

E-NEWSLETTER: MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

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*Media Convergence: Transformation from the Press to Digital Media
Alaksandr Nikalajchuk "Yezhednievnik"
"Business Internet" Conference, 2007*



Belarusian Association of Journalists

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Governments should demonstrate more clearly that they are ready to defend the freedom of speech not only by empty statements, but also by concrete actions. There has to be a well-defined policy in the mass media field, based upon the principle of freedom of speech. Political leaders should stop pointing to the criticizing journalists as the enemies of the government or the state. It has to be admitted on the top governmental level that journalism is not aimed at playing up to the officials or being their messengers. The objective of mass media is to perform a role of "a watchdog of society" and to inform about significant processes, taking place in the society, including those that may embarrass and worry the mighty of this world.

Thomas Hammarberg
CE Commissioner for Human Rights

Cover Photo: Media Convergence: Transformation from the Press to Digital Media.
Alaksandr Nikalajchuk "Yezhednievnik". "Business Internet" Conference, 2007

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Table of Content:

1. Statistics	p. 4
2. Situation Development in Belarusian Media Field (September 01 – October 31, 2007)	p. 5
3. The Main Problem	p. 9
4. Ratings and Events	p. 11

1. Statistics

1247 printed periodical editions (701 newspapers, 508 magazines, 34 newsletters, 3 catalogues and 1 almanac) and 9 news agencies were officially registered in the Republic of Belarus on October 1, 2007. The number of registered periodical editions remained practically the same in comparison with the previous three months under review: 2 newspapers were closed down and 5 magazines got officially registered.



One new radio broadcaster got registered at the beginning of autumn 2007. Consequently, the general number of registered radio companies amounted to 175 (including 136 state-owned broadcasters) on October 1, 2007. The number of TV companies totaled 60 (including 27 state-owned broadcasters) on the same date. However, it should be emphasized that non-state TV and radio broadcasters are rigidly controlled by the national authorities (firstly, the Ministry of Information) and the local state executive institutions.

The role of the Internet as a source of non-censored information has been confirmed by the data, presented during the “[Business Internet](#)” conference in Minsk on October 4-5, 2007. According to the sociological data available, 21% of adult population of Belarus admitted the Internet to be one of most preferable sources of information. Though the majority of Belarusian Internet users give preference to foreign Internet-resources, the number of popular Belarusian Web-sites is growing as well. Their number has increased by 5,000 and reached 25,000 in the year of 2007. The number of Internet portals has increased to 234 to be compared with 82 last year. The number of Web-sites of printed media outlets is 260 (to be compared with 239 in the year of 2006). The daily audience of the Internet users has increased by 29% in the year of 2007. Presently, it totals 180,000 people. Still, a considerable part of this audience enters the Internet in the search of work, essays and mobile phones, the “Akavita” Web-portal reports.



2. Situation Development in Belarusian Media Field (September 01 – October 31, 2007)

Numerous facts of counteraction to professional journalist activity and out-of-court seizures of print-runs of independent newspapers by the police took place in Belarus within the reporting period. They were supplemented with the wide-spread cases of economic and legal discrimination of non-state media outlets.

Detentions and Arrests of Journalists

There continued persecution of journalists, contributing to foreign media outlets that broadcast to Belarus in different regions. Thus, the Public Prosecutor's Office for Hrodna region issued official warnings to free-lance journalists Natalia Makushyna and Ivan Roman on *September 3, 2007* for their cooperation with foreign mass media without valid journalist accreditations. A free-lance journalist from Homeil Ales Karniayenka received a similar warning from the Public Prosecutor's Office for Homiel region on *September 21, 2007*.

Counteraction to Distribution of the Press

Police officers conducted a double search of the house, belonging to Ales Yazvinski, the Editor of non-registered "Brama" newspaper in Niasvizh (Minsk region) on *September 19, 2007*. They seized 170 copies of this periodical edition and made an attempt to seize the Editor's personal computer.

