

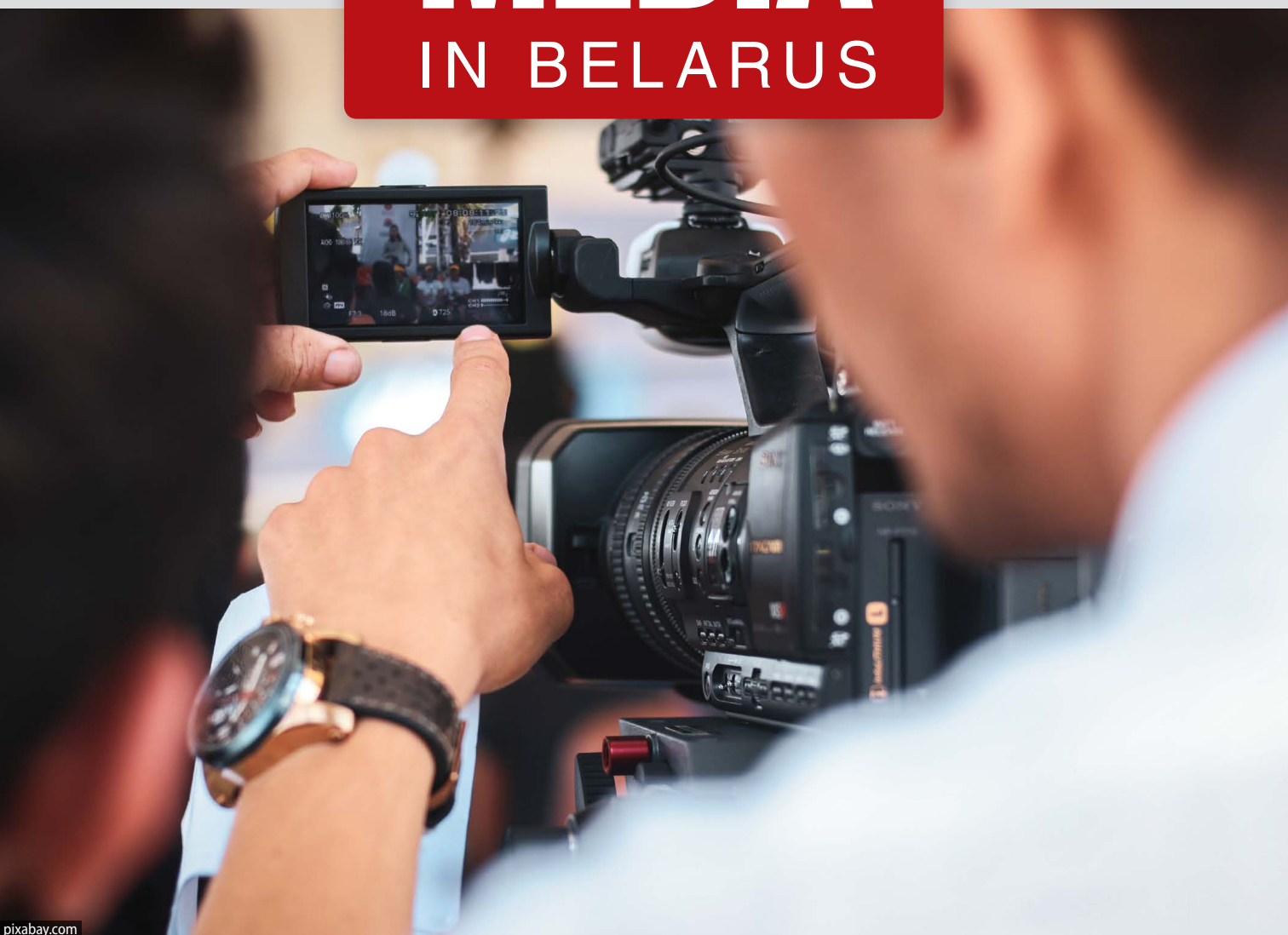
WWW.BAJ.BY



E-NEWSLETTER

# MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

№ 1 (60)  
RESULTS  
OF THE YEAR 2019



pixabay.com

**2** | Media Results  
of the Year 2019  
in Figures

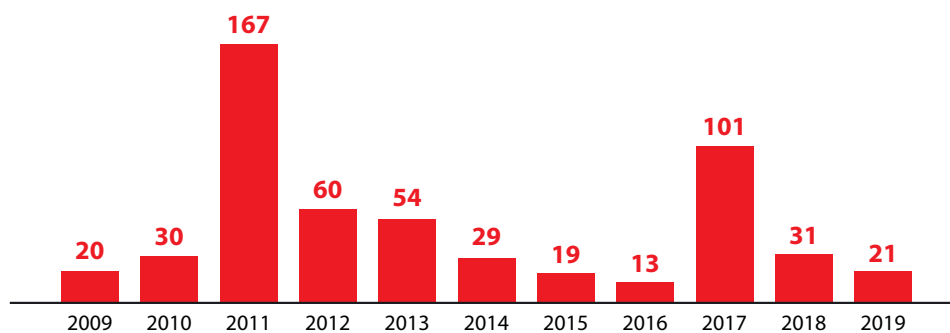
**4** | Situation  
in Mass Media Field  
in 2019 (review)

**13** | Indexes  
and Rating  
