



THE BELARUSIAN
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MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

E-NEWSLETTER

SPECIAL ISSUE



**MASS MEDIA
IN THE PERIOD
OF PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION
IN BELARUS**

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BRIEF BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION-2015 IN BELARUS

On June 30, 2015, the Chamber of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus [appointed the Presidential election to October 11, 2015.](#)

On September 10, 2015, the Central Commission of Belarus for Elections and National Referendums (further – Central Election Commission) [registered four presidential candidates](#), nominated by collecting signatures, including the incumbent president Aliaksandr Lukashenka, Siarhei Haidukevich, Tatsiana Karatkevich, and Mikalai Ulakhovich.

A part of opposition groups initiated the so-called ‘ignore campaign’ with a call to disregard the voting. (It is worth mentioning that calls to boycott elections are banned in Belarus in line with the amendments to the Belarus Electoral Code, adopted in 2013.)



The electioneering started as soon as the candidates got registered. It lasted until the so-called ‘day of silence’ on October 10, 2015. [The procedure of using the media](#) during the preparation and holding the elections was approved by the CEC.

The state-owned TV-channel ‘Belarus 1’ and ‘The First National Channel of Belarusian Radio’ provided each candidate with the possibility to deliver their election speeches free of charge (twice on the radio and twice on TV). The presidential candidate TV-debates were conducted on October 3, 2015. But for that, the candidates gained the right

to publish their election programs in the print media, funded from the state budget. (The selected media were outlined in the special ordinance of Central Election Commission.)

The incumbent president A. Lukashenka didn't make use of the free broadcasting. Also, he didn't take part in the TV-debates. Still, his presence on the state TV and Radio broadcasting channels was prevailing. The fact was proved by 'The Coverage of the 2015 Presidential Election in the Belarusian Media' [monitoring results](#). (The research was conducted by the Belarusian Association of Journalists.)

Early voting started in Belarus on October 3, 2015. According to the Central Election Commission reports, over 36% of electorate cast their votes early that made a peculiar record of presidential elections in the country. The 'Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections' campaign observers registered numerous facts of [coercion to vote](#) early by the administrations of enterprises and universities.

The main part of voters took part in the election on October 11, 2015.

On October 16, 2015, [the Central Election Commission announced](#) that the incumbent President of Belarus Aliaksandr Lukashenka won the election.

The preliminary evaluation of Presidential election campaign-2015 has been presented [in the interim report](#) by the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission.



SITUATION IN MASS MEDIA FIELD ON THE EVE OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION-2015 (BACKGROUND OF ELECTION CAMPAIGN)

The Belarusian mass media legislation as well as its application practice toughened considerably in the election year.

At the end of December 2014, essential amendments and changes were hastily introduced into the Belarus Law 'On Mass Media' by the legislative authorities without any public discussion. They came into force since January 1, 2015. In particular, the Ministry of Information **was entitled with the right** of extrajudicial restriction of access to any Web-resources, even for a single violation of Mass Media law. Although the initial scope of information that couldn't be disseminated in the media was vaguely formulated and gave space for broad interpretation, it was still supplemented by another legal norm of the kind, banning the dissemination of information "that could be harmful to the national interests of the Republic of Belarus".



Referring to the newly adopted legal norm, the Ministry of Information took a decision to restrict access to the www.kyky.org Web-site on June 18, 2015. (None of official warnings were issued to the Web-site editorial at that.)

The Ministry reported that a range of publications on the Web-resource "contained humiliating expressions in relation to the Victory Day, officially celebrated in the Republic of Belarus, as well as the citizens, who participated in it, disputed the significance of this event in the history of the state, and thereby distorted the historical truth about the Great Patriotic War".

The access to www.kyky.org was resumed in 6 days, as soon as the arguable material was deleted from the Web-site. The blocking of access to www.kyky.org was regarded by specialists as a warning to the Belarusian Internet community.

Among other, the list of amendments to the Belarus Law 'On Mass Media', hastily adopted in December 2014, included a demand of obligatory registration of mass media production distributors. The Ministry of Information was entitled with the right to ban the press distribution activity at that.

The provision came into effect since July 1, 2015, i.e. after the appointment of the Presidential election.

Some independent periodical editions that sold a considerable part of their print-runs through trade enterprises and entrepreneurs, suffered from the decrease in the number of sales points, where their periodicals could be found. The trend had **the especially negative impact on the periodicals** that couldn't be distributed through the state enterprises with dominating positions in the press distribution market ('Belposhta' and 'Sayuzdruk' enterprises).