The police officers from Zhlobin District Department of Interior (Homiel region) detained two cars with a part of print-run of "Tovarisch" newspaper (around 7,000 copies) on *September 26, 2007*. Moreover, 10,000 copies of this



periodical were seized by the police at Minsk-located editorial office of "Tovarisch" newspaper on *September 27, 2007*. The newspaper issue was dedicated to the oppositional 'Social March', planned to be held in November

2007. The newspaper copies were returned to the publisher at the end of November 2007, in reply to a special request to the Public Prosecutor's office.

The police seized around 400 copies of "Narodnaya Vola" non-state social and political newspaper from the Conservative and Christian BPF Party activists Ales Pazniak and Ales Yemiyanau in Vitsiebsk on *October 30, 2007*. Reportedly, the private distributors were detained by the police as soon as they took the copies of "Narodnaya Vola", passed from Minsk for distribution on the territory of Vitsiebsk region, from a left-luggage office at the railway station. Among other, the police officers were interested if the newspaper issue contained any information about the coming oppositional 'Social March' in Minsk. While seizing the newspaper copies, the policemen started calculating their quantity; then they got tired and made up their minds to weigh the arrested copies instead. 'They got 15 kilos,' – Ales Paznyak said.

Economic Discrimination of the Independent Press

As before, the majority of non-state social and political periodicals are excluded from subscription catalogues of "Belposhta" state monopolist press distributing enterprise for the year to come.

Brest Branch of "Belposta" state enterprise refused again to include a non-state "Hantsavitski Chas" newspaper in its Subscription Catalogue. The monopolist distributing company considered cooperation with the non-governmental periodical edition to be "inexpedient". The Branch Director G. Tsitova signed a letter in reply with this statement, dated by *October 3, 2007*.

It should be mentioned that the newspaper was among three periodicals for Hantsavichy district with the largest circulations in the year of 2005. However, on the eve of Presidential elections at the end of 2005, "Belposhta" terminated cooperation with the newspaper editorial. "Hantsavitski Chas" was excluded from the state distributor's subscription catalogue 2006.

The newspaper publisher "IntexPress-Region" Private Unitary Enterprise addressed to the "Brestablsayuzdruk" state enterprise with a request to resume distribution of "Hantsavitski Chas". No reply has been received so far.

The Monitoring Service of Belarusian Association of Journalists witnessed several cases of compulsory subscription for the state-owned press within the current subscription campaign 2008.

Baranavichy city authorities obliged the heads of all local enterprises and organizations to arrange subscription of their subordinates to a local state-owned 'Nash Kraj' newspaper "in connection with the complicated financial state of the media outlet" and "in order to foster the workers' spiritual and moral development". A corresponding official instruction was signed by the Head of Baranavichy City Executive Committee on *September 6, 2007*. The state official explained his instruction by the necessity "to increase the newspaper's circulation by 20%" as well as "to broaden the information field".

State-financed organizations and state-owned enterprises in Karelichy, Hrodna region, made their employees subscribe to a package of state-run papers for the final quarter of 2007, threatening not to pay them their bonuses otherwise

The package for compulsory subscription included *Sovetskaya Belorussia*, a district paper *Polymia* and the so-called 'trade' periodicals: *Meditsinskiy Vestnik* ("Medical Newsletter") for doctors, *Nastaunickaja Hazeta* ("Teachers' Newspaper") for teachers, etc.

'*Miascovy Chas*', an independent newspaper circulating in Pinsk region, said good-bye to its readers on *September 27, 2007*. The weekly covering social and political issues had been published for four years. It had to close down for financial reasons.



The periodical was launched on September 25, 2003. Alaksiej Biely, its Editor-in-Chief, said '*Miascovy Chas*' had been facing problems ever since it opened its office in Pinsk. The weekly had been denied accreditation, which entailed complications not only with renting an office, but also obtaining information from official institutions.

