

# MASS MEDIA

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Фота: Геннадзь Берацінскі

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# Situation in Mass Media Field in January–April 2017 (Review)

Following certain **reduction of pressure on journalists and mass media in 2016 and the winter of 2017**, the situation in Belarus mass media field deteriorated again in March–April 2017. Strict governmental control over distribution of information remained the same during the whole period at that. The deterioration was linked to the intention of Belarusian authorities to restrict the media coverage of mass protest actions in the country.

Thus, the Belarusian Association of Journalists registered **123 cases of violations of journalist rights in connection with the media workers' implementation of professional activities**, including 94 cases of arbitrary detention and 6 cases of physical violence, in March 2017.



Фота: Леаўдэ, Берацінскі

Also, there resumed prosecution of Belarusian journalists for their cooperation with foreign media without press accreditations in the period under review. In particular, journalists were punished 13 times with huge fines by judges for the alleged 'violation of mass media production and distribution procedures' in March and April 2017. On March 31st, the police conducted searches and seized technical equipment in two offices, where the journalists, cooperating with the 'Belsat' TV channel worked. The police explained the actions with the need to defend the right to the trade-mark on the right holder's claim.

The return of independent printed media to the state-owned monopolist press distribution networks was the main positive result of the spring 2017 in the Belarusian mass media field. It is worth mentioning that the non-state printed periodical editions hadn't been allowed to use the services of the state-owned press distribution networks for more than 10 years before that.



# Main Events in Mass Media Field in January – April 2017

## Detentions of journalists, who covered mass protest actions

In 2016, the Belarusian Association of Journalists noted the reduced number of arbitrarily detained journalists as a positive trend. In particular, there were registered 13 cases of detention in 2016 vs. 19 cases of detention in 2015 and vs. 167 cases of detention in the year of 2011 that followed the crackdown in the aftermath of the Presidential election in December 2010. However, **18 media workers (i.e. nearly 50% more journalists in comparison with the previous year) were arbitrarily detained by police** in different Belarusian cities and towns just on the same day of March 12, 2017.

Four of them, including Katsiaryna Bakhvalava, Halina Abakunchyk, Siarhei Piatrukhin and Dzmitry Harbunou, were sent to the pre-trial custody and had to spend a night there. Consequently, S. Piatrukhin and D. Harbunou were sentenced to 15 days of arrest on administrative charges.

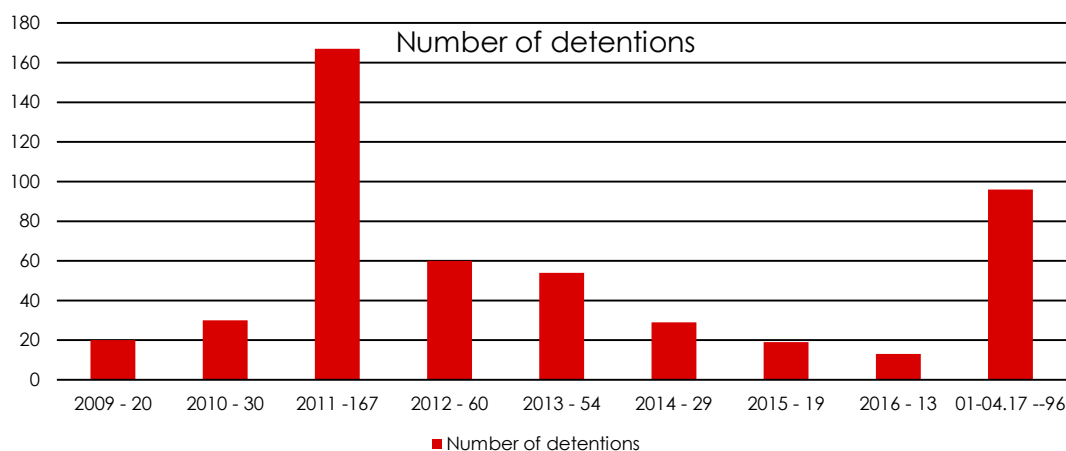


36 journalists were detained during the 'Liberty Day' actions, which are traditionally celebrated by the Belarusian democratic forces on March 25th. Eight of them were detained and sentenced **to the terms of up to 15 days of arrest on administrative charges**. The court verdict in relation to a **cameraman Aliaksandr Barazhenka caused the largest public response**, since the latter had been streaming live from the place of the public action, including the moment of his detention.



The police officers stated in their report that Mr. Barazhenka had been ‘screaming, cursing, swinging his arms, and ignoring the police warnings’ at the moment of his detention. However, the defense presented a video record to court that contained the moment, when Mr. Barazhenka was detained. **The footage proved true that the cameraman hadn’t committed the unlawful acts, which were incriminated to him.** Just on the contrary, it was clear from the video record that Mr. Barazhenka performed his professional duties and informed the police repeatedly about his journalistic status.

