreover, there was broadened the list of forms, in which the 'extremist materials' can exist. Thus, it was de-facto banned to publish the portraits of people, who had been punished on the 'extremism' charges, in mass media.

There appeared the notion of 'an extremist formation (grouping)' in the law as 'a group of citizens that indulges in committing extremist activities or fosters extremist activities or acknowledges the possibility of applying them in their work or finances extremist activities'. Unlike an 'extremist organization', its existence is determined out of court by the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the KGB.

On June 16, a new law '**On preventing the rehabilitation of Nazism**' came into force. It affected the right to freedom of speech. Similar to the previously adopted law '**On counteraction to extremism**', it defines 'rehabilitation of Nazism as public actions that are manifested in the justification of the ideology (doctrine) and practice of Nazism, as well as persons or organizations associated with Nazi crimes; approving or denying crimes against the peace and security of humanity, war crimes and other crimes. Among other, it was supplemented by the notion of heroization of Nazi criminals and their aides,' i.e., their deliberate glorification, as well as the praise of crimes committed by them.

The subjects, dealing with counteraction to rehabilitation of Nazism, including the Ministry of Information, as well as the scope of their competence in the field were defined by the law.

The coordination of activities to be implemented by the specified subjects was entrusted to the internal affairs bodies, which are responsible for the mandatory monitoring of the implementation of current legislation in terms of preventing the rehabilitation of Nazism by founders and editors of mass media, owners of Web-resources, journalists, and authors of news reports and materials.

The new law provides for measures to counter the rehabilitation of Nazism, including the issuance of official warnings and writs as well as suspension, prohibition of activity, and liquidation of an extremist organization. The procedure for applying such measures is determined in accordance with the legislation on counteraction to extremism.

On June 19, amendments to the law '**On Internal Affairs Bodies of the Republic of Belarus**' came into force. Accordingly, the employees of internal affairs bodies were given the right to prohibit citizens from taking video footage and photos as well as filming (Article 25).

On June 26, the law '**On Amendments to the Laws on Mass Media**' came into force. It related to the transformation of the law '**On Mass Media**'.

The new law introduced additional restrictions on establishment and registration of Belarusian and foreign mass media as well as on distribution of their media production.

Thus, the person who previously acted as a member of an organization recognized as extremist cannot act as the founder of a media outlet within five years from the date of such recognition. Also, the person that acted as the owner of a Web-resource or online publication, blocked for public access, following a corresponding decision, cannot act as the founder of a media outlet within three years from the date of the decision (Article 10).

There were introduced new reasons for refusal of state registration:

- the name of media outlet coincides or is similar to the degree of confusion with the name of the mass media, which activity has been terminated by a corresponding decision;

- the name of the Web-periodical does not match the domain name of the Web-resource (Article 15).

The Ministry of Information can issue a written warning to a media outlet for the failure to present a hyperlink to the original source of published information, if the source doesn't stipulate other conditions for distributing the information, which has been posted for public access (Article 49).

The decision of Interdepartmental Commission on Information Security on the presence of information messages and (or) materials in the foreign mass media production, which may harm the national interests of the Republic of Belarus, if disseminated, became a legal ground for denial to issue a permit for distribution of foreign mass media production (Article 17), termination of mass media production (Article 51), and restriction of access to the Web-resource (Article 51-1).

If earlier the mass media release could be terminated by a court decision only, the amendments to the Mass Media Law provided for the possibility of such termination of media activity by decision of the Ministry of Information in case of issuing two or more written warnings or by the decision of Interdepartmental Commission on Information Security (Article 51).

The list of journalists' responsibilities was broadened (Article 34). Accordingly, it became inadmissible to collect information 'for the benefit of a third party, including a legal entity that is not a media outlet'. (Thus a journalist cannot combine work in several media if he or she is an employee of one of them.)

There were introduced grounds for depriving a journalist of accreditation, such as violation of the accreditation procedure, dissemination of information that does not correspond to reality and defames business reputation of the accrediting body, as well as committing any purposeful illegal actions during the implementation of professional activities (Article 35).

The list of information that is prohibited for distribution has been broadened by the law (Article 38). In particular, the law banned publication of results of unofficial opinion polls concerning the socio-political situation, referendums and elections. (In practice, it means the impossibility of conducting street polls on political topics.)

According to the new wording of Article 51-1, the restriction of access to a Web-resource or online publication can be introduced for a certain period within 6 months after the occurrence of the corresponding grounds. (It used to be 3 months for online publications in the past.) The public access can also be restricted to any Web-resource, which resembles to the degree of confusion the one to which the access has already been limited (a copy of the Web-resource).

The Prosecutor General as well as the prosecutors of Belarusian regions and the city of Minsk have been given the right to restrict access to the Web-resources and online publications that disseminate information aimed at promoting extremist activities or

information that contains calls for such activities, as well as information that may harm the national interests (Article 51-1).

On **June 26**, amendments to the law '**On mass events in the Republic of Belarus**' came into force. In particular, Article 11 introduced a ban on real-time coverage of mass events, which are held in violation of the established order, aimed at their promotion or propaganda by anyone, including journalists. The journalists are also prohibited from acting as organizers or participants of mass events while performing their duties.

On **October 18**, the law '**On amending laws on protection of sovereignty and constitutional order**' came into force. As a result of its adoption, the list of emergency measures and time limits set by the law 'On state of emergency' was specified.

Thus, according to Article 11 of this law, should a state of emergency be introduced, it would be possible:

- to suspend (terminate) the release of mass media, the validity of state registration certificates, issued to the publishers, producers, and distributors of printed publications, and the validity of licenses for polygraphy and broadcasting activity;
- to restrict access to Web-resources and online publications.

If earlier, in case of a state of emergency introduced in the presence of riots, it was allowed to limit the freedom of the press by introducing preliminary censorship, to seize temporarily or arrest the printed production, radio transmitting, sound-amplifying and copying technical equipment, as well as to define a special procedure for the press accreditation, the new version of the law allows suspension of distribution of Belarusian and foreign media production.

On **June 28**, Presidential Decree No. 242 amended the **Provisions on the Interdepartmental Commission on Information Security**. The commission was authorized to decide whether media products and any Web-resources contain the materials, which can 'harm the national interests of the Republic of Belarus,' if distributed.

On **August 25**, the Operational Analytical Center under the President of the Republic of Belarus issued **Ordinance No. 138 'On the administration of national domain zone'**. Accordingly, the 'Belarusian Cloud Technologies' Joint Limited Liability Company was obliged to perform the function of the technical administrator of Belarusian domain zone since January 1, 2022. The change was caused by the persecution and de-facto liquidation of the leading news Web-portal TUT.by that was linked to the previous technical administrator, hoster.by. The company CEO Siarhei Pavalishau was detained together with TUT.by representatives on May 18, 2021. He was kept in the pre-trial detention center till September 1, 2021, when his remand was changed.

The Council of Ministers issued **Resolution No. 575 ‘On Measures to Counter Extremism and Rehabilitation of Nazism’** on **October 12, 2021**. According to this document, all control over the implementation of legislation in this area was entrusted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The subjects of counteraction to extremism and rehabilitation of Nazism were obliged to send updates about their activities at least once in half a year.

According to the new law **‘On preventing the rehabilitation of Nazism’**, the Resolution regulates the implementation of the law application monitoring (*see above*).

The document also introduces Provisions on the procedure for evaluating symbols and paraphernalia as well as information products for the presence (absence) of signs of extremism and Provisions on the National committee to be established under the Ministry of Information for the evaluation of information products discovered on the territory of Minsk. The relevant regional committees were authorized to continue their operation on the territory of Belarusian regions. The evaluation should be based upon a corresponding appeal of the state bodies that deal with counteraction to extremism. (Previously, any citizens and organizations could apply for a check). Lilia Ananich, deputy chairperson of the Standing Committee on Human Rights, National Relations and Mass Media at the House of Representatives headed the abovementioned National committee.

According to **the law ‘On the National Budget for 2022’, adopted on December 31, 2021**, the state media will receive 151,111,118 Belarusian rubles (compared to 156.04 million rubles in 2021) to cover their expenses in 2022. The state-owned print media and publishing houses will receive more in 2022 (8,040,679 Belarusian rubles compared to 7,617,997 Belarusian rubles in 2021). The Belarusian State TV and Radio Broadcasting Company will get the same funding as a year before (114,655,220 Belarusian rubles).

