

E-NEWSLETTER: MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

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A "Nasha Niva" correspondent Siamion Piechanko got released from jail after 15 days of administrative arrest. The media worker had been detained by riot police, while reporting from a peaceful rally in Minsk



Belarusian Association of Journalists

www.baj.by

“The Belarusian independent journalism has appeared as if a penal battalion on the front line nowadays. And the state authorities carry on demonstrating their top priority of information control.”

*Zhanna Litvina, Chairperson of Belarusian Association of Journalists.
Interview to the BAJ Press Service*

Cover Photo: A "Nasha Niva" correspondent Siamion Piechanko got released from jail after 15 days of administrative arrest. The media worker had been detained by riot police, while reporting from a peaceful rally in Minsk.

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1. Statistics

1273 printed periodical editions (694 newspapers, 537 magazines, 37 newsletters, 4 catalogues and 1 almanac) and 9 news agencies had the official registration certificates in the Republic of Belarus on May 1, 2008. The Ministry of Information of Belarus cancelled 22 certificates of media outlets and issued 5 registration papers to periodical editions *in April 2008*. All in all, the Ministry has nullified 1235 registration certificates of media outlets since 1996.

The number of registered state-owned printed periodical editions totals 395 publications, including 217 newspapers. The number of non-state printed periodical editions amounts to 858 publications, including 477 newspapers.



According to the BAJ analysis, the number of social and political non-state printed media outlets does not exceed 30 publications in Belarus these days. Nearly a half of them have been excluded from the state-owned monopolist systems of press distribution by subscription and through the news-stalls.

The majority of printed mass media are published in Russian (534 periodicals) as well as in Russian and other languages (367 periodicals). Only 76 periodical editions are published in Belarusian (6% of the total number of all existing and duly registered printed periodical editions in the country). 278 more periodicals are published in Belarusian and other languages. Thus, the Belarusian language is noted as a language of publishing in 354 registration certificates of media outlets to be compared with the Russian language, declared as a language of publishing in 901 media registration certificates. Eight periodical editions are published in other languages in the Republic of Belarus. Thus, English is noted as a language of publishing in three media registration certificates. Four periodicals are published in Polish and one periodical is published in the Ukrainian language.

221 broadcasters (including 65 TV and 156 radio broadcasting media outlets) had the officially registered status in Belarus *on May 1, 2008*.

3 new TV broadcasting organizations have been registered since March 1, 2008.

The majority of officially registered TV and radio broadcasting media (165) belong to the state. Only 56 broadcasting organizations belong to private owners.

It should be emphasized that all non-state TV and radio broadcasters are rigidly controlled by the local state executive institutions and the national authorities.

2. Situation Development in the Belarusian Media Field (March – April 2008)

Detentions and arrests of journalists during an oppositional public action, dedicated to the Liberty Day *on March 25, 2008* and a nation-wide series of KGB searches, held in a large number of private apartments, belonging to private journalists as well as in a range of editorial offices *on March 27-28, 2008* were in the center of public attention *in March – April 2008*.

The “**Nasha Niva**” newspaper journalists **Andrej Liankievich** and **Siamion Piechanko** were detained by police during a peaceful rally, arranged by the democratic opposition in Minsk *on March 25, 2008*. The media workers were taken to



a police prison, although it was absolutely obvious that they had been implementing their professional duties, having their press cards visible to everyone. Being detained, Andrej Liankievich was beaten hard by riot police. Finally, Maskouski City District Court of Minsk sentenced S. Piechanko to 15 days of administrative arrest. The case against A. Liankievich was sent back for revision to the police department.

There happened an incident with a **Lithuanian TV** crew (LTR TV channel), accredited in Belarus, *on March 25, 2008*. A journalist **Ruta Ribogauskene** and a cameraman **Jonas Grishkonis** were detained by riot police with the use of force, while reporting from the opposition rally in Minsk,

dedicated to the 90th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic. The Lithuanian journalists were kept at the Central City District Police Station in Minsk for two hours, as if for a check of their documents.

The policemen seized a video cassette with the filmed materials from the media workers. Moreover, their video camera was damaged at the moment of detention.

As soon as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania lodged a protest, regarding the reprehensible accident, the Ambassador of Belarus in Lithuania presented his apologies on behalf of A. Lukashenka. However, the video cassette has never been returned to the owners. The Lithuanian journalists consider the Ambassador's apologies to be insufficient. Consequently, they are intended to urge the Belarusian state authorities to return the illegally seized video cassette and reimburse their expenses, connected with fixing up the damaged digital video camera.

The KGB officers held a series of searches in 13 private apartments, belonging to independent journalists, as well as in 4 media offices in different Belarusian regions on March 27-28, 2008. The intrusions were authorized by the Public Prosecutor's Office of Minsk. All in all, around 30 media workers suffered from the sudden assault. The Public Prosecutor's Office officially reasoned the necessity of holding the searches with a legal investigation upon a criminal case on libel in relation to the President of Belarus, filed in 2005. In particular, it was connected with distribution of satirical flash-animation about the Belarusian political regime representatives in the Internet.



