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MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

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The authorities continued putting systemic pressure on the media and journalists in all forms:

- criminal prosecution of journalists,
- obstruction of their activities by law enforcement agencies,
- application of legislation on countering extremism to limit the influence of independent media,
- administrative measures to restrict access to information.

Belarus ranked 153 out of 180 in the “Press Freedom Index 2022”¹, published on the eve of the World Press Freedom Day. It was the worst result among the states located in Europe (alongside Russia).

17 sentences were passed in media-related criminal cases during the year of 2022. Journalists and other media workers were sentenced to **1.3–14 years of imprisonment**.

It was shortly before the end of her prison term that journalist **Katsiaryna Andreyeva, who was sentenced to two years in prison in 2020**, was also found guilty of ‘high treason’ (article 356 of the Criminal Code) and **sentenced additionally** to eight years of imprisonment, on top of the initial sentence. **11 new criminal cases against journalists and other media workers** were filed in 2022. They are still to be considered by courts.

33 journalists were imprisoned at the end of 2022.

According to the ‘Reporters Without Borders’ international non-governmental organization, Belarus closes the top five countries in the world with the largest number of journalists behind bars and holds the 4th position as for the number of imprisoned female journalists (9)² in the country.

¹ <https://rsf.org/en/index>

² https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2022/12/RSF_Bilan2022_EN.pdf

The law enforcement agencies continued to put pressure on independent media representatives. In 2022, the BAJ registered **43 cases of detention of journalists and 55 searches.** The journalists were fined four times and **sentenced 20 times** to different terms of administrative arrest. In addition, representatives of law enforcement agencies summoned journalists for questioning, visited relatives and searched the homes of journalists, including those who had left Belarus³.

Maria Ordzhonikidze, director of the 'Justice for Journalists' Foundation drew attention to the following trend: "In 2020, over 1.5 thousand attacks were registered, including legal harassment (attack through weaponizing law, wrongful deprivation of liberty), on independent journalists in Belarus. In 2021, there were some 1000 cases. In 2022, the number dropped down to three hundred⁴. It's not that the intensity of attacks has decreased: there just isn't anyone to attack – some have been expelled from the country, and some have been jailed. We call this Turkmenization."

As before, **anti-extremist legislation** was used by the regime in power as **a weapon in the fight against the independent press.** Primarily, it was used as a basis for restricting access to the content of independent media and persecuting people for any participation in their activities.

Thus, the first criminal case under the new "extremist" article of the Criminal Code 130–2 (denial of the genocide of the Belarusian people) was initiated in connection with publications in independent media – "Flagpole" and "Zerkalo". Also, military expert Yahor Lebiadok was charged with assisting extremist activities under Article 361–4 of the Criminal Code for his comments to the European

³ <https://baj.by/en/analytics/repressions-against-journalists-belarus-2022-list-colleagues-prison>

⁴ <https://baj.by/en/analytics/we-dont-want-belarus-become-information-black-hole-discussions-free-journalism-forum>

Radio for Belarus. (It should be underscored that the radio station was recognized as an “extremist formation” after the interview).

Over 5,000 “extremist crimes” were registered by the Prosecutor General’s Office during the first eleven months of 2022⁵. 76 % of this number were posts on the Internet at that. They were usually connected to the events of 2020. The online statements were defined by the authorities as ‘slandering the state and

top leadership’, ‘insulting government officials’, ‘deliberate incitement of hatred’, and ‘discreditation of the Republic of Belarus’.