The expenses for the ‘Mir’ TV and radio company will increase by almost 500,000 Belarusian rubles in 2022 (from 8 million to 8,482,400 Belarusian rubles). CJSC ‘Capital Television’ will receive 823,190 Belarusian rubles in 2022 (compared to 1.66 million Belarusian rubles in 2021). CJSC ‘Second National Television’ (ANT) will receive 3,289,870 Belarusian rubles (compared to 3.5 million Belarusian rubles in 2021).

The covered expenditures for the activities of the Ministry of Information will amount to 23,209,342 Belarusian rubles in 2022, which is 6 million less than in 2021.

VIOLATIONS OF MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS’ RIGHTS. CONFLICTS IN MASS MEDIA FIELD

Criminal cases

The unprecedented scale of criminal prosecution was among the most serious challenges faced by independent journalists and other media professionals in Belarus in 2021.

The criminalization of independent media workers' activity included bringing them to legal responsibility for the coverage of events in the country as well as for the allegedly committed economic crimes. **As of December 31, 2021, over 60 mass media representatives were criminally prosecuted in Belarus. 32 of them were kept in custody in connection to their criminal prosecution by the end of the year.**

The Case of Siarhei Satsuk

A famous investigative journalist and the Editor of 'Yezhednevnik' online periodical **Siarhei Satsuk** was detained on March 25, 2020.

One of his high-profile investigations contained a series of publications in the 'Yezhednevnik' online periodical about corruption in the health care system of Belarus. Several high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Health were exposed for corrupt practices later on.

On March 23, 2020, an article 'Who is spreading panic around the coronavirus, the President or Websites and Web-channels?' by Siarhei Satsuk was published on the 'Yezhednevnik' (ej.by) website. The author questioned the official statistics on the incidence of coronavirus in Belarus in this publication.

The State Control Committee commented upon the detention only six days later, accusing the journalist of receiving a large bribe 'for preparing and posting an article on his website that contains compromising information about the organization's competitors.'

Siarhei Satsuk's detention and the initiation of a criminal case against him caused sharp criticism from the Belarusian and international community. Consequently, the Prosecutor General canceled the decision to place him in custody on the 10th day after his arrest. Hence, the journalist was released, but the criminal case against him was not terminated.

On December 8, 2021, Siarhei Satsuk was detained again. He was searched and questioned by the Legal Investigative Committee on the same day. The ej.by website was blocked at the same moment of time. Consequently, the journalist was taken into custody after his interrogation on the old case under Article 430 of the Criminal Code (receiving a bribe).

The Case of Katsiaryna Barysevich

A journalist of TUT.by Web-portal **Katsiaryna Barysevich** was sentenced to six months of imprisonment on March 2, 2021. She was put on trial together with the doctor Artsiom Sarokin, who was fined and sentenced to the suspended two-years' prison term. Both of them were tried for the alleged disclosure of medical secrets that entailed grave consequences (article 178, part 3 of the Criminal Code).

The journalist published information about the death of a peaceful protestor Raman Bandarenka, who had been beaten cruelly by people in masks and delivered to a police department in the unmarked van. The person died in hospital afterwards. The publication contradicted to the official version of his death. Katsiaryna Barysevich was fined on November 19, 2020 and released from prison on May 18, 2021.

The journalist was presented the German-Norwegian *Free Media Awards for Eastern European journalists*.

The Case of Katsiaryna Andreyeva (Bakhvalava) and Darya Chultsova

On **February 18, 2021**, two journalists of Belsat TV channel Katsiaryna Andreyeva and Darya Chultsova were sentenced to two years of imprisonment for the alleged 'arrangement of actions that grossly violated public order' (article 342, part 1 of Belarus Criminal Code). The journalists were prosecuted for live broadcasting of brutal dispersal of peaceful demonstrators who came to pay tribute to the memory of Raman Bandarenka at the place of his death in the courtyard of a residential building on November 15, 2020. Judge Natalia Buhuk pronounced the verdict in the Frunzienski City District Court of Minsk.

Darya Chultsova and Katsiaryna Andreyeva became the laureates of Courage in Journalism Awards. It is a prestigious international journalist award, established by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF).

Also, the journalists were presented the German-Norwegian Free Media Awards for Eastern European journalists and the Prize for the Freedom and Future of the Media 2021, established by the Media Foundation of Sparkasse Leipzig. 'The jury expressly appreciates the commitment of the two young journalists, who by their work [...] made heard the voice of free reporting in an autocratic regime', Stephan Seeger, Managing Director of Media Foundation said.

The Case of 'Press Club'

Five out of six convicted people on the Press Club case were released from custody in August 2021. They were freed after signing a petition for clemency except for Kseniya Lutskina, who refused to sign the plea. Consequently, the Prosecutor General's Office announced the termination of proceedings. Kseniya Lutskina, suffering from a growing tumor in the brain, remained in custody. A new criminal case was filed against her.

(The essence of new charges remained unknown since her lawyer had been forced to sign a non-disclosure note).

On December 22, 2020, the Financial Investigation Department officers arrested a number of Press Club Belarus employees: Yulia Slutskaya, the Press Club Belarus founder and Board member of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, Alla Sharko, the Press Club Belarus Program Director, Siarhei Alsheuski the Financial Director, Pyotr Slutsky, a videographer (son of Yulia Slutskaya), Siarhei Yakupau, the Director of Press Club Academy, as well as former employees of the Belarusian State TV and Radio Company Kseniya Lutskina and Dzianis Sakalouski.

On December 31, 2020, the detainees were presented charges under Article 243, part 2 of the Criminal Code (large-scale tax evasion). A Russian citizen Siarhei Yakupau was deported to Russia on the same day. Yulia Slutskaya and her colleagues spent eight months in Pre-trial Detention Center No. 1 in Minsk, suffering from extremely hard conditions of stay.

Yuliya Slutskaya became the laureate of the 2021 IAPC Freedom of Speech Award. Also, she was named 2021 IPI-IMS World Press Freedom Hero. The award is presented to the journalists, who have made a significant contribution to the promotion of press freedom, especially facing high personal risks.

The Case of Siarhei Hardziyevich

On August 2, 2021, Ivanava District Court in Brest region sentenced **Siarhei Hardziyevich**, a correspondent of www.1reg.by news Web-site from the town of Drahichyn, to 18 months of imprisonment.

The journalist was charged under three articles of the Criminal Code: Article 368 (insult to the President of the Republic of Belarus), Article 188 (defamation), and Article 369 (insult to a governmental official) for the allegedly published messages in a local Viber chat.

The court ordered Hardziyevich to pay 2,000 rubles (about 800 US dollars) to each of the two police officers who considered themselves insulted as compensation for moral damages. The journalist was taken into custody in the courtroom following the announcement of the verdict. He had spent more than 4 months under house arrest before the sitting of the court. Hardziyevich was sent to serve his sentence in the penal colony in Shklou.

The Case of Andrei Aliaksandrau

A media manager and founder of www.journalby.com on-line periodical edition Andrei Aliaksandrau as well as his partner Iryna Zlobina have been held in custody since January 12, 2021.

Both of them were presented charged under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (arrangement and preparation of events that grossly violate public order or active participation in them) for the alleged 'funding of individuals involved in riots and other protests.'

Shortly before the expiration of the maximum possible pre-trial detention term, Andrei Aliaksandrau was presented new charges under Article 356 of the Criminal Code (high treason). He can face up to 15 years of imprisonment on these charges.

Following the arrest of Aliaksandrau's former colleagues at the BelaPAN News Agency, he was also recognized as a suspect under Article 243 of the Criminal Code (tax and dues evasion) on August 31, 2021.

Andrei Aliaksandrau was awarded 'The Hope of Freedom' Prize by the Lithuanian Union of Journalists in 2021. Also, he became a laureate of Frantsishak Aliakhnovich Literary Award by decision of Radio Liberty and Belarusian PEN Center for his 'poems from behind bars', grounded upon his personal prison experience.