Despite the obvious, the judge sentenced Mr. Barazhenka to 15 days of arrest on the alleged administrative charges of ‘minor hooliganism’, grounded on the written testimony, provided by the engaged police officers.



**All in all, the Belarusian Association of Journalists registered 96 cases of arbitrary detention and 6 cases of physical violence, exercised by police officers in relation to journalists in March – April 2017. But for that, there were registered 45 facts of prosecution of media workers on the alleged administrative charges within the same period under review. The journalists were sentenced to the terms of up to 15 days of arrest in 10 cases and fined up to 60 base amounts each (above EUR 650 in equivalent) in 22 other cases. Some cases are still pending in courts.**



## Prosecution of journalists for cooperation with foreign media without press credentials

The prosecution of Belarusian freelance journalists for their cooperation with foreign mass media without press credentials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus resumed in March 2017. As before, the media workers were punished for the alleged violation of article 22.9 of Belarus Code on Administrative Offenses on the charges of ‘breaking the mass media legislation’.

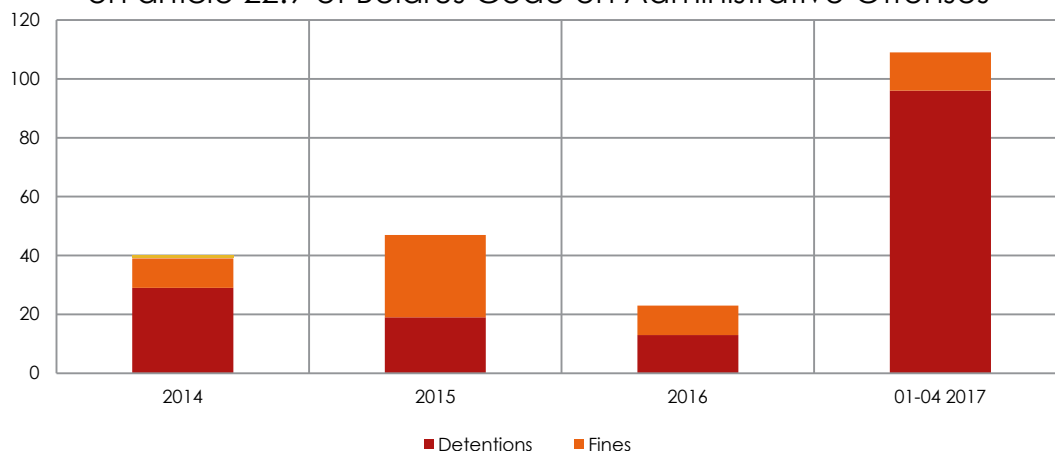
All in all, there were registered 13 cases of bringing journalists to administrative responsibility for the alleged violation of the legal norm in March – April 2017. The total sum of fines totaled 9,430 Belarusian rubles (around EUR 4,715).

In all the cases, the charges were not connected to the content of journalistic materials. They were related to the mere fact of their appearance in the foreign media.

By the moment of the newsletter publication, four more journalists have been fined on the same administrative charges. Also, the police carry on drafting new reports for the allegedly conducted journalistic activity in the interests of foreign media without press credentials. The journalists, who contribute to **the ‘Belsat’ TV channel (Poland)** are suffering from the nonstop prosecution most of all.



Detentions of journalists and imposed fines on article 22.9 of Belarus Code on Administrative Offenses







The journalists are brought to trial, basing on the vaguely interpreted part 2 of article 22.9 in the Belarus Code on Administrative Offenses that envisages legal liability for illegal production and / or distribution of mass media products.

The prosecution policy was started in May 2014. The courts fined journalists on the charges 38 times till August 2015. The situation seemed to improve, when being interviewed the president of Belarus Aliaksandr Lukashenka **promised independent journalists to solve the problem.** Consequently, none of new cases were filed since the end of August 2015 till the end of the year. However, the prosecution policy was resumed in the Homiel region at the beginning of 2016. Two journalists from Homiel Kastus Zhukouski and Larysa Shchyrakova were fined 10 times within four months there. As soon as the elections to the Chamber of Representatives approached, prosecution of freelance journalists got temporarily suspended in May 2016. However, it resumed in March 2017.



The police conducted searches and seized equipment in two office premises in Minsk, where the journalists, who cooperate with the 'Belsat' TV channel, worked on March 31, 2017. The commandment of Minsk City Police Department explained the actions with the need to defend the right to the trade mark on the right holder's claim.

The BAJ Board adopted a statement on April 3, 2017. Among other, it related the police searches and the seizure of technical equipment with the intention of Belarusian official authorities to terminate the independent TV-reporters' activity in the country. First of all, the repressive steps were obviously directed to stop the online video-coverage of mass protest actions.