Lists

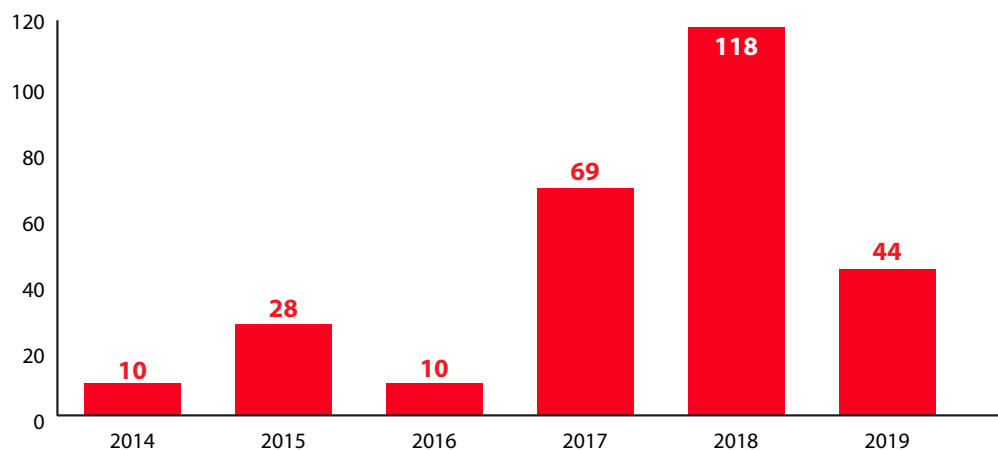
# Media Results of the Year 2019 in Figures

**2** journalists and bloggers convicted on criminal charges

**21** journalists and bloggers suffered from arbitrary detention



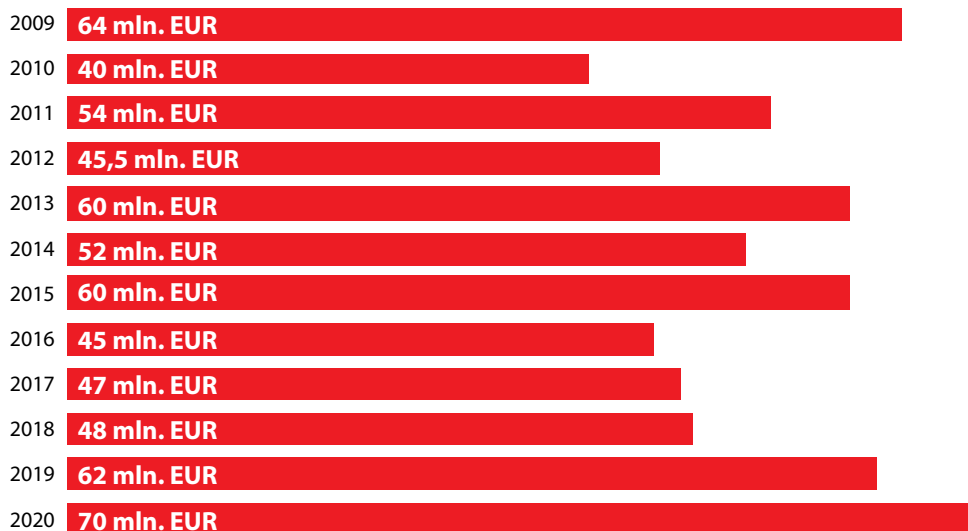
**44** fines imposed on freelance journalists for collaboration with foreign media without accreditation