The Case of Dzianis Ivashyn

An investigative journalist **Dzianis Ivashyn** was arrested in Hrodna on March 12, 2021. Consequently, he was presented charges under Article 365 of the Criminal Code (interference in the internal affairs officer's activities), which envisage a maximum sentence of three years in prison. D. Ivashyn worked for 'Novy Chas' newspaper at that time. He was also the author and editor of Belarusian service of InformNapalm Website.

His last article in 'Novy Chas' was dedicated to former employees of the 'Berkut' special forces (Ukraine), allegedly involved in violent actions against peaceful demonstrators in Kiev in 2014, who got a job in the Belarusian police later. (The article was written with the use of data from open sources).

On September 2, 2021, the journalist was presented additional charges under Article 356 of the Criminal Code (high treason). He can face up to 15 years of imprisonment on these charges.

Dzianis Ivashyn was presented 'The Journalist of the Year 2021' award, established by the Belarusian human rights defenders' community.

The Case of Andrzej Poczobut

A journalist of Polish origin Andrzej Poczobut from Hrodna, an employee of the Polish 'Gazeta Wyborcza' daily, as well as 'Nad Niemnem' newspaper was arrested alongside several other members of the Union of Poles in Belarus on March 25, 2021. He was

placed in custody and presented charges under Article 130, part 3 of the Criminal Code (incitement to racial, ethnic, religious or other social hostility or hatred). He faces the risk of 5 to 12 years of imprisonment.

According to the official version, since 2018 the members of the Union of Poles in Belarus have held a series of illegal events with the participation of minors in Hrodna and other cities in the region 'in honor of the participants of anti-Soviet bandit formations who acted during and after the Great Patriotic War, who committed robberies, murders of civilian population of Belarus, and destruction of property.' It should be noted that these actions of official authorities were held against the background of anti-Polish propaganda on the state television. Poland was described as an aggressor in the propagandist narrative, allegedly having territorial claims against the Republic of Belarus.

Andrzej Poczobut was awarded the main prize "For Freedom of Speech" of the Association of Polish Journalists in 2021 "for publications in defense of democracy and rule of law, which revealed misuse of power, corruption and violations of civil and human rights." Also, the journalist was awarded the Polish Community Prize during the 30th edition of the Economic Forum in Karpacz.

The Case of TUT.by

On May 18, 2021, the Belarusian authorities launched an unprecedented attack on the leading independent news resource TUT.by. (The Web-portal publisher 'TUT.BY Media' had been deprived of the mass media status by a court verdict on January 19, 2021.) The Financial Investigation Department of Belarus filed a criminal case against its employees under Article 243, part 2 of the Criminal Code for the alleged tax evasion that caused large-scale damages. Mass searches were conducted in the TUT.BY offices in Minsk, Brest, Vitsiebsk, Mahilou, and Hrodna as well as in the offices of affiliated companies – Hoster.by, Av.by and Rabota.by – and in the private apartments of TUT.BY employees on that day.

On the same day, the Ministry of Information of Belarus blocked public access to TUT.BY Web-site from Belarus and from abroad. The decision was grounded on the note, issued by the General Public Prosecutor's office about the allegedly registered 'numerous facts of violation of Mass Media Law'. In particular, it concerned the fact of publication of materials, released by the BYSOL Foundation. (It is a civil society initiative that deals with fundraising in support of victims of political repressions in Belarus. The Belarusian legislation bans distribution of materials on behalf of non-registered organizations.)

14 representatives of TUT.by and related companies were placed in custody or under house arrest:

1. Maryna Zolatava, Editor-in-chief;
2. Ludmila Chekina, General Director;
3. Anzhela Asad, Chief Accountant (released from custody on March 11, 2022, but remains in the status of the accused in the case);
4. Iryna Rybalka, Deputy Director (released from custody on March 11, 2022, but remains in the status of the accused in the case);
5. Ala Lapatka, Chief Engineer;
6. Volha Loyka, Editor;
7. Alena Talkachova, Journalist;
8. Maryia Novik, Deputy Chief Accountant (released from custody on March 11, 2022, but remains in the status of the accused in the case);
9. Aliaksandr Daineka, General Director on Technical Issues;
10. Andrei Audzieyeu, Manager;
11. Siarhei Pavalishau, Director, Hoster.by (released from custody on September 1, 2021, but remains under investigation);
12. Darya Danilava, General Director, RocketData;
13. Katsiaryna Tkachenka, Lawyer (house arrest);
14. Iryna Kastiuchenka, a former lawyer (house arrest).

The TUT.BY Editor-in-chief Maryna Zolatava became a laureate of Reporter:Innen Preis 2021, which is annually awarded to outstanding journalists by the German Reporters' Forum.

The Case of Valeryia Kastsiuhova

Valeryia Kastsiuhova, a political scientist and analyst, the founder of 'Our Opinion' Web-site for the Belarusian expert community, the editor and author of 'Belarusian Yearbook' and the leader of 'Belarus In Focus' monitoring experts' group was detained after a search in her private apartment, conducted by the KGB representatives, on **June 30, 2021**. She was presented charges under Article 357 of the Criminal Code (conspiracy to seize power by unconstitutional means) and Article 361 of the Criminal Code (calls for actions aimed at causing harm to the national security of the Republic of Belarus).

Her arrest was preceded by her speech on Euroradio, where she answered questions about whether it would be possible to achieve the release of political prisoners through sanctions and whether a split with the West would provoke a rapid deepening of integration between Belarus and Russia.

The Case of Aliaksandr Ivulin

Aliaksandr Ivulin, a sports journalist of Tribuna.com Web-site and 'ChestnOK' Youtube channel founder was arrested on **July 3, 2021**. He was presented charges under Article 342, part 1 of the Criminal Code (arrangement and preparation of actions that

grossly violate public order or active participation in them). Judge Siarhei Shatsila sentenced him to two years of imprisonment on January 19, 2022.

The Case of 'Nasha Niva'

Public access to the '**Nasha Niva**' Web-site (**nn.by**) was totally blocked on **July 8, 2021**, following the correspondent ruling, issued by the Ministry of Information of Belarus. The decision was grounded on the note, issued by the Public Prosecutor General's office, that registered the alleged 'publication of information that is banned for distribution by Article 38, part 1 of Mass Media law.' Consequently, police searches were conducted at the office premises and private apartments of four 'Nasha Niva' employees. Two of them, **Yahor Martsinovich**, the 'Nasha Niva' Editor-in-chief and **Andrei Skurko**, the Head of 'Nasha Niva' Advertising and Marketing Department were detained and placed in custody on July 8, 2021. They were presented charges under Article 216, part 2 of the Criminal Code for the alleged 'property damage without signs of embezzlement'. Allegedly, they paid utility bills for the editorial office at the rate for housing. Judge Anzhela Kastsiukevich sentenced both of them for the term of 2.5 years of imprisonment. The trial took place in the Zavadski City District Court of Minsk on March 15, 2022.

Andrei Skurko became a laureate of Frantsishak Aliakhnovich Literary Award by decision of Radio Liberty and Belarusian PEN Center for his fairy tales and poems for his son. The award is presented to authors for their literary accomplishments, grounded upon personal prison experience.

The Case of BelaPAN News Agency

On **August 18, 2021**, there were conducted searches at the office premises of independent BelaPAN News Agency as well as at the BelaPAN employees' private apartments in Minsk. The searches were conducted as part of a criminal investigation on Article 342 of Criminal Code (arrangement or preparation of actions that grossly violate public order or active participation in them).

The BelaPAN Web-sites (**belapan.by** and **belapan.com**) were totally blocked for public access. Six BelaPAN employees were interrogated at the Legal Investigation Committee. On the same day in the evening the Legal Investigation Committee published a statement that showed the alleged violations of tax legislation, which were discovered during the initiated tax audit of BelaPAN activity. The BelaPAN Director Iryna Leushyna and the former Director Dzmitry Navazhylau were taken into custody as suspects on the criminal case, grounded on Article 243 part 2 of the Criminal Code ('tax evasion').

On November 18, 2021, it became known that both journalists were also presented charges under Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code (establishment of an extremist

grouping), for which they face up to 7 years of imprisonment. The presentation of charges was preceded by the recognition of "a group of Belarusian citizens from among the employees of the BelaPAN news agency" as an extremist formation on November 1, 2021.