On the eve of the Presidential election, the editorials of 'Gazeta Slonimskaya', 'Intex-press', 'Intex-press Plus', and 'SNPlus. Svobodnye novosti plus' newspapers received once again rejection letters from 'Belposhta' and 'Sayuzdruk' enterprises on their requests to include them into the subscription catalogue and sell the periodicals through the network of news-stalls, respectively.

During the Presidential election campaign – 2015, **similar rejection letters were received** by the 'Novy Chas' and 'Borisovskiye Novosti' editorials.

The Ministry of Information issued **27 official warnings to 26 media outlets for the incorrect mentioning of the registering body** ('The Ministry of Information of RB' instead of 'The Ministry of Information of Republic of Belarus') at the beginning of 2015.



The insignificant reason for issuing official warnings, on the one hand, and the fact that the Ministry of Information can file a claim to court with a demand to close down a media outlet, following two official warnings within a year's course, on the other hand, show that, apparently, the ministerial officials warned the editorials with the aim of fostering self-censorship in the media on the eve of the election campaign.

The pressure on journalists for cooperation with foreign media without accreditations increased in 2015. [The courts fined the media workers](#), using police reports, for breaking the arbitrarily interpreted article 22.9 part 2 of Belarus Code on Administrative Offences that envisages responsibility for the illegal production and/or distribution of mass media products. (The first cases were regarded by courts in May 2014.) It should be noted that the article was used for prosecution of 10 journalists in 2014 and 28 journalists within the period since January till August 2015.

In all the cases, mentioned above, the mere fact of appearance of materials in foreign media was used for prosecution of journalists. (The content of materials was disregarded at that.) As soon as the President Aliaksandr Lukashenka [promised to look into the problem](#) during a press conference for journalists of independent mass media at the beginning of August 2015, none of new cases on article 22.9 of Belarus Code on Administrative Offences were started.



OBSERVATION OF JOURNALIST AND MEDIA RIGHTS DURING THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

The main violations of journalist and media rights were registered in October 2015.



On October 3, 2015, the Web-server of 'BelaPAN' News Agency [suffered from a large-scale DDoS attack](#) that lasted for a couple of days. (The 'BelaPAN' Web-site and its on-line newspaper [Naviny.by](#) are stored there.) The attack started on the first day of early voting at the Presidential election in the country. BelaPAN connected the attack with a series of articles about 'The Prayer for Belarus religious and political action', published on Naviny.by Web-site: "The author of the articles criticized the methods of arranging the event, presented the students' opinions and noted that the latter were obliged to take part in the action with participation of the head of state."

It was forbidden to conduct photo- and video-recording at some polling stations during the early voting period and on the main voting day.

Thus, on October 9, 2015, the local election commission at the polling station No.29 of Leninski city district in Minsk accused a 'Novy Chas' journalist Artsiom Liava of impeding the election process and forced him to leave the polling station.

It is worth mentioning that A. Liava wasn't permitted to enter the premises of another polling station #33, located in the same city district, on the main voting day – October 11, 2015.

On October 9, 2015, a 'Bobruyskiy kuryer' Web-site journalist was prevented from carrying out her journalistic work at a polling station in the city of Babruysk (Mahilou region). The Chairperson of the local election commission strictly "restricted" the time

of her presence at the polling station to making one photo. Consequently, the lady journalist had to leave the polling station.

On October 11, 2015, a journalist of Eastbook.eu on-line resource wasn't permitted to film the vote counting process at a polling station in Piershamayski city district of Minsk.

An observer from 'Belaya Rus' GONGO made attempts to prevent journalists from filming at a polling station in Brest; the TUT.BY video-crew faced numerous [obstacles to their professional activity](#) etc.

It is noteworthy that the actions of members of local election commissions directly [contradicted the instructions](#), adopted by the Central Election Commission. In particular, the specially elaborated 'Tentative Scenario of Training Workshops for Members of Local Election Commissions at the Presidential Election' contained the analysis of cases with participation of journalists at polling stations. And it was stated unambiguously that media workers had the right to conduct photo-video reporting from there.

Among other violations of journalist rights, connected with the electoral process, there should be mentioned numerous refusals to provide them with information, related to the election.

However, it should be noted that the Presidential election – 2015 was held in a quite calm atmosphere. Apparently, it was connected with the intention of Belarusian official authorities to receive the positive evaluation of the Presidential election from the international community, the absence of political tension in the country during the election period, as well as the 'cooling' effect on the mass media, reached due to the toughening of legislation and its application practice.





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