

# E-NEWSLETTER: MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

*No.3 (June – August 2007)*



*Lukashenka: «The anarchy in the Internet has to be stopped...»*



*Belarusian Association of Journalists*

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“A Deputy Minister of Information [Mr. Alaksandr Slabadchuk – noted by A.Bastunets] presents a highly controversial and knotty system of arguments, while reasoning the necessity of working out legislative provisions upon the activities of Internet resources in the frames of the Media law. On the one hand, he has stated that the activity of Internet resources is not regulated by law in our country. On the other hand, he admits that all legal provisions of civil, criminal, advertising and copyright laws refer to Web-sites. Thus, in reality, the Internet is not located “outside the legal regulation field”, owing to the existence of influence tools that regulate the activity of Internet resources.”

**Andrei Bastunets,**  
**Deputy Chairman, BAJ**  
<http://www.baj.by> , August 16, 2007

Cover Photo: Lukashenka: «The anarchy in the Internet has to be stopped...»

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**Table of Content:**

<b>1. Statistics . . . . .</b>	<b>p. 4</b>
<b>2. Situation Development in Belarusian Media Field (June – August 2007)</b>	<b>p. 5</b>
<b>3. The Main Problem . . . . .</b>	<b>p. 9</b>
<b>4. Ratings and Events . . . . .</b>	<b>p. 11</b>

## 1. Statistics

1244 printed periodical editions (703 newspapers, 503 magazines, 34 bulletins, 3 catalogues and 1 almanac) and 9 news agencies were officially registered in the Republic of Belarus on *August 1, 2007*. Certain quantitative rise of registered periodical editions was reached due to registration of new magazines. At the same time, the number of newspapers remained practically the same (to be compared with 704 officially registered newspapers and 489 magazines on *June 1, 2007*).

As before, the “Sovietskaya Byelorussia” newspaper, founded by the Presidential Administration, has the largest circulation in Belarus. It amounted to around 500,700 copies in August 2007. Circulations of other nation-wide state newspapers are much smaller – around 25-30,000 copies (newspaper “Respublika” is published in 49,400 copies). One-time print-run of all state-owned local media in the country (136 regional, city, district and inter-district newspapers) totaled 869.4 thousand copies



Comparatively high print-runs of the state-owned printed media are explained by their direct financial and administrative support. Thus, it leaked out that the Head of “Polatsk-Shklovalakno” Public Corporation (more than 4,500 employees) issued an instruction for his subordinated to get subscribed to 735 copies of state-owned newspapers “Sovietskaya Byelorussia”, “Respublika”, “Zvyazda”, “Vitebskiy Rabochiy”, “Polotskiy Viestnik” etc. The General Manager stated he issued the instruction by order from the Presidential Administration.



Total *weekly* print-run of all non-state social and political press is half as many as the *daily* print-run of “Sovietskaya Byelorussia” only. As before, more than 50% of 30 existing independent social and political periodicals are not represented in the subscription catalogue of “Belposhta” state monopolist enterprise. Also, the majority of independent periodical editions are not sold at the news-stalls of “Belasayuzdruk” state monopolist distributing enterprise.

Brest City Executive Committee informed the Chief Editors of local non-state newspapers on *June 12* that the official permits for distribution of their periodicals on the territory of Brest became null and void. The media outlets were to meet a range of requirements in order to get a new license. In particular, they were to buy special caps and jackets with an inscription “The Press of Brest”, depicted on them, movable hawkers’ stands etc. The approximate cost of such a set totals 3.5 – 4 million Belarusian rubles (around 1,100 – 1,400 EUR).

60 TV and 156 radio broadcasting companies were officially registered in Belarus on *August 1, 2007*. The majority of officially registered TV and radio broadcasting media (156) belong to the state. The number of non-state broadcasting media outlets totals 55 only. However, it should be stressed that the non-state radio and TV broadcasters are strictly controlled by the national and regional state authorities.



Consequently, the Internet is becoming a more and more valuable source of uncensored information for a significant part of Belarusians. Nearly 30% of adult population of Belarus makes use of the Internet. Half of them use the Internet on the regular basis.

The Belarusian authorities have been repeatedly expressing their attempts recently to take the Internet-space in Belarus under its control (see Chapter ‘The Main Problem’).

## **2. Situation Development in Belarusian Media Field (April – May 2007)**

Numerous detentions of non-state journalists and individual distributors of independent press took place in June – August 2007. The KGB showed increased “attention” to the press as well.

Thus, four youth activists were detained by the police for distributing non-registered bulletins “The Right to Freedom” and “6 Square Metres” on *June 6, 2007*.

A distributor of non-registered small-circulation newspapers was detained in Vorsha (Vitsiebsk region) on *July 8, 2007*. The police seized 70 copies of newspapers from him.

A correspondent of “Salidarnasc” Internet-newspaper Alena Yakzhyk was detained for taking photos of the house, belonging to the president Lukashenka’s wife, in Shklou district (Mahileu region) on *July 12, 2007*. Police officers made her delete the photos.