The Case of Henadzi Mazheyka

Henadzi Mazheyka, a journalist of 'Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus' was detained by special services in Moscow and deported to Minsk on October 1, 2021. The detention was reasoned by the publication of his article on the www.kp.by Web-site in the evening of September 28, 2021. The publication contained a former classmate's positive remark about the IT specialist Andrei Zeltser, who participated in a tragic incident that cost lives to a KGB officer and Zeltser. Although the editorial deleted the text in a couple of minutes after its publication online, the Web-site www.kp.by was blocked for access on decision of Ministry of Information of Belarus on the following day. Allegedly, the publication 'contributed to forming the sources of threats to the national security.'

Henadzi Mazheyka was taken into custody. He was presented charges under two articles of the Criminal Code of Belarus – Article 130 (incitement of racial, national, religious or other social hostility or hatred) and Article 369 (an insult to a governmental official). Consequently, the Russian office of 'Komsomolskaya Pravda' decided to close its CJSC 'BelKP-PRESS' representation office that had published the 'Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus' newspaper since 1994.

The Case of Andrei Kukharchyk

On October 24, 2021, the editor of the "Virtual Brest" News Web-portal **Andrei Kuharchyk** was sentenced to 1.5 years of restriction of liberty without being sent to a correctional facility for "insulting a governmental official" (Article 369 of the Criminal Code). The trial took place in the Moscow City District Court of Brest.

According to the indictment, Kuharchyk wrote a comment under the photo of a deputy of the House of Representatives Ihar Marzaluk in the 'Discussing dangerous Brest' Telegram chat. Judging by the published video of the Ministry of Internal Affairs about this case, the comment contained the following words: 'The people were beaten, and the MP said, 'Forget about the complaints and start with a clean slate.' It's annoying [...]'. The 'Virtual Brest' website was blocked at the same moment of time.

The Case of Iryna Slaunikava

A journalist of Belsat TV channel **Iryna Slaunikava** was detained on return from a holiday trip at the airport of Minsk on **October 30, 2021**. She wasn't released from custody having served 30 days of administrative arrest. Consequently, she was presented charges under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (arrangement or participation in group actions that grossly violate public order).

The Case of Andrei Kuzniechyk

Andrei Kuzniechyk, a freelance journalist, who cooperated with 'Radio Liberty', was detained on **November 25, 2021**. Following the reporter's detention, the law enforcement agents managed to take control over the 'Radio Liberty' Telegram-channel for a short period of time. A. Kuzniechyk was sentenced to the administrative arrest on the following day after his detention. Then, he was sentenced to two more terms of administrative arrest for a total of 30 days. However, he was never released from custody.

On December 23, 2021, A. Kuzniechyk's relatives were informed that a criminal case had been filed against him.

While Kuznechyk was under arrest, the court recognized the channels of the Belarusian service of 'Radio Liberty' on Telegram and YouTube as well as the corresponding pages on social media as extremist materials on December 3, 2021.

The Case of Aleh Hruzdilovich

A 'Radio Liberty' journalist **Aleh Hruzdilovich** was detained on **December 23, 2021**. He actively covered the social and political events in Belarus in the summer of 2020. Among other, despite being deprived of press credentials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs alongside with most other correspondents of foreign media in August 2020, he was streaming for the 'Radio Liberty' YouTube channel from protest actions. The streams were extremely popular with the audience.

Firstly, Hruzdilovich was detained during mass searches at independent journalists' apartments on July 16, 2021. He spent 10 days in custody. After being released, the journalist remained a suspect. And he was forced to sign a bond to appear in Court. On December 23, 2021, a group of masked people broke down the door in Hruzdilovich's private apartment in Minsk and took him into custody. Consequently, it appeared that the measure of his restraint had been changed.

The journalist was presented charges under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (arrangement and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order or active participation in them). He was accused of participating in an unauthorized action at a time when he had already been deprived of press credentials by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus. On March 3, 2022, the Soviet City District of Minsk sentenced him to 1.5 years of imprisonment.

Criminal prosecution of bloggers

Quite a few of Belarusian bloggers, who expressed their opinion on the socio-political issues, were arrested in connection with their criminal prosecution during the period of presidential election campaign 2020. Nine bloggers, including a prospective

presidential candidate Siarhei Tsikhanouski, were taken into custody. A famous political blogger Eduard Palchys was detained in October 2020. The arrested bloggers were put on trial in 2021. Consequently, all of them were sentenced to different terms of imprisonment, including:

Uladzimir Niaronski – 3 years of imprisonment on Article 342, part 1 of the Criminal Code (arrangement and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order or active participation in them) and Article 369 of the Criminal Code (an insult to a governmental official);

Pavel Spiryn – 4.5 years of imprisonment in a penal colony on Article 130 of the Criminal Code (incitement to racial, national, religious or other social hatred);

Siarhei Piatrukhin – 3 years of imprisonment on Article 342, part 1 of the Criminal Code (arrangement and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order or active participation in them) and Article 391 of the Criminal Code (an insult to a judge or a lay judge);

Aliaksandr Kabanau – 3 years of imprisonment on Article 342, part 1 of the Criminal Code (arrangement and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order or active participation in them);

Ihar Losik, consultant for 'Radio Liberty' – 15 years of imprisonment in the enhanced security penal colony on Article 293 of the Criminal Code (arrangement of mass riots) and Article 130 of the Criminal Code (incitement of hatred);

Eduard Palchys – 13 years of imprisonment in the enhanced security penal colony on Article 293, part 1 of the Criminal Code (arrangement of mass riots), Article 342 of the Criminal Code (arrangement and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order or active participation in them), Article 361 of the Criminal Code (calls for actions aimed at causing harm to the national security of the Republic of Belarus) and Article 130 of the Criminal Code (incitement of hatred).

The legal investigation of the criminal case against bloggers **Raman Pratasievich** and **Stsiapan Putsila** continued in 2021. The media workers founded the NEXTA Telegram Channel that played an important role in the coverage of post-election protests in 2020 and gained the highest popularity in Belarus.

In November 2020, the Investigative Committee of Belarus brought charges against the bloggers in connection with the events around the presidential election on August 9, 2020. In particular, they were accused of organizing mass riots and group actions that grossly violated public order (Articles 293 and 342 of the Criminal Code of Belarus). Also, they were presented charges under Article 130, part 3 of the Criminal Code for the alleged 'incitement of social enmity on the basis of professional affiliation' in relation to civil servants and law enforcement officers through the Telegram channels, which were created and managed by them. Both bloggers were declared internationally wanted.

Also, the KGB included them into the List of organizations and individuals, dealing with terrorist activities.

On **May 23, 2021**, the blogger **Raman Pratasievich** was arrested by the Belarusian authorities as a result of the forced landing of a passenger jet flying from Athens to Vilnius. His girlfriend Sofia Sapega, a citizen of the Russian Federation was detained together with him.

The alleged threat of an explosion on board was announced as the reason for the forced landing of the plane. The BelTA state news agency reported that Aliaksandr Lukashenka personally ordered the plane crew to land in Minsk and approved the use of the MiG-29 fighter to convoy the jet. The former Editor-in-chief of the NEXTA Telegram channel Raman Pratasievich was the editor of another "Belarus of Head Brain" opposition Telegram channel at the time of his arrest.

Pratasievich was placed in a pretrial detention center after his arrest. On June 14, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus held a briefing with his participation, where the blogger underscored that he voluntarily cooperated with the legal investigation.

At the end of June 2021, Raman Pratasievich and Sofia Sapega were placed under house arrest. The blogger repeatedly appeared on TV and on Twitter, showing remorse for his former activities.

The blogger's arrest as a result of the forced landing of a foreign plane, which was carried out by the Belarusian authorities, caused an extremely wide public response in the world, including the reaction of the UN Secretary General, which led to a sharp increase in the sanctions pressure on the Belarusian regime in power.

Two criminal cases against a popular blogger **Anton Matolka** were filed in **March 2021**. The blogger covered the events, connected with the Presidential election 2020. The criminal investigation was initiated on charges under Article 130, part 3 of the Criminal Code ('in connection with the implementation of intentional actions aimed at inciting social hatred on the grounds of professional affiliation in relation to the governmental officials and law enforcement agents') and Article 361-1, part 1 of the Criminal Code (creation of an extremist formation). The Legal Investigation Committee representatives stated that Matolka united extremist groups (the so-called 'backyard chats'), established an extremist formation, and managed it.