On June 14, 2022, the Supreme Court of Belarus recognized the ‘TUT BY MEDIA’ Ltd., which used to be the largest online resource of Belarus, as an ‘extremist organization’⁶. The company employees are under criminal



investigation now. Ihar Lutski, the ex-Minister of Information stated in this respect as follows:

“There took place a direct encroachment on the sovereignty and independence of our country. The funding of these non-state media was carried out from abroad, and it was also coordinated from abroad. The current verdict on TUT.BY is a vivid example of that. They have been recognized as extremist!”⁷

⁵ <https://baj.by/be/content/za-nyapouny-2022-god-silaviki-zavyali-5000-sprau-za-ekstremizm-i-kipuchaya-dzeynasc-ne>

⁶ <https://t.me/supremecourtbelarus/243>

⁷ <https://baj.by/be/content/eks-glava-mininforma-prokomentiroval-priznanie-tutby-ekstremistskoy-organizaciy>

The authorities continued to include Websites and pages of independent publications on social media in the list of extremist materials. Their employees, who were under criminal investigation and presented charges under certain articles of the Criminal Code, were included in the lists of “extremists” and “terrorists”. Also, **9 independent media outlets were recognized as “extremist formations”** by the regime in power during the year of 2022. Two of them were the so-called “samizdat”, i. e., protest print newspapers published and distributed by non-professional journalists.

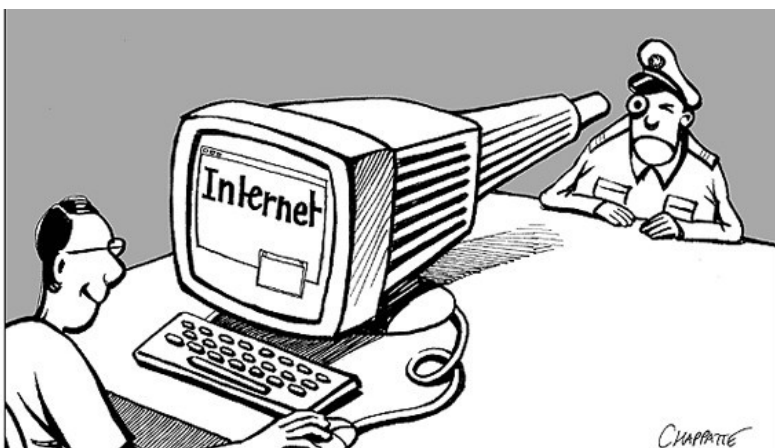
All in all, publications of approximately 1,500 Web-resources (mostly Telegram-channels and groups) were recognized as ‘extremist materials’ by courts in 2022.

Also, **more than 100 Web-resources were recognized as ‘extremist formations’** by the KGB or the Ministry of Internal Affairs⁸.

As before, this decision entailed the mass prosecution of Internet

users for the alleged dissemination of “extremist” media content.

The Ministry of Information continued their repressive activity on restricting access to the ‘undesirable’ information, banning the independent mass media activities and acting as a censor.



⁸ <https://baj.by/be/content/za-nyapouny-2022-god-silaviki-zavyali-5000-sprau-za-ekstremizm-i-kipuchaya-dzeynasc-ne>

According to official reports, the regime in power restricted access either fully or partially to **3,002 Web-resources** (mainly, Telegram channels and chats)⁹ within the period of January – November 2022. (To be compared to a bit more than 5,000 Web-resources, subjected to such restrictions during seven preceding years.)

The list of blocked mass media included 'Viacherni Babruysk'¹⁰, 'Babruyski Kuryer'¹¹, 'Narodnaya Volya', Polish Radio, CityDog.io¹², s13.ru, '[Journalists for Tolerance](#)' et al. The VK social media blocked a range of pages and groups of Belarusian independent mass

media, including 'Charter'97' and 'Flagpole', following a complaint of the Ministry of Information of Belarus, as well as 'Zerkalo' and the Belarusian edition of 'Media Zone' on demand of the General Prosecutor's Office of Russia.

The procedure of blocking the undesired Web-resources was changed. Whereas previously ISPs were required to check the list

of Websites to restrict access once a day, now they are required to do so every three hours during the day and block access to them within four hours on putting them on the ban list¹³.