In 2003 the managers of a state-owned printing house in Pinsk refused to print 'Miascovy Chas'. The paper had to be printed in Baranavichy and then transported from there. The same year the managers of 'Brestabsajzdruk', the state monopolist delivering periodicals, refused to include 'Miascovy Chas' into its subscription catalogue or to sell the paper via the state newsagents.

'Some top officials did not like the region to have a paper that tells the truth, centers on social problems, interviews prominent public and political figures, whose views differ from those of the government,' said Alaksiej Biely, 'Miascovy Chas' Editor-in-Chief to BAJ monitoring service. 'Even private businessmen, whose problems 'Miascovy Chas' covered more than once, have decided against taking the risk of signing contracts to sell our newspaper.'

According to Alaksiej Biely, even those who considered the MC readers their target group and were longing for social transformations were scared to advertise in 'Miascovy Chas'. 'But a newspaper is a business. If it receives no revenues from adverts, it is very difficult to survive,' says the Editor-in-Chief. It all led to a dramatic fall in circulation from 2500 to 1300 copies.

Most Significant Legal Suits

The Leninski district court of Minsk ruled to exact 25 million BRB from the newspaper "Narodnaya Vola" and another 2 million from its journalist Maryna Koktysh in favour of Alieh Praliaskouski, the head of the Central Ideological Department of the presidential administration on *October 1, 2007*. This decision was rendered on October 1 by judge Zhulkouskaja, who considered Praliaskouski's claim for the protection of his honour, dignity, business reputation and moral damages.

The claim was provoked by an article named "Vladimir Holod is still under custody" published in "Narodnaya Vola" on August, 2 2007. The article was placed in the "Sensational Cases" section and covered the detention for bribery of a high-ranking official of the presidential administration.

According to Maryna Koktysh, Praliaskouski's complaints stem from the fragment which reads about the hearsay in the power lobby, related indirectly to his personality.

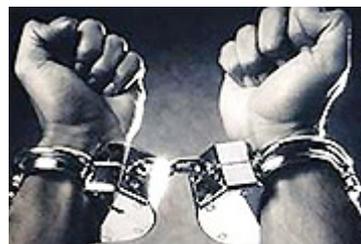
On *October 2, 2007*, the Board of Appeal at Minsk City Court left unchanged the sentence to Andrei Klimau, a politician and a writer of political essays. The court session was closed to public.

It should be reminded that the public activist Andrei Klimau got detained in Minsk on April 3, 2007. The public prosecution accused him of breaking article 361 of the Criminal Code of Belarus (Public appeals for violent subversion of a political system). Consequently, the democratic activist was convicted to two years of imprisonment for an article, published in the Internet (www.ucpb.org) this summer.

3. The Main Problem

The problem of **arbitrary detentions of journalists** was especially acute within the reporting period.

The journalists of non-state periodical editions – Vasil Fiadosenka (Reuters), Viktor Drachou (“France-Presse”) and a free-lance “Nasha Niva” correspondent Arsien Pahomau were detained in Baranavichy on *September 10, 2007*.



They had come to Baranavichy City Court in order to cover a trial over a youth democratic activist Jaraslau Hryshchenia.

The journalists were preliminary accused of “participation in an unauthorized meeting and rowdy behaviour”. All of them, apart from a free-lance correspondent Arsien Pahomau, were released on showing their press cards to the police authorities.

Arsien Pahomau, a “Nasha Niva” free-lance photographer was kept at Baranavichy regional police station for about 7 hours, despite the fact that his journalist certificate and passport were on him. Policemen drew up a report

blaming him for “petty hooliganism”. Being presented the framed-up charges, the journalist was fined on *September 21, 2007*.

On *September 23, 2007*, when independent journalists were coming back from ‘The Right to Be Free’ rock festival, the Belarusian customs officers at the Belarus-Ukrainian border copied information from their cameras and listened to the tape records without the journalists’ permission.