On **August 16, 2021**, a blogger **Vadimati (Vadzim Yermashuk)** was arrested in Hrodna. He expressed protest against violence, supported political prisoners, and attended court sessions on 'political' cases. As it became known later, he was presented charges under two articles of the Criminal Code – Article 368 (causing an insult to the President of Belarus) and Article 370 (defamation of state symbols). The blogger was sentenced to 3 years of imprisonment on December 21, 2021.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT COURT CASES

On **June 8**, the Supreme Court left unchanged the verdict, announced by judge Ernest Koira from the Economic Court, who imposed a fine of 8,700 Belarusian rubles on the "Nasha Niva" newspaper for the allegedly illegal business activity. The editorial representatives, allegedly, printed 20 mandatory newspaper copies, which were not sold anywhere, with the use of the editorial printing equipment.

On **September 22**, judge Alyaksei Kmita from Kobryn District Court did not satisfy the claim, submitted by the children's doctor Julia Rafalovich in defense of her honor, dignity and business reputation against the '**Kobrynski Vesnik**' district state newspaper's editorial.

In the article "When the Hippocratic Oath... was forgotten", posted on vkobrine.by Website on April 21 and published in the printed version of '**Kobrynski Vesnik**' on April 24, the author of the publication reported that the local doctor 'categorically refused... to help the policeman's child for political reasons.' At the same time, the law enforcement authorities did not find any crime in the doctor's actions, having looked into the fact of 'failure to provide medical aid to a patient without valid reasons.' The case was heard during the closed court session.

On **October 28**, the Economic Court of Minsk took a decision to collect more than 108 thousand rubles (about 44.5 thousand US dollars) from the 'Narodnaya Volya' newspaper in favor of 'Belposhta' state enterprise. The latter appealed to the court, since the independent newspaper hadn't delivered its print runs for distribution by subscription and through news-stalls. It happened due to that fact that the media outlet couldn't print its circulation since August 2020 (*see more details in the chapter on 'Repression against the print press representatives'*).

On **November 12**, the Economic Court of Minsk satisfied the lawsuit of the Karich brothers, who are businessmen from Serbia, against Stanislau Ivashkevich, the head of the Belarusian investigative center and the author of 'Let's find out' program on the Belsat TV channel. The lawsuit was grounded on the publication of an article about the Karich brothers' business in Belarus in the Serbian media. The publication was prepared within the framework of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). The court ruled that Ivashkevich should remove several quotes about the activity of the Karich family in Belarus, which was accompanied by the receipt of excessive profits, from this investigative article.

PROSECUTION OF JOURNALISTS

The systemic pressure on the independent press of Belarus was observed in 2021 in continuation of numerous gross violations of journalists' rights that took place after the presidential election in August 2020. The work of independent journalists in Belarus was accompanied with arbitrary detentions, searches with the seizure of professional

equipment and information carriers, as well as administrative liability in the form of fines and arrests. The coordinated mass repression against independent journalists and mass media was aimed at destroying the independent media sector. Consequently, it became impossible for most independent media to continue their work from Belarus. The media outlets had to carry on their activity from abroad.

According to the annual report, issued by the Committee to Protect Journalists, Belarus ranked 5th in the world as for the number of journalists in prison in 2021.

The 'Reporters without Borders' human rights organization labeled Belarus as the most dangerous country for media workers in Europe.

Detention and administrative prosecution of journalists

113 cases of detention of journalists were registered by the Belarusian Association of Journalists since the beginning of 2021. The duly accredited foreign journalists Nicholas Connolly (Germany) and Luzia Tschirky (Switzerland) were among the detained media workers.

Yahor Martsinovich, the 'Nasha Niva' online publication's Editor-in-chief was beaten cruelly and injured in the head at the moment of detention on July 8, 2021. A 'Belsat' TV correspondent **Dzmitry Soltan** was beaten in the stomach with a truncheon during the interrogation after his arrest on February 8, 2021.

Journalists were fined no less than 50 times on charges under Article 23.5 of Belarus Code of Administrative Offenses (previously known as Article 22.9 of the Code) for the alleged cooperation with foreign mass media without accreditation. This kind of prosecution was registered in 32 cases. Thus, a journalist from Mahilou Alina Skrabunova was fined 10 times, Zmitsier Lupach from Hlybokaye was fined 7 times.

18 times independent reporters were brought to responsibility for their work on the ground of Article 24.23 of Belarus Code of Administrative Offenses for the alleged participation in the unauthorized mass events. Thus, the authorities equalized participation in mass events with their coverage by professional journalists. As a rule, the judges issued their rulings, solely grounding them on the testimony of law enforcement agents, whose names were changed and faces hidden.

Moreover, journalists were tried for the alleged violation of the following legal norms of Belarus Code of Administrative Offenses: Article 24.3 (disobedience to a lawful order or demand of an official in the exercise of his/her official powers), Article 19.1 (petty hooliganism), and Article 19.11 (distribution, production, storage, transportation of information products containing calls for extremist activities or promoting such activities).

In 29 cases, the journalists were punished with different terms of administrative arrest, which they served in harsh conditions in overcrowded cameras without sufficient sleeping places and hygienic items etc.

Mass searches and seizure of professional equipment

Since July 8, 2021, the Belarusian authorities began to carry out ‘a large-scale operation [...] to clean up the radically minded people...’, as stated by Kanstantsin Bychek, Deputy Head of the Investigative Department of the KGB of Belarus. It affected the independent press, human rights defenders, and other civil society representatives.

71 searches were conducted at journalists’ apartments and editorial offices of independent mass media by the police and KGB representatives all over the country on **July 8-9, 2021**.

In most cases, they were grounded upon the need of investigation of criminal cases, in particular, on Article 289 (act of terrorism) and Article 342 (arrangement and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order or active participation in them). Professional equipment, information carriers, and communication devices were seized during the searches. At least 14 journalists were detained and interrogated.

The second mass attack on independent mass media took place on **July 16, 2021**.

Searches and detentions took place at the Belsat TV studio and the office of Radio Liberty in Minsk as well as at private apartments of at least 26 independent journalists. Five journalists were detained for the term of up to ten days. A journalist of Radio Liberty Inessa Studzinskaya went on a hunger strike throughout the period of her detention.

Obstruction of activity of Belarusian Association of Journalists

In connection to the rapidly aggravated situation with freedom of speech in Belarus since the beginning of presidential election campaign 2020, the legitimate activity of BAJ on journalists’ rights defense was hampered by the unlawful interference of official authorities.

The BAJ Web-site (www.baj.by) was blocked in the first group of Web-resources on the election day. The mobile hotline number for journalists was blocked, too.

The Web-site couldn’t be accessed by Belarusian Web-users within the period since August 9 till August 27, 2021, despite the absence of any formal decisions on restricting access to the Web-resource.

On **February 16, 2021**, the police conducted a search at the BAJ office in Minsk and seized documents and computer equipment there. Consequently, the office premises were sealed. Also, police searches were conducted at several BAJ members' private apartments and houses in different parts of the country, including the apartments of BAJ Deputy Chairs Barys Haretski and Aleh Aheyeu.

The officers of Legal Investigative Committee of Belarus noted that the operation was carried out within the framework of a preliminary investigation into the funding or arrangement of actions that grossly violate public order under Article 342 of the Criminal Code of Belarus.

The BAJ office was sealed for almost a month after the search, and its leadership representatives were summoned to the Investigative Committee for interrogation on several occasions.

On **June 21, 2021**, the Ministry of Justice started to audit the activities of the Belarusian Association of Journalists. According to the letter that was received on that day thousands of documents were required to be submitted for the period since January 1, 2018. It is noteworthy that the letter was dated June 9, 2021, but it was received on June 21, 2021 only. It was the deadline for submitting the numerous documents. The Ministry representative postponed the deadline till June 23, 2021 later on. The BAJ representatives submitted to the Ministry of Justice all requested documents, which they managed to collect over two days.

On **July 14, 2021**, the law enforcement bodies conducted another search at the BAJ office in Minsk and sealed the premises once again. (The second search was performed in the absence of BAJ representatives.) The BAJ bank account was blocked. On the following day, a letter from the Ministry of Justice was received stating that the Deputy Minister Siarhei Kalinouski issued a warning to the Belarusian Association of Journalists in the written form on July 8, 2021. He claimed that some documents were not provided and the rental agreements of several BAJ branches had to be corrected. It was required to eliminate the violations indicated in the warning within one day, i.e. by July 16, 2021.