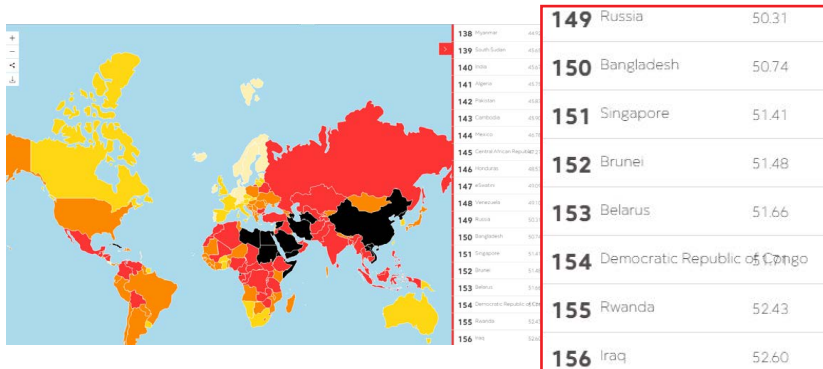
**EUR 18,000** is the total sum of fines imposed on journalists for contributing materials to foreign media

**6** non-state Web-resources got registered as mass media since the moment of adoption of amendments to the Mass Media Law of Belarus, which stipulate the registration procedure for online media

**Over EUR 70 million** reserved for funding the state-owned media in the State budget 2020



**153** (out of 180) is the ranking of Belarus in [the World Press Freedom Index](#), compiled by 'Reporters without Borders'



## Situation in Mass Media Field in 2019 (review)

The general situation in the Belarusian mass media field was controversial in 2019. On the one hand, it was influenced by the overwhelming trend of reinforcing governmental control over the media space. On the other hand, due to hosting the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Games, the official authorities were pushed towards greater openness of the country. The complicated foreign policy and economic situation in Belarus, including negotiation processes with the European Union and the United States, the increasing size of external debt and pressure on the part of Russia as well as the elections to the Belarusian parliament, held on November 17, 2019, had their impact on the situation in the media field, too.

[The 2<sup>nd</sup> European Games](#) were held in the capital city of Minsk on June 21-30, 2019.



On the eve of the international sport event, a human rights organization Human Rights Watch [called](#) upon the Olympic officials to guarantee safety of journalists in Minsk:

→ *“Belarusian authorities have carried out concerted attacks on media freedom over the past two years*

*that directly affect the climate in which news media will cover the country before, during, and after the upcoming European Games, Human Rights Watch said today. The European Olympic Committees (EOC) should ensure that all journalists, foreign and local, covering the 2019 European Games in Belarus can operate free from harassment.”*

Despite the fears of human rights activists and journalistic organizations, none of serious conflicts related to the implementation of journalistic activities occurred during the European Games. Moreover, the pressure on freelance journalists had decreased by the beginning of the international sport event. In particular, such journalists were fined 38 times on court decisions for cooperation with foreign mass media without press credentials within the period since January till the end of May 2019. The wave of oppression suspended since May 31, 2019.



However, it resumed after a three-month-long break. Consequently, the BAJ registered [44 fines](#), imposed on freelance journalists in 2019 to the total sum of 42049.5 Belarusian rubles (approx. USD 21,000).

Criminal prosecution of journalists and bloggers on different grounds was among the main problems in the field of freedom of expression in Belarus in 2019.



## The guilty verdict in relation to TUT.BY Chief Editor Maryna Zolatava and completion of ‘BelTA case’

On March 4, 2019, the Zavodski City District court of Minsk found the editor-in-chief of the leading Belarusian Internet portal [TUT.BY](https://tut.by) Maryna Zolatova guilty of inaction as an official (Article 425 of the Criminal Code of Belarus) and sentenced her to a fine of 7 650 Belarusian rubles (about \$ 3,800 at the rate of the National Bank of Belarus).