At the same time, the Belarus' Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the police and the KGB had held an operation against the people that cooperated with foreign media outlets without valid accreditations. Also, independent observers noted that numerous persecuted journalists cooperated with the Polish media outlets, broadcasting their programs to Belarus - "**Belsat**" TV Channel, "**Radio Racyja**", "**The European Radio for Belarus**". (More information on the issue can be found in *The Main Problem* section).

Numerous owners of satellite dishes in Minsk received orders from the local utility enterprises at the turn of March 2008 to remove urgently the “illegally installed” technical equipment till **April 7, 2008**. Otherwise, the local authorities threatened the common dwellers with administrative punishments (see “*Mass Media in Belarus #2: April-May, 2007*”).



The list of other important events in the Belarusian media field in March – April 2008 included renewal of “**Novy Chas**” newspaper publishing, cyber-attacks against the “**Radio Liberty**” and “**The Belarusian Partisan**” informational Web-sites as well as reinforcement of administrative pressure against the “*Vitsiebskiy Kuryer*” and “*Gazeta Slonimskaya*” independent newspapers.

The Pershamajski City District Court of Minsk deblocked the “**Novy Chas**” newspaper’s bank account on *March 13, 2008*. The account had been “frozen” as if in order to secure implementation of a court decision on reimbursement of moral damages upon a claim, submitted by a general and a senator **Mikalay Charhinets**. It should be mentioned that the court urged the “**Novy Chas**” newspaper editorial to pay out 50 million Belarusian rubles to the general (see more details in “*Mass Media in Belarus*” #5: *November-December, 2007*). It became possible to make the payment to the claimant and to resume the newspaper publishing after the forced break due to numerous private donations, sent to the editorial account on publishing the Editor’s appeal to readers.



Free access to a range of informational Web-resources was blocked on the day of “**Charnobylski Shlach**” rally on *April 26, 2008*. The **RL/RFE** Belarusian Service informed the public next day that “a non-stop intense and well-coordinated attack” had been implemented against the Web-site. Consequently, the **RL/RFE** Belarusian Service management called upon their colleagues, working in the Internet, to place the **RL/RFE** materials on their

Web pages in sign of solidarity and support of freedom of speech in the Internet.

Coordinators of “**Belorusskiy Partisan**” Internet-resource informed the public about an intensive DOS-attack against their Web-site *on April 26, 2008*. Moreover, the Web-site team had to suspend the Internet site activity as soon as the passwords got broken and the contents got changed. The journalists accused the Belarusian special services of putting these disgraceful actions into life.

A cyber-attack against the **RL/RFE** Belarusian Service’s Web-site was discussed in the OSCE. **Ms. Julia Findley**, the Head of Permanent Delegation of the United States of America to the OSCE told in her statement that the cyber attack was an obvious manifestation of violation of freedom of speech, to be secured by all OSCE member states. Also, she presented such actions as a new form of aggression that has even more serious consequences in the OSCE region.

The administrative pressure against the “**Gazeta Slonimskaya**” weekly has increased rapidly in the recent period of time. It should be mentioned that this periodical edition has been stated to be among the best printed periodical editions in Eastern Europe – 2007 by the **ZEIT Foundation** (Germany).



The local authorities delivered an oral instruction to ban selling the “**Gazeta Slonimskaya**” newspaper in the city trading network in the spring 2008. (It should be emphasized that the newspaper cannot be sold through the state-owned news-stalls as well.) Moreover, the independent distribution network got jeopardized *in April 2008*. At the same time, the renter announced termination of validity of rental agreement with the newspaper editorial. To crown it all, Slonim District Military registration and enlistment office handed over an order to the “Gazeta Slonimskaya” Editor-in-Chief (50 y.o.) to take part in a military muster on April 22, 2008. It should be emphasized that the military muster terms coincided with an enormously tense period of time, including cancellation of rental agreement (since June 1, 2008) and

termination of license on selling the newspaper on-retail (June 25, 2008). The “Gazeta Slonimskaya” Editor-in-Chief is sure that all these actions have been agreed on and directed to complete destruction of the only officially registered independent social and political newspaper in the Hrodna region.

The “**Vitsiebskiy Kuryer M**” newspaper has been coming across similar problems within a long period of time (see “*Mass Media in Belarus #5: November – December, 2007; #1 (6): January – February, 2008*”). The first issue of “Vitsiebskiy Kuryer M” after a forced suspension from publishing got printed in Smolensk printing house (Russia). However, the whole print-run got detained by Vitsiebsk police and seized *on April 24, 2008*. Non-appearance of one issue could lead to cancellation of registration certificate. Therefore, in order to prevent the situation, the newspaper editorial prepared the second issue of “Vitsiebskiy Kuryer M”. It was published *on May 3, 2008*.