The BAJ leadership sent a letter to the Ministry of Justice with a request to postpone the deadline due to the lack of access to statutory documents, the seal and lease agreements subject to the fact that the BAJ office was sealed after the search.

However, on July 21, 2021, it became known that the Ministry of Justice had filed a claim with the Supreme Court of Belarus on liquidation of the Belarusian Association of Journalists in connection with the BAJ's alleged failure to take measures to eliminate violations of the law and the repeated violation of the law after the receipt of official warning in the written form.

Judge Inesa Lazavikova from the Supreme Court of Belarus satisfied the claim of the Ministry of Justice to liquidate the Belarusian Association of Journalists on **August 27, 2021**. It happened against the background of a large-scale attack on the independent press and non-governmental organizations in Belarus that had taken place since July 2021. The majority of BAJ officers had to leave the country, in order to be able to continue their work.

The public access to the BAJ Web-site – baj.by – was blocked for Belarusian Web-users by decision of the Ministry of Information of Belarus on November 4, 2021.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists was presented the German-Norwegian Free Media Awards for independent journalism in Eastern Europe in 2021. Also, the BAJ became a laureate of Ihor Lubchenko National Prize for the Protection of Freedom of Speech, which is awarded by the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine.

RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF ACTIVITY ON THE WEB

Since the time of presidential election 2020, the state has made numerous attempts to restrict access to information on the Web.

“The easy access to the Internet for a wide audience has made the global Web a leading source of information. The virtual environment is the most powerful factor influencing the population nowadays. At the same time, the information disseminated on the Internet is not always aimed at the development of society and the state. The Internet has become a tool of information wars aimed at destroying public foundations and moral values, and sometimes entire states,” – noted the Minister of Information Ihar Lutski, presenting a draft law on mass media activities on April 2, 2021.

Among other, the authorities applied such measures as blocking public access to the Web-sites of independent mass media and civil society organizations, the forced deletion of critical content, recognition of publications on independent media resources as ‘extremist materials’, and prosecution for distribution of the alleged ‘extremist materials’ during the year of 2021.

According to the global rating list on *Freedom on the Net* 2021 that was compiled by the Freedom House human rights organization, Belarus appeared next to Myanmar and Uganda among the countries with the registered most significant aggravation of Web freedom. In comparison with the previous year, Belarus lost 7 positions on the list and got only 31 out of 100 possible points.

Pressure on online media

A broad range of searches was conducted at the editorials of nation-wide and regional online media in 2021. Their employees were interrogated. The police searches were held at their apartments as well. Some of the employees were prosecuted on administrative and criminal charges.

In particular, there were searched editorial premises of 'Binokl' ('Binocular') online media (Brest), 'Ranak' Web-site (Svetlahorsk), 'Intex-Press' (Baranavichy), 'Media Palessie' (Pinsk – Luninets), 'Motsnya Naviny' ('Strong News') Web-site (Homiel), Radio Liberty and other. As a result of police searches, there were seized documents and technical equipment that blocked editorial work or made it more complicated. Huge fines were imposed on a number of independent media Web-site for the published content that further led to decisions on disabling public access to them. Thus, the 'Media Palesse' Web-site owner was fined 5771 Belarusian rubles (around USD 2300 in equivalent) on July 27, 2021 for the alleged distribution of incorrect information, in particular, the phrase 'The judges from Pinsk refused to conduct the trial. Therefore, the accused were transferred to Brest'.

As reported on September 16, 2021, the 'Inform-Prahaluka' online newspaper (Luninets, Brest region) was fined 2900 Belarusian rubles (around USD 1150) for 'causing harm to the national interests of Belarus'. The charges were presented under Article 23.5 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (violation of mass media legislation). The court verdict was grounded on the information that had been posted in the Digest Web-section and contained reposts of the news published by other mass media.

The authorities continued the practice of blocking access to the Web-sites of independent mass media. The definition of 'copies of online resources' was introduced into the national legislation in March 2021. Consequently, the blocking practice was extended to the so-called 'mirror' Web-sites, created to bypass the blocks of targeted Web-resources.

Thus, there was restricted access to a number of 'mirror' Web-sites of independent mass media, including 'Naviny.online' Web-resource of BelaPAN News Agency, 'Blstv.eu' Web-site of 'Belsat' TV channel, 'euroradio.pl' Web-site of 'European Radio for Belarus', 'Zerkalo.io' Web-site of TUT.by and other.

Since the autumn of 2021, there was started a new wave of blocking access to online news resources, including Media-Polesye.by, the Web-site of 'Belarusian Radio Racyja', belaruspartisan.by, the Web-site of 'Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus', and other.

The official authorities took regular planned steps on restricting the influence of leading online-media, including TUT.BY, nashaniva.by and naviny.by. Consequently, the public access to the Web-resources was blocked. And a number of their employees faced criminal prosecution. (see '*Criminal Cases*' for details).

Nevertheless, independent online media continued to prevail in the Belarusian media space. They diversified the distribution channels of information, working more actively on social media and messengers. The Belarusian audience started using more actively the messengers, particularly Telegram, and social media, particularly YouTube, for getting access to information.

Implementation of legislation on counteraction to extremism

The use of legislation on counteraction to extremism, aimed at restriction of freedom of speech online, reached an unprecedented scale in 2021. In particular, all critical statements and activities were regarded as 'extremist' activities.

The authorities started using new provisions of the law 'On counteraction to extremism' in relation to independent mass media.

The number of court decisions recognizing extremist materials dramatically increased since the summer of 2021. 71 court verdicts on recognizing 115 publications as 'extremist materials' were returned in June – July 2021. It was three times more in comparison with the period since the beginning of April till the end of May 2021. 84 court rulings on recognizing 129 publications as 'extremist materials' were returned in August – September 2021. The overwhelming majority of them was connected with Telegram channels. It was registered for the first time during the whole history of observations that not only the Telegram channels were banned, but also the bots of some of the Telegram chats. **All in all, over 410 Telegram channels and chats as well as more than 20 YouTube channels were recognized as 'extremist' by the Belarusian authorities in 2021.**

Since the moment of a large-scale attack on independent media and civil society in July 2021, the Belarusian authorities started to recognize the content of online mass media as 'extremist materials', in addition to their Telegram channels.

Apart from the Telegram channels, the authorities continued to include the accounts of independent media on other social media, including Facebook and VK, into the list of 'extremist materials'. It was registered for the first time in history of observation that the authorities also banned pages of mass media on 'Odnoklassniki', Instagram, and TikTok.

Thus, they recognized the Belsat TV Web-site, Telegram channel and pages on social media as 'extremist materials' on July 27, 2021.

Then, they recognized as 'extremist materials' the content of Tribuna.com sports online media, the content of the leading news portal TUT.BY and the content of zerkalo.io Web-site that substituted TUT.BY after its blocking.

Taking into account that practically any Belarusian media used TUT.BY publications, all of them faced the risk of prosecution for the alleged 'dissemination of extremist materials'.

Thus, the Public Prosecutor's office for Brest region restricted access to the 'Media Palessie' Web-site for 6 months for reposting publications from the Web-resources, which were later recognized as 'extremist'.

On October 28, 2021, the Ministry of Information blocked access to three online media in a row (Deutsche Welle, 'Nastoyasheye Vremya' and 'Novy Chas') for 'spreading hyperlinks to materials recognized as extremist'.

The fate of the popular regional news Web-site **Hrodna.life** (Hrodna) became an example of the use of anti-extremism legislation to put pressure on the media, up to their liquidation.

On March 19, its Editor-in-chief Alyaksei Shota was fined 12,325 Belarusian rubles in total (about USD 4,900) for distributing information products included in the National list of extremist materials. The questionable publications in April and June 2020 contained links or the logo of a Telegram channel, which was recognized as extremist in October 2020.

On June 3, the owner of Hrodna.life Website - JSC "Hrodna Life Media" was fined 14,500 Belarusian rubles (about USD 5,800) on the same grounds. The new administrative case was based upon publication of one photo, deleted in a few hours after its posting. The Hrodna.life editor Iryna Novik was fined 725 Belarusian rubles for posting the photo, too.