## The return of independent newspapers to the state-owned press distribution networks

Several independent printed periodical editions, including ‘Gazeta Slonimskaya’, ‘Novy Chas’, ‘Intex-press’, and ‘Barysauskiya naviny’, **reappeared in the ‘Sayuzdruk’ news-stalls after more than a 10-years’ break** at the beginning of April 2017. Apparently, it was the immediate outcome of the meeting between the ‘Narodnaya Vola’ Editor-in-chief and Aliaksandr Lukashenka in February 2017. Mr. Iosif Siaredzich handed over a list of nine periodical editions that couldn’t get to some of the state-owned press distribution networks to the head of state. The president promised to solve the problem.

Consequently, the editorials that addressed to the ‘Sayuzdruk’ enterprise that holds domineering positions in the national press distribution field with a request to resume cooperation were provided with a possibility to sell their printed periodicals in the state monopolist’s news-stalls.

Most of them as well as ‘SNPlus. Svobodnye novosti plus’ and ‘Volnaye Hlybokaye’ are negotiating the possibility for them to return to the subscription catalogue of ‘Belposhta’ state-owned enterprise for the second half-year of 2017.



**Nearly 20 independent socio-political newspapers were excluded from the state-owned press distribution networks on the eve of a presidential election campaign 11 years ago. The ‘Belposhta’ National Unitary Enterprise refused to include the periodicals into subscription catalogues and the ‘Sayuzdruk’ Enterprise refused to sell the periodicals through a network of news-stalls. As a rule, the cancellation of contracts with editorials of independent newspapers was motivated by economic inexpediency. Consequently, around a half of these periodical editions terminated the production of their publications in the printed format. Against the background of warming relations between Belarus and the EU, ‘Belposhta’ and ‘Sayuzdruk’ enterprises resumed cooperation with the ‘Narodnaya Vola’ and ‘Nasha Niva’ newspapers.**



# Rating lists, indexes, statistics

## Belarus was ranked 153th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2017 World Press Freedom Index.

The country used to hold the 157th position in the list of countries for several years in a row before.



According to the RSF's rating list description, the World Press Freedom Index reflects "the degree of freedom available to journalists, mass media, and civil society activists in 180 countries as well as the efforts, which are taken by the authorities to respect the freedom of speech there."

## IREX measured the 'Media Sustainability Index' of Belarus



The IREX international non-for-profit NGO published its annual 'Media Sustainability Index', grounded on experts' survey results in April 2017.

Information about Belarus is presented on more than 10 pages in the global report.

The countries are evaluated in five categories. For the first time in history, Belarus transferred from the group of unsustainable countries with the anti-press systems to the group of unsustainable countries with the mixed systems in the category of 'Freedom of speech'. The number of scores nearly doubled from 0.73 to 1.31 in

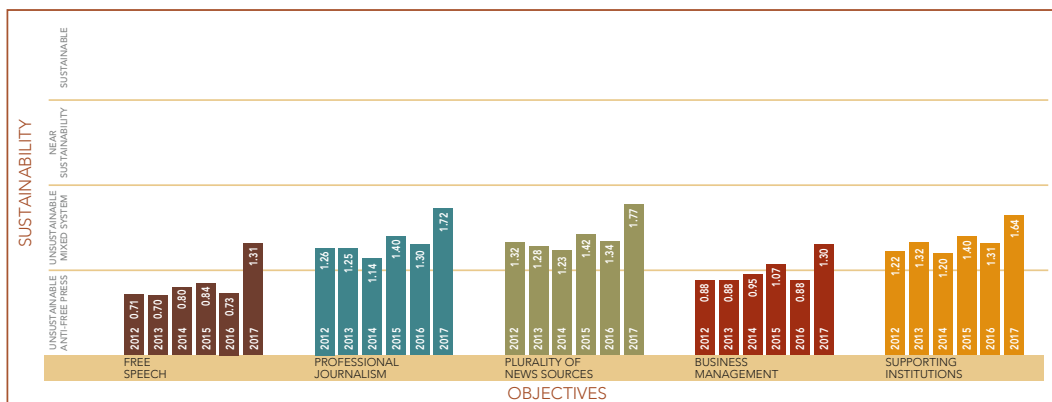




comparison with 2016 at that. (The minimum score totals '0' and the maximum score totals '4')

However, it is emphasized in the report that the freedom of speech in Belarus has the lowest score in comparison with other categories of research (see page 164 of Index). However, in other categories Belarus is also included into the list of unsustainable countries with the mixed systems.

**MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BELARUS**



**MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2017: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES**



**CHANGE SINCE 2016**

▲ (increase greater than .10) □ (little or no change) ▼ (decrease greater than .10)



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