3. The Main Problem

KGB officers held mass searches in the private apartments of independent journalists and in several media offices at *the end of March 2008*. The searches were carried out practically simultaneously in Minsk, Hrodna, Mahilou, Babruysk (Mahilou region), Homiel, Vitsiebsk, Navapolatsk (Vitsiebsk region), Brest, Biaroza, Baranavichy and Pinsk (Brest region) in the morning of March 27, 2008. More searches took place in media workers' apartments in Asipovichy and Horki (Mahilou region) on March 28, 2008. Office equipment, audio and video records, documents and books were seized from the journalists during the searches.

Reportedly, the searches in apartments of independent media workers were implemented by instruction of **A. Stuk**, Deputy Public Prosecutor of Minsk to general-major V. Vegera, who is holding the position of Deputy Head of KGB in Belarus.



The order enlisted the people, who, allegedly, work for “**Belsat**” TV Channel, “**Radio Racyja**”, “**The European Radio for Belarus**” as well as the “**Batskaushchyna**” NGO and **BPF Party** activists from Hrodna.

Ms. Maryia Vanshyna, the Head of Informational Department at the Belarus' Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that the persecuted people weren't journalists as they were working for foreign media outlets without proper press accreditations.

However, it should be mentioned that the Republic of Belarus has ratified the International Pact on Civil and Political Rights. Article 19 of the document ensures everybody's right to receive and distribute information and ideas of any kind, regardless the state borders.

Actually, in any case, the Belarusian law doesn't envisage taking such rigid measures as searches and seizures of property in relation to journalists that work without accreditation in the country. Therefore, the orders on holding the searches were linked to a criminal case (part 1, article 367 of Belarus' Criminal Code), filed for defaming the President of Belarus in 2005. The offense was connected with the appearance of satirical flash-animation in the Internet.

The suspects on the case have been residing abroad since long ago. None of them is connected with the journalists, which private apartments were sought by the KGB officers.

A suspect Pavel Marozau is living in Estonia nowadays. He recollects that the "Multclub" case has been repeatedly used in order to meet similar goals in the past. Thus, the searches at the apartments, belonging to the members of "Partnerstva" NGO were held under the pretext of connection to the "flash-animation case" some time ago. Moreover, the special services used the case in order to put pressure upon the regional youth activists. "And now they have taken journalists in hand. It must be a very convenient case, as thus they can seize the office equipment and interrogate a large circle of people on diverse issues", P. Marozau emphasized.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists addressed to the Prosecutor General of Belarus Ryhor Vasilevich in connection with the mass KGB searches in a number of private apartments of independent journalists as well as in a range of offices on March 27 and 28, 2008. The copies of appeal were sent to the Head of Belarus KGB Yury Zhadobin and the Public Prosecutor

of Minsk Mikalay Kulik. The Belarusian Association of Journalists insisted on returning the seized property as well as on ensuring the journalists' rights and lawful interests in the letter of appeal. The officials stated in their replies that no violations of law took place during the searches. It was confirmed that the journalists' property would be returned to the owners, as soon as it was examined properly.

After the KGB searches, the persecuted journalists were summoned to interrogations as witnesses.

The mass searches caused a distinctly negative reaction all around the world. Among other, the KGB campaign of repression against independent journalists was condemned by the International Federation of Journalists, the Reporters without Borders, the Norwegian Human Rights House Foundation, the Norwegian Union of Journalists, the Norwegian PEN-Center, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, the Committee to Protect Journalists (USA), the OSCE Representative of Freedom of the Media, the US Department of State, the EP Chairman, the Head of EP Committee on Foreign Affairs, the European Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia, presently chairing the CE Committee of Ministers, and the Special Reporter on Media Freedom at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

4. Ratings and Events

The 12th International Specialized Exhibition “Mass Media in Belarus” was held in Minsk from April 28 till May 01, 2008. It was founded by the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National State TV and Radio Company, Minsk City Executive Committee, the Belarusian Union of Journalists, and the Union of Press Publishers and Distributors.



It should be emphasized that none Belarusian independent periodical editions were represented during the event among more than 800 media

outlets from Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Poland, Lithuania, India and China.

A solemn ceremony of presenting awards to the winners of the 4th National Competition of Print Media – “The Golden Letter” – took place in the framework of the “Mass Media in Belarus” exhibition *on April 28, 2008*. “**Sovietskaya Byelorussia**” was acknowledged to be the best social and political newspaper in Belarus. “**Gomielskaya Prawd**a” and “**Nasha Zhyccio**” were recognized to be the best regional and district newspapers correspondingly.

The US analytical center **Freedom House** released its annual survey of global press freedom *on May 3, 2008*. Belarus has been given the 188th position out of 195 available in the Freedom of the Press 2008 ranking to be compared with its 186th position in the year of 2007. It has been for six years already that Belarus got placed on the list of countries, lacking the press liberties (64 states this year) alongside with Uzbekistan, Cuba, Turkmenistan etc.



In particular, the chapter, dedicated to Belarus, denotes total control over the state media activity, diverse means of persecuting the independent media, mass closures of non-state media organizations and independent media outlets etc.