On July 9, 2021, the Leninsky City District Court of Hrodna recognized the content of Hrodna.life Telegram channel as 'extremist materials.' According to the public prosecutor's office, it posted messages that fostered enmity and contained 'expressions aimed at inciting the determination to use violence against a certain social group of people and aimed at forming motives of hatred towards people based on a certain profession and type of occupation', as well as photos with the logo of an 'extremist' Telegram channel.

Following the public prosecutor's claim, the court liquidated JSC "Hrodna Life Media" on August 26, 2021, referring to the fact that it 'carried out activities prohibited by legislative acts', mentioning two cases when Hrodna.life employees were brought to administrative responsibility for the distribution of 'extremist materials.'

On September 16, 2021, the Hrodna.life Website was blocked in accordance with the decision of the public prosecutor's office of Hrodna region. The blocking was explained by publication of articles accompanied by video materials 'that discredit the activities of governmental law enforcement agencies', bringing the Website editors to administrative responsibility for dissemination of extremist materials and distribution of extremist information products. Consequently, Hrodna.life managed to continue its activity only through 'mirror' Websites and social media.

All in all, the content of 13 independent mass media was recognized as 'extremist materials' by official authorities in 2021.

Moreover, the authorities started applying legislative innovations on counteraction to extremism in the form of 'extremist formations' in order to prosecute representatives of online media (Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code envisages up to 10 years of imprisonment for creating an extremist formation and up to 6 years of imprisonment for participation in it.)

At the beginning, the charges were presented to the creators and administrators of oppositional Telegram communities. With the time passing, the authorities started presenting them to journalists, too. Thus, two criminal police searches within a month's term were conducted at the private apartment, owned by a famous Belarusian TV- and radio presenter Katsiaryna Pytleva, in September 2021. The searches took place as soon as she became the Program Director and presenter of a popular YouTube project 'Malanka Media', following her relocation to Lithuania.

On November 3, 2021, the Ministry of Internal Affairs took a decision to recognize 'a group of citizens, who are united through the Belsat Web-resources' as an extremist formation.

Apart from that, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus recognized 'a group of citizens united through the Internet resources of Radio Liberty' as an extremist formation and the KGB recognized 'a group of citizens of Belarus from among the employees of the BelaPAN News Agency' as an extremist formation later.

Moreover, in order to limit the influence of independent media, the authorities began to apply the anti-extremist legislation as the grounds for prosecution of Web-users for dissemination of media content that had been recognized as 'extremist materials.' The forms of punishment on administrative charges include not only fines, but also different terms of administrative arrest.

On May 7, 2021, the Belarus Prosecutor General's Office issued a statement that prosecutors monitor messages on the Web on the daily basis. At the same time, it was emphasized that 'any step on the Internet, whether visiting a certain Web-resource, or rating certain images or messages on social media, or posting or commenting on them, is recorded.'

Two journalists, Iryna Slaunikava and Siarhey Niarouny were found guilty of disseminating extremist materials (publications of Belsat and TUT.by) by verdicts of Belarusian courts on November 1, 2021. Iryna Slaunikava was arrested for 15 days for her reposts on Facebook. Siarhey Niarouny was fined 580 Belarusian rubles for his 'likes' on Facebook.

The Web-users are even punished for 'distribution of extremist materials' in private correspondence. Thus, e.g., Pavel Smirnou from Minsk was sentenced to 15 days of arrest for sending a message from TUT.by Telegram channel to his friend as soon as the police officers got access to his mobile phone.

OBSTRUCTION OF PRINTING AND DISTRIBUTION OF INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS

The Belarusian government continued to restrict the activity of independent printed media in 2021. First of all, it concerned the printed socio-political media.

In 2020, the official authorities applied the policy by means of depriving the periodical editions of the opportunity to print and distribute their print runs. In 2021, the pressure on the part of law enforcement agencies and public prosecution bodies as well as prosecution of both the publications and their employees were added.

Repression against the print press representatives

On **March 24, 2021**, Piotr Huzayeuski, the Editor-in-chief of 'Hantsavitski Chas' independent regional newspaper and two correspondents Siarhei Bahrou and Aliaksandr Pazniak were summoned to the Public Prosecutor's office, where official warnings were pronounced to S. Bahrou and A. Pazniak.

The 'Novy Chas' newspaper received a warning from the Ministry of Information on **March 25, 2021**. It was issued for publishing four articles that allegedly contained information that 'contributed to causing harm to the national interests of the Republic of Belarus.'

The Prosecutor General's office issued another warning to the newspaper Editor-in-chief in May 2021. It was presented in connection to the fact that the authors of some publications *'used certain expressions and phrases that contributed to the heightening of tension in society as well as incitement of hatred and enmity against governmental officials and law enforcement officers as separate social groups of population.'*

The 'Intex-press' regional newspaper from Baranavichy (Brest region) suffered from persecution for publishing an interview with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on April 14, 2021. The newspaper Editor-in-chief Uladzimir Yanukevich received a warning from the Public Prosecutor's office on the following day. Then, he was fined the maximum possible sum for 'violating the mass media legislation' – 580 Belarusian rubles (approx. USD 240). In addition, the 'Intex-press' Publishing house was fined 4,350 Belarusian rubles (approx. USD 1,780) later on.

Following the claim, filed by the Public prosecutor's office, the published interview with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and its video recording were officially recognized as extremist materials.

Another series of searches was conducted at the editorial offices of independent media and journalists' private apartments in July 2021. They were accompanied with interrogations and seizure of technical equipment. Consequently, a number of regional newspapers seized to be published in the printed form.

A series of searches took place at the 'Novy Chas' editorial office as well as at the newspaper employees' private apartments in October 2021.

Since the summer of 2020, the state-owned printing houses have refused to print the leading non-state newspapers 'Narodnaya Volya', 'Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus', 'Svobodnye Novosti Plus', and 'Belgazeta'. 'Narodnaya Volya' and 'Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus' started publishing their circulations outside Belarus. However, the 'Belposhta' and 'Belsayuzdruk' de-facto monopolist state-owned retail sales networks of press distributors refused to sell the newspapers, despite the presence of existing contracts. Consequently, these periodical editions had to continue their activity online only.

The following media outlets terminated publication of their periodicals in the print version in 2021: 'Brestskaya Gazeta', 'Leader-Press' (Salihorsk), 'Intex-press' newspaper (Baranavichy), 'Inform-progulka' newspaper (Luninets), 'Rehiyanalnaya gazeta' (Maladziechna), 'Novy Chas' and 'Nasha Slova'. As a rule, this step was preceded by the refusal of 'Belsayuzdruk' to distribute the print media through its network and the exclusion of the print media from the 'Belposhta' subscription catalogues.

The publication of 'Verasen' literary magazine was terminated in 2021, since its founder - 'The Belarusian Language Society' was deprived of official registration.

'Gazeta Slonimskaya' and 'Otdushina' newspapers (Slonim, Hrodna region) couldn't resume their publication after the suspension of activity, following a search and the seizure of technical equipment in November 2020. On May 24, 2021, the Ministry of Information included both newspapers into the Register of Print Mass Media. However, the printing houses refused to print their circulations.

The 'Narodnaya Volya' newspaper tried repeatedly to arrange the printing of its issues in Russia, all in vain. The contracts were cancelled subject to interference from the authorities. The riot police came to the 'Narodnaya Volya' editorial office on November 13, 2020 and seized without providing any explanations the whole print run of a fresh newspaper issue, which had just been delivered from a printing house in Russia. The driver and two volunteers, who dealt with the print run delivery were detained at that. 'Belposhta' made use of this situation to sue 'Narodnaya Volya' for reimbursement of costs for the newspaper copies, which hadn't been received since August 2020. The amount to be paid was pronounced by the Economic Court of Minsk at the end of October 2021. It totaled 108,000 Belarusian rubles (over USD 44,500).

On December 1, 2021, it was reported that the OJSC 'Brest Printing House' refused to print the 'Hantsavitski Chas' regional newspaper since the beginning of 2022.

The magazines 'Our History', 'Attention, Children!', and 'Duda' were deprived of the possibility of distribution through the state-owned sales networks.

As a result of the official policy, 7 newspapers and 1 magazine ceased to be published in print during 2021. (Eight more newspapers hadn't been published since 2020).