Police officers detained several journalists, who covered an auto-rally, arranged by the activists of “Young Front” non-registered organization. The list of detained journalists included Lyubou Lunyova, a correspondent of Belarusian Service at the Radio Liberty, Hienadz Barbarych, a journalist of “Belarusians and Market” newspaper, Maria Karol, a correspondent of Polish Radio and Stanislau Kavaleuski, the Editor of Mahileu-located small-circulation “BUM” newspaper. The media workers were convoyed together with the action participants to Dziarzhynsk District Department of Internal Affairs in Minsk region. They were kept in the police department for nearly two hours.

The Editor, the Technical Editor and an individual distributor of non-registered “Our Mahileu” newspaper were detained in Mahileu on *July 27, 2007*. 109 newspaper copies were seized from the distributor.

Representatives of KGB Department for Minsk region conducted a search in the apartment, belonging to a journalist and the Press Secretary of non-registered “Young Front” organization Barys Haretski on *August 23, 2007*. A fixed computer disk and a filing of non-state “Nasha Niva” newspaper were confiscated from the premises.



The KGB implemented a series of interrogations of young regional journalists at the end of August.

Two young journalists, who desired to stay undisclosed, were urged to come to a local KGB office in Hrodna on *August 28, 2007*. The KGB representatives were trying to figure out the reasons for their frequent visits to Poland as well their possible relation to the Polish “Belsat” satellite TV channel that is going to start satellite broadcasting to Belarus in the nearest months. The KGB officers threatened the journalists with responsibility for spying and discrediting the Republic of Belarus. Also, they promised to summon their parents to interrogations as well.

A legal investigator of KGB Department for Mahileu region urged a journalist, who desired to stay undisclosed, to come “as a witness” to an interrogation on *August 29, 2007*. However, the interrogation got postponed for unknown reasons.

A Hrodna journalist Ivan Roman was summoned “as a witness” to the Public Prosecutor’s Office for Leninski City District of Hrodna on *August 29, 2007*. However, the Public Prosecutor started asking questions about I. Roman’s professional activity instead. In particular, he was highly interested in some articles, as if “discrediting a state institution,” which appeared at the “Radio Ratsyja” Web-site in *July 2007*.

Independent periodical editions came across another kind of problems within the period under review.

Thus, law enforcement officers seized 7 computer monitors, a copier and other office equipment from the non-state “Narodnaya Vola” newspaper’s editorial office on *August 10, 2007*. They referred to the necessity of implementing a



court verdict. Accordingly, “Narodnaya Vola” was to pay out ‘moral damages’ that totaled around 2 million Belarusian rubles (less than 700 EUR) to the chief manager of some enterprise. The technical equipment was returned to the newspaper editorial as soon as the penalty got paid out to the plaintiff.

Access to information remained to be a serious problem for Belarusian media within the reporting period. The Belarusian authorities made an attempt to have it restricted by law. The Chamber of Representatives at the National



Assembly of the Republic of Belarus adopted a corresponding bill after its first reading on *June 27, 2007*. In particular, it states that the appropriateness of publications and statements of state officials in the media will be settled by the heads of corresponding state authorities. State officials will have to get special consents for having a say in the media.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists adopted a decisive protest appeal against the amendments to the Belarusian law “On the State Service” on *June 28, 2007*. Among other, it was stated in the appeal that the introduction of amendments to the law would lead to further infringement of press freedoms, much more closed activity of the state authorities as well as to the restriction of state officials’ constitutional right to express their opinion. BAJ called upon the MPs to exclude the faulty provisions from the bill.

The continued criminal prosecution of people for expressing their opinion should be pointed out among other events during the summer period.

On *June 8, 2007*, the Court of Piershamayski City District of Vitsiebsk found a journalist and a human rights defender Valery Shchukin guilty of insulting (part 2, article 189 of the Criminal Code) members of election committees during the recent local election 2007 and sentenced him to a fine. Vitsiebsk Regional Court rejected V. Shchukin’s appeal against the court verdict on *July 25, 2007*.

The Central City District Court of Minsk found a politician and a publicist Andrej Klimau guilty of making appeals to a violent overthrow or the change of the Constitutional government with the use of mass media (article 361 of the Criminal Code). Consequently, he was imprisoned for two years in a high security colony. The news appeared in a month after the conviction came into power. The court process was closed and kept in secret from the civil community. The court acknowledged A. Klimau guilty of placing his publications in the Internet. Thus, being an active opponent of the regime in power, A. Klimau has been





kept behind bars since *April 3, 2007*. He had spent 4 years in prison as if for conducting economic crimes. Later, he was sentenced to 15 months of custodial restraint for the arrangement of street protest actions in 2005. “The International Amnesty” admitted Andrei Klimau to be a prisoner of conscience.

A criminal case against Siarhei Panamarou, the founder of a samizdat weekly bulletin “Boyki Kletsk” was resumed on *August 14, 2007*.