⁹ https://minsk.gov.by/ru/actual/view/209/2022/inf_material_2022_12.shtml

¹⁰ <https://t.me/viasna96/13809>

¹¹ <https://t.me/viasna96/14043>

¹² <https://citydog.io/post/citydog-blakujuc/>

¹³ <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=T22205145&p1=1&p5=0>



Apart from that, the presidential decree, dated October 18, 2022, significantly simplified the access of special services to the content of online resources. Accordingly, the specified telecommunication service providers and owners of Internet resources will be required to register in a special information system for electronic interaction with special services within a three-month period and set up their resources for unhindered online access for law enforcement officers.

As a result of this policy, Belarus worsened by three points its position in the global 'Freedom on the Net – 2022' annual ranking, compiled by the 'Freedom House' human rights organization, getting 28 points out of 100. The preceding year of 2021 had been far from being easy at that¹⁴.

It was a new phenomenon in 2022 that the Web-audience from Russia was deprived of access to a number of Belarusian news Websites, since the latter covered the military conflict in Ukraine. In particular, the General Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation blocked access to the news Websites Zerkalo.io, Nasha Niva, European Radio for Belarus, Media-Palessie, Salidarnasts et al., by decision of the Federal Service for Communications, Information Technology and Mass Communications (Roskomnadzor).

The ***BelBusinessChannel TV*** stopped broadcasting its programs without explanation of reasons in 2022. It was the only TV channel on business in Belarus, dealing with rebroadcasting the programs of the Russian RBC TV channel and filming original programs on Belarusian issues. The **'UzHorak' regional newspaper (Horki,**

¹⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-net/2022>
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net>



Mahilou region) terminated its publication, refraining from the explanation of reasons in public, in 2022. **The oldest Belarusian newspaper ‘Belarusy i Rynak’ ceased its publication** in 2022, following the order, issued by the Minister of Information of Belarus.

Censorship was de-facto present in Belarus, including the state media sector

In March 2022, the Ministry of Information issued warnings to two popular Belarusian radio stations, ‘Radio Rocks-M’ and ‘Radio B A’, in connection with the ‘distribution of materials that don’t belong to the contents of the specialization, which is outlined in the radio outlet’s registration documents.’

The news Website Blizko.by was temporarily blocked for public access by decision of the Ministry of Information of Belarus. As soon as it was unblocked, the Web-users couldn’t find political news items, including the archived ones, on its pages any longer¹⁵.

At least three state-owned media workers were fired for making statements deemed disloyal by the regime in power, while other employees were subjected to reprimands.

Practically all major independent news Web-resources continued their work from abroad. Some media outlets were forced to relocate their editorial teams once again after the outbreak of war in Ukraine at that.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists also continued its activity in exile.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists was awarded with the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Prize for Contribution to Press Freedom in Montevideo on May 3, 2022.

¹⁵ <https://news.zerkalo.io/cellar/22663.html?tg>

“By awarding the prize to the BAJ, we are standing by all journalists around the world who criticize, oppose and expose authoritarian politicians and regimes, by transmitting truthful information and promoting freedom of expression”, [said Alfred Lela, Chair of the Prize’s international jury](#). “Today we salute and praise them; we find a way to say: we are with you, and we value your courage”¹⁶.



Apart from the UNESCO prize, on the same day, the BAJ was awarded the Freedom of the Press 2022 award of the Swedish section of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Difference Day Honorary Title for Freedom of Expression, presented by two universities in Brussels (ULB and VUB).

¹⁶ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1117102>



More details about the state of the Belarusian mass media in 2022 can be found in the quarterly 'Mass Media in Belarus' analytical reviews, published by the Belarusian Association of Journalists:

<https://baj.by/en/analytics/mass-media-belarus-e-newsletter-no1-68-2022-january-april-2022>

<https://baj.by/en/analytics/e-newsletter-mass-media-belarus>

<https://baj.by/en/analytics/e-newsletter-mass-media-belarus-no-4-70-august-october-2022>



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