Also, since the beginning of 2021, the 'Volnaye Hlybokaye' independent newspaper terminated its work for economic reasons after 26 years of its existence.

Deprived of any opportunity to publish the printed versions of newspapers, most editorial teams continued their activities online.

The 'Leader-Press' newspaper was published in Salihorsk (Minsk region) during 28 years. The media outlet terminated its activity on October 1, 2021. A range of searches was conducted at the editorial office and at the owners' apartments in the summer of 2021. The editorial addressed the newspaper readers as follows: *'It looks like any material that truthfully covers the events in the region or in the country can be declared extremist with all the ensuing consequences. In this situation, we cannot put our employees at risk. Therefore, we are forced to terminate the activity of our media outlet.'*

The Russian publisher of 'Komsomolskaya Pravda' took a decision to close its representation – 'BelKP-PRESS' Close Corporation – in Belarus. The company dealt with the 'Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus' newspaper production since 1994. The closure related to the criminal prosecution of its employee, a journalist Henadzi Mazheika (see 'Criminal Cases' for details).

Prosecution of independent press distributors

The suspension of publication of independent print media was accompanied by the emergence of unregistered publications, which were published by activists. These publications mostly contained reprints of content from independent news Websites. The people involved in the distribution of such newspapers were prosecuted and fined in early 2021.

Thus, Yury Laktsiyonau was fined 638 Belarusian rubles for the distribution of 'Hrodziensky Chas' small-circulation newspaper in Hrodna on February 1, 2021. The periodical was distributed through mailboxes free of charge. (16 editions of 'Hrodziensky Chas' newspaper have been published since August 2020.)

Eight people, who dealt with production and distribution of 'Mahilouskiya Vestki' unregistered newspaper, were detained in the city of Mahilou in January – February 2021. 2000 copies of 'Mahilouskiya Vestki' periodical were seized from Aleh Pahyly at that. Most of the detainees were fined later.

Zmitsier Shashkou was detained while transporting 4000 copies of this newspaper on February 11, 2021. Consequently, he was sentenced to 10 days of arrest on administrative charges for the alleged disobedience to the police and fined 1450 Belarusian rubles.

Tatsiana Yukho was fined for distributing the unregistered 'Vitsiebski Vesnik' digest in Vitsiebsk on February 10, 2021. The police seized 500 copies of this periodical from her home. Two residents of Minsk district were detained in March 2021, including the Director of a private printing house, Artsiom Fedasenka, and the administrator of "Atolina" Telegram channel, Pavel Yukhnevich. (15,000 copies of 'protest' newspapers were found in P. Yukhnevich's car.)

According to the Investigative Committee's report, the detainees produced more than 21,000 copies of 'radical' newspapers and more than 10,000 leaflets, which they planned to distribute in the city of Minsk as well as on the territories of Minsk, Mahilou, Homiel, and Hrodna regions.

A.Fedasenka and P. Yukhnevich were accused of producing and distributing 'protest leaflets, stickers, and newspapers', as well as taking part in marches on Sundays in August-September 2020. They were presented charges under two articles of the Criminal Code, including Article 342 (participation in actions that grossly violate public order) and Article 361 (distribution of materials, which contain calls for actions, aimed at causing harm to the national security of Belarus). Each of them was sentenced to 4 years of imprisonment in January 2022.

VIOLATIONS RELATED TO ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Restriction of access to information

Independent media workers faced obstacles on the part of official authorities, while covering public events in the first half-year of 2021. Among other, they were denied press credentials and access to the places of events. Also, they were detained and fined for the alleged participation in unauthorized mass events.

Thus, on February 19, 2021, the journalists from TUT.by, Onliner, Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus, BelaPAN, 'Novy Chas', and Office.life were denied accreditation for the trial of their colleague Katsiaryna Barysevich and the intensive care doctor Artsiom Sarokin (*see more details in the chapter on 'Criminal Cases'*).

On March 23, 2021, only one independent journalist out of many – Stanislau Korshunau ('Brestskaya Gazeta', TUT.by) was admitted to the court room during the hearing of the high-profile case on mass riots in Pinsk, which allegedly took place on August 9, 2020.

Independent journalists from Mahilou Aliaksandr Burakou and Uladzimir Laptsevich were detained, while leaving the square in front of Mahilou Regional Court on May 12,

2021. The trial on the case of one of Belarusian Christian Democracy party leaders, Pavel Seviarynets and other political prisoners started in the closed court session there.

Starting from July 2021, when the repression against the independent press in Belarus reached its peak (*see details in the chapter on 'Persecution of Journalists'*), quite a few of independent journalists actually lost the opportunity to use the journalist's right to access to information, as their publications appeared to be outlawed one way or another.

Obstacles to foreign media activities

Foreign correspondents faced problems with obtaining press credentials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after their revocation from all foreign journalists on October 2, 2020, due to the adoption of new accreditation rules.

The submitted claims for new accreditations in accordance with the new rules were left without attention for months, despite the set 30-day terms for their consideration.

The Ministry representatives explained the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, it is known that the press credentials were issued to Russian media outlets, such as Sputnik and RIA Novosti. (Their journalists were allowed to attend court sessions even if the doors for their colleagues from other media were closed.)

On April 12, the Ministry of Information excluded the Euronews TV channel from the list of foreign mass media that was permitted to distribute their production in Belarus. It happened as soon as the previously issued permission expired.

The official authorities closed the correspondent office of 'Euroradio' in Belarus on July 5, 2021. It had operated since 2009. Its journalists were stripped of their press credentials along with other colleagues from foreign media in October 2020.

On July 6, 2021, the Ministry of Information of Belarus took a decision to strip two Ukrainian TV channels - UA and KVARTAL of their permits for broadcasting TV programs in Belarus. The decision was grounded on the alleged violation of advertising law by the media outlets.

A journalist of Kurdish NRT TV Channel Zhian Katarin Moberg wasn't permitted to enter Belarus at the airport of Minsk on November 22, 2021. The reporter is a Danish citizen. And she came to cover the crisis with migrants at the Belarusian border. However, she was sent back on November 23, 2021. The Border Committee of Belarus explained the refusal of entry with the absence of valid press credentials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

THE STATE MEDIA SECTOR ACTIVITIES

The increasing state propaganda alongside the suppression of independent media have become a priority policy of Belarusian governmental authorities since the time of presidential election in 2020.

Thus, the Ministry of Information of Belarus spent 40,000 Belarusian rubles on a study, dedicated to "Development of scientific and practical recommendations and means of effective struggle with the spread of destructive information content in modern realities." The study was conducted by the Belarusian State University. It was aimed at preparing a set of recommendations for improving the operation of 'the leading media', i.e., the state-owned media outlets, as presented by Belarusian authorities.

A new resolution of the Ministry of Information entered into force on January 15, 2021. It introduced incentive payments to the employees of budgetary organizations, subordinated to the governmental agency, and budgetary organizations from the field of responsibility of the Ministry of Information, subordinated to local executive and administrative authorities.

Thus, the allowances for the complexity and stress of work were established for managers, specialists and other employees of such organizations, except for working professions, since July 1, 2021. The allowances reached up to 50% of the salaries of these employees. The amount of bonus increased from 5% to 20%. The amount of one-time recovery payment increased, too.

On **July 30, 2021**, Aliaksandr Lukashenka shared his vision of the state media policy with the representatives of local authorities:

'Each chairperson of executive committee should have a clear idea of the information map of his / her district or city. The existing media outlets and resources. The editorial policy they implement. The level of their public support. The deputy chairperson, who supervises the issues of ideology and information, must know in person all journalists, bloggers, administrators of Telegram channels and chat rooms, who live and work in the district, and work with them individually. Not only should all work be done under your control. Everything should be done with your permission.'

Subject to the propaganda activity of the state TV channels, which used hate speech against the opponents of the government, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) suspended the membership of the Belarusian State TV and Radio Broadcasting Company in the organization on June 30, 2021.

Consequently, the Belarusian State TV and Radio Broadcasting Company lost the possibility to broadcast competitions in 18 different sports since July 1, 2021. Also, the national broadcaster was stripped of its right to take part in the Eurovision music contest, denied subscription to the news feed, etc. The employees of the Belarusian State TV and Radio Broadcasting Company lost their right to study at the EBU Academy.