Moreover, [the court urged her](#) to cover the procedural costs of BelTA, connected with the litigation, in the amount of 6 000 Belarusian rubles (about \$3,000).

→ *M. Zolatava's conviction completed the so-called ‘BelTA case’, which had been filed [in the summer of 2018](#).*

*The case initiation was caused by the unsanctioned use of passwords to the news string of BelTA state news agency by some journalists. (The BelTA materials could be accessed*



*on the Web-site of the agency free of charge at that. The persecuted mass media published the materials in question with due consideration of BelTA rules. The passwords to the News String weren't changed by BelTA for years.)*

*The editorial offices of BelaPAN News Agency, TUT.BY Web-portal and a number of other media as well as private apartments of some journalists, employed by the media, were subjected to searches on August 7-9, 2018.*

*Professional technical equipment and information carriers were seized during the searches. Around 20 journalists were detained and interrogated by legal investigators. Eight of them were sent to custody for the period of up to three days. Criminal cases were filed in relation to 15 journalists on the charges, envisaged by article 349 part 2 of the Criminal Code of Belarus ('the unauthorized access to computer information, committed out of mercenary or other personal interest.)*

The legal investigators' actions [evoked protests](#) on the part of human rights defenders, journalist organizations and international bodies, including the Council of Europe, the European Union, and OSCE.





The criminal cases against 14 journalists were terminated at the end of 2018. The media workers were brought to administrative responsibility in the form of large fines and actual compulsion to pay compensation to BelTA and the “SB. Belarus today” newspaper, published by the Presidential Administration.

The TUT.BY Chief Editor Maryna Zolatava appeared to be the only convicted person on the ‘BelTA case’, who was brought to criminal responsibility.

- *“Conviction & fining of Marina Zolotova, editor of TUT.BY, along with disproportionate measures of law enforcement against BelaPAN & TUT.BY agencies in 2018, may exert chilling effect on independent media in Belarus”, [noted Harlem Désir](#), OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.*
- *“The way the authorities persisted with this case, which was out of all proportion from the outset, shows their determination to undermine the state media’s rivals”, [noted ‘Reporters without borders’](#) reacting to the court verdict in relation to M. Zolatava.*

The Chairperson of the Supreme Court of Belarus [Valiantsin Sukala noted](#) that the increased public attention to the trial against Zolatava, including the presence of diplomats and reporters, could be regarded as indirect pressure on the court.





## The case of blogger Andrei Pauk

---

On March 20, the Investigative Committee of Belarus used its official Telegram channel to announce the initiation of a criminal case under article 340 part 1 of the Criminal Code of Belarus on the fact of a deliberately false report of mining a district executive committee in the urban settlement of Aktsiabrski. A local blogger Andrei Pauk was presented as the suspect in the case, since his mobile phone number was indicated in the message about the mining.

A.Pauk was detained on March 20, 2019. His house was searched and his computer and other professional equipment [were seized](#).

→ *According to legal investigators, A. Pauk sent an email to the Homiel Regional Branch of the Ministry of Emergency Situations with a message about the mining of the Aktsiabrski District Executive Committee, which is the local governmental authority. A.Pauk was released after the interrogation procedure. The criminal case in relation to him was terminated and all technical equipment was returned to him one month later.*

The story with false mining repeated in May 2019. An e-mail message about the 'mining' of the court building in the city of Mazyr was received by the Ministry of Emergency Situations.



A.Pauk was considered as the suspect on the case, since his mobile phone number was mentioned in the message.

[A.Pauk appealed to the Office of Legal Investigation Committee and the Prosecutor General](#) with a request to find the person, who makes use of his personal data to disseminate false messages about the ‘mining’ of governmental institutions. Moreover, he filed a claim to court against the police officers, who had violated his rights during the apartment search in his opinion. He requested the court to oblige the policemen to cover his moral damages for his arbitrary detention on suspicion of false mining.