The criminal case had been filed in accordance with part 2, article 188 of the Criminal Code (libel in the media). However, it was terminated on holding a linguistic expertise for the lack of any corpus delicti. S. Panamarou believes the resumed criminal case is connected with his application for a picket in defence of a convicted ex-candidate for Presidency A. Kazulin as well as other political prisoners.

### **3. The Main Problem**

The Internet appeared in the area of especial attention in Belarus during the summer 2007.



The president Lukashenka stated on *August 2, 2007* as follows: “The anarchy in the Internet has to be stopped. It cannot be tolerated that the technical achievement gets transformed into the information garbage dump. A law should be adopted, where the status of electronic mass media is described”.

Consequently, the Reporters without Borders (RSF) delivered a protest statement on *August 3, 2007*. The international human rights organization expressed deep concern with A. Lukashenka’s words. “The main threat to the Belarusian Internet lies in its slow suffocation as a result of repressions, arranged at the top governmental level. The control, imposed by Belarusian authorities on the Internet news and information is one of the strictest among the countries of the former USSR,” – the RSF representatives noted.

The Reporters without Borders reminded about a governmental instruction of *February 10, 2007* that introduced additional control over the work of Internet clubs, promoted the practice of blocking the Internet resources during elections and informed the public about other facts of pressure upon mass media in Belarus.

Just on the contrary to the governmental thesis about the lack of control over the Internet, there have taken place such cases in the Belarusian history. The most recent case of the kind is connected with the conviction of a politician and a publicist A. Klimau for his Internet articles.

A. Lukashenka's expressions about the need "to stop anarchy in the Internet" activated the activities of different state structures and officials.



The state authorities have resumed work on a bill "On Information, Informatization and Information Security". It was planned the draft law would be revised again in autumn in order to avoid its consideration at the Parliamentary session to come. Among other, the draft law regulates the Internet activities.

A Deputy Minister of Information Alaksandr Slabadchuk told about the creation of a nation-wide working group on studying and solving a problem of legislative regulation of the Internet-space.

While referring to the experience of foreign states in the field of regulating the Internet space, A. Slabadshuk firstly noted "the Chinese option". He emphasized that it includes strict control of Web resources with a direct link to the national traditions.

Media experts believe that the attempts of legal regulation of Belarusian internet-space are aimed at restricting the freedom of distributing information in the Belarusian Internet segment. Presumably, the Internet resources will be given the status of mass media. Therefore, they will have to get re-registered by the Ministry of Information in order to be present in the Belarusian web-segment. Also, most likely, the state authorities will broaden the legislative

base for bringing to responsibility the people/organizations, running Web-sites that irritate the Belarusian authorities.

#### 4. Ratings and Events

A seminar on “Interaction of Mass Media and Press Services in a Democratic Society”, arranged by the OSCE, was held in Minsk on *June 5, 2007*. The session was authorized by the local authorities.

According to Miklos Haraszti, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, the chosen topic for discussion shows how far the Belarusian authorities are ready to go, as for the issues of mass media activities in the country.

On the eve of the seminar M. Haraszti had a meeting with journalists. He noted then that the situation with the media freedom in Belarus hadn't changed, as there was still present practically complete monopoly of the state on the newspaper printing and distribution services to be crowned by total state control over TV broadcasting in Belarus. M. Haraszti said the existing media law restricted media activities and got used as a means of punishment.

A solemn ceremony of awarding the laureates of Gerd Bucerius Prize, issued by the ZEIT Foundation, took place in the city of Oslo on *June 21, 2007*. The award is presented to the best periodicals from the Eastern Europe. The “Nasha Niva” newspaper and the “CDmag” youth multimedia project have been awarded Gerd Bucerius Prize this year. A former Editor-in-Chief of “Nasha Niva” newspaper Andrei Dynko stated that the award could be regarded as a sign of appreciation of the editorial activity, when the independent press found itself on the verge of survival.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists arranged a memorial action to commemorate Dzmitry Zavadski, the “ORT” TV channel's cameraman, who had disappeared seven years ago, on *July 7*. The



action was held near the block of flats, where Dzmitry used to reside. D. Zavadski's mother took part in the action.

D. Zavadski disappeared, when he went to Minsk airport to meet his colleague Pavel Sheremiet on July 7, 2000.

Later on, several officers from the "Almaz" riot police troop were accused of kidnapping D. Zavadski and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. However, D. Zavadski's fate has still remained unknown.

A round-table discussion devoted to questions of preserving historic and cultural heritage of Belarus was arranged by BAJ in Minsk on August, 14. The action was held within the framework of a media campaign "Journalists for Historical Heritage", organized by the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

The goal of the round-table discussion was to give possibility for experts to exchange opinions on the issues, which are closely related to preservation of historic and cultural heritage and restoration of architectural monuments in the presence of journalists.



Representatives of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Belarus, historians, art critics, teachers, architects, restorers from Minsk and Hrodna participated in the round-table discussion.