The Leninski City District Court in Hrodna sentenced an independent journalist Ivan Roman to 5 days of administrative arrest on *October 10, 2007*. The media worker was allegedly accused of committing misdemeanor (article 17.1 of Belarus’ Code on Administrative Torts). The press representatives weren’t permitted to attend the court session.



Ivan Roman believes he has been included in the police ‘black list’ since the recent Presidential election. On the eve of mass public actions, the authorities usually detain their potential participants. It should be reminded that Ivan Roman was arrested twice on similar charges after the Presidential election 2006 and the Freedom Day on March 25, 2006.

Leninski District Court in Hrodna sentenced Ihar Bancar, Editor of “Magazyn Polski na uchodźstwie”, published by the Independent Union of Poles in Belarus, to a 10-day arrest, allegedly, for ‘cursing’ on *October 11, 2007*. As soon as the sentence got pronounced, the journalist declared he was going on hunger strike.

The court session was close to public. Neither journalists nor civil representatives were permitted to enter the courtroom.

Ihar Bancar got released from jail ahead of time on *October 17, 2007*. The journalist’s colleagues are sure it was done in order to prevent a mass protest action in support of Ihar Bancar, planned to be held near the prison building.

The police detained about 27 people, who gathered at the place of mass murders of Stalin times near the village Palai close to Vitsebsk on *October 30*,

2007. Some journalists and BAJ members were detained as well: Alena Stsiapanava, Leanid Svetsik, Vadzim Barshcheusky, and Siarhej Piatrenka.

Reportedly, the requiem action participants, having commemorated the victims of Stalinism, were preparing to get back to Vitsiebsk, when policemen detained their bus and drove it off to a building of the regional police department. The detained were informed there that they were suspected in participation in an unauthorized public action.

The police released Alena Stsiapanava and Vadzim Barshcheusky just after they had shown their BAJ membership cards.

Transcripts of interrogation were drawn up on Siarhej Piatrenka, a freelance correspondent of “Narodnaya Volya” newspaper and Leanid Svetsik, an author of “Za Prava Chalaveka” (“For Human Rights”) human rights newsletter, who hadn’t press cards with them.

4. Ratings and Events

Owing to the witnessed systematic violations of media freedoms in Belarus, “Reporters without Borders” placed the country on the 151st position out of 169 available in the Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2007. The same poor record of Belarus had been stated by the international organization a year before. The report was published on *October 16, 2007*.

Three Belarusian journalists – Hienadz Barbarych, Anatol Hatouchyts and Natalia Makushyna received Dzmitry Zavadski Memorial Awards “For Courage and Professionalism” on *September 10, 2007*. The award is annually presented to the most worthy media professionals by the First Channel (Russia) and the Belarusian Association of Journalists.



Moreover, Ihar Hiermianchuk Memorial Diploma “For Adherence to the Principles of Freedom of Speech” was

presented to Iosif Syaredzich, the “Narodnaya Vola” Editor-in-Chief. The Honorary Diploma was founded by the Norwegian PEN-center and the Norwegian Human Rights House together with BAJ. This year, the awarding ceremony has been dated to the International Solidarity Day of Journalists, globally celebrated on September 8.

It was a year on *September 4, 2007*, since the first issue of *Ezhednevnik* had appeared. It is the first and so far the only e-newspaper in Belarus, which is distributed via the Internet exclusively. Having subscribed to *Ej* at www.ej.by,



every morning the reader finds its free PDF-version in their inbox. Thus *Ej* avoids complications with being included into the subscription catalogues or printing, so a lot of people call it a ‘Belarusian paper of the future.’

‘It took enormous effort to convince our readers and advertisers that the project is viable and we can really offer a quality product. But in six months all the doubts were gone,’ says *Ej*’s Editor-in-Chief Siarhiey Sacuk in his interview to BAJ Press Service. Today, by *Ej*’s reckoning, it has about 12,000 subscribers.