→ *The blogger received personal threats from unknown persons through the Viber messenger on the eve of the litigation in Aktsiabrski District Court on September 24, 2019:*

*«There will be a court hearing tomorrow, and you will lose the case. The issue with the search was initiated to make you think about your behavior, shut your stinking mouth, and find a job. Say thanks that we didn't give you anything. Should you continue to engage in sabotage and defame the existing government, certain measures will be taken against you. You will be imprisoned and your [obscenity] wife will carry parcels to jail [...]».*

*The author of the harassing message hasn't been found yet.*

On October 4, 2019, an operational officer on duty from the local District Department of Internal Affairs phoned Andrei Pauk and told him that, allegedly, a phone call had been received from the phone number, owned by Mr. Pauk. Reportedly, the unknown person introduced himself as Andrei and told Mr. Pauk's home address, saying that he ‘had killed his wife Olga’. Andrei's wife Olga had to provide explanations that the phone call was a provocation. The district police representatives informed the Pauks that they wouldn't be able to find the ‘offender’.

The court refused to satisfy A. Pauk's claim against the police officers.



## Criminal Conviction of Blogger Siarhei Piatrukhin

---

The Leninski City District Court of Brest found a blogger [Siarhei Piatrukhin guilty](#) under Art. 188, part 2 (“Slander”) and article 189, part 2 (“Insult”) of the Criminal Code of Belarus on April 18, 2019.

Four officers of the Leninsky City District Police Department of Brest were regarded as victims in the case. The court imposed a fine on S. Piatrukhin in the amount of 360 basic units (9 180 BYN that equals approx. USD 4,600). Also, the judge urged the blogger to cover moral damages to the police officers Siarhei Ihnatsiuk, Dzmitry Yakushevich, Ihar Haliantsich, and Siarhei Tokun in the total sum of 7 500 BYN that equals approx. USD 3,750. Moreover, the blogger was obliged to cover the fees, which had been paid by the victims to their attorneys and the court in the amount of 1 000 BYN.

→ *The criminal prosecution against the blogger was reasoned by the video footage, which had been produced in March 2018 and presented on YouTube. S. Piatrukhin stated in the videos that a number of officers from Leninski City District Police*



*Department had relation to a physical attack on a citizen P. Kaminski, who appealed to law-enforcement bodies with a demand to investigate the incident and told the blogger about it.*

14 Belarusian human rights organizations [issued a demand](#) before the trial start to terminate the criminal prosecution in relation to S.Piatrukhin. According to them, the persecution was politically motivated and associated exclusively with implementation of his constitutional rights and international norms in the field of human rights and liberties, including the freedom of expression as well as the freedom to collect and disseminate information.

On July 5, 2019, the Judicial Panel on Criminal Cases at Brest Regional Court upheld the decision of the first instance court without changes.

## Indexes and Rating Lists

### **REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS** FOR PRESS FREEDOM

Belarus held the 153<sup>rd</sup> position among 180 states of the world [in the annual 2019 World Press Freedom Index](#), published by the international organization 'Reporters without

Borders' in April 2019. This year, the country managed to climb two positions higher in comparison with the previous year.

"[Belarus's position](#) in the 2019 World Press freedom Index seems to suggest an improvement but, in reality, it reflects the fact that the situation has worsened dramatically in so many other countries, as well as the fact that the record number of arrests in Belarus in 2017 was not repeated in 2018."



As before, the international human rights organization Freedom House [continued to classify](#) the Republic of Belarus as a non-free, but not the worst case country in its annual Freedom in the World 2019 rating list. However, [according to the Freedom House experts' conclusions](#), the degree of mass media

freedom in Belarus shrank to the minimum level in 2018.

"The score declined from 1 to 0 due to a crackdown on journalists that included new restrictions on online media, a criminal case against journalists accused of illegally obtaining content from



the state news agency, and the frequent detention and issuing of fines against reporters in connection with their work”.



The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has placed Belarus [on the 9<sup>th</sup> position in the list of countries](#) with the strictest censorship in the world.



**THE BELARUSIAN  
ASSOCIATION  
OF JOURNALISTS**

**WWW.BAJ.BY**

The contents of this publication are copyrighted. It is obligatory to refer to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, when using the E-NEWSLETTER: MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS materials.

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

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

Contact:  
Mr. Andrei Bastunets,  
BAJ Chairperson