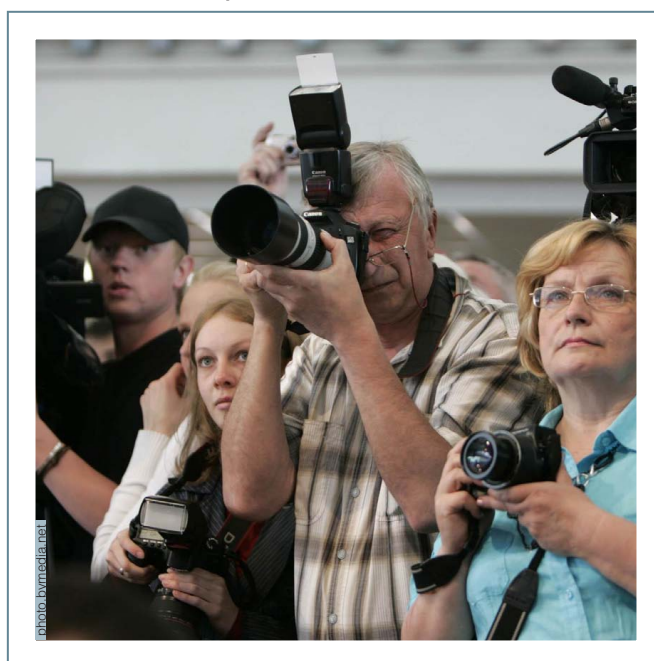


MASS MEDIA

in Belarus

E-NEWSLETTER

4 (10) September – November 2009



BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS
www.baj.by

“The informative and educational functions of mass media are important to the sentries of law and order. On our part, we intend to facilitate access to information. However, sometimes, the peculiarities of operational investigative activity prevent us from providing this assistance.”

Anatol Kulyashou, Minister of Interior of Belarus
<http://www.belta.by/by/news/society?id=435405>

“The securities committed an unprecedented intrusion into the journalists’ activity on October 16th. It was a direct violation of article 34 of Belarusian Media Law that entitles media workers to attend the places, where actions, demonstrations, and other socially important events take place. Thus, it was a direct ban on holding professional activities. I can recollect a statement, delivered by Anatol Kulyashou, the Minister of Interior of Belarus during the recent celebrations of the 25th anniversary of Information and PR Department at the Ministry. He noted that the Ministry of Internal Affairs didn’t have any closed topics and closed doors for journalists. In this respect, we should demand him to name the officials, who ordered to prevent the journalists from doing their work on October 16, 2009 as well as the people, who fulfilled the order.”

Zhanna Litvina, Chairperson of Belarusian Association of Journalists
<http://www.charter97.org/ru/news/2009/10/19/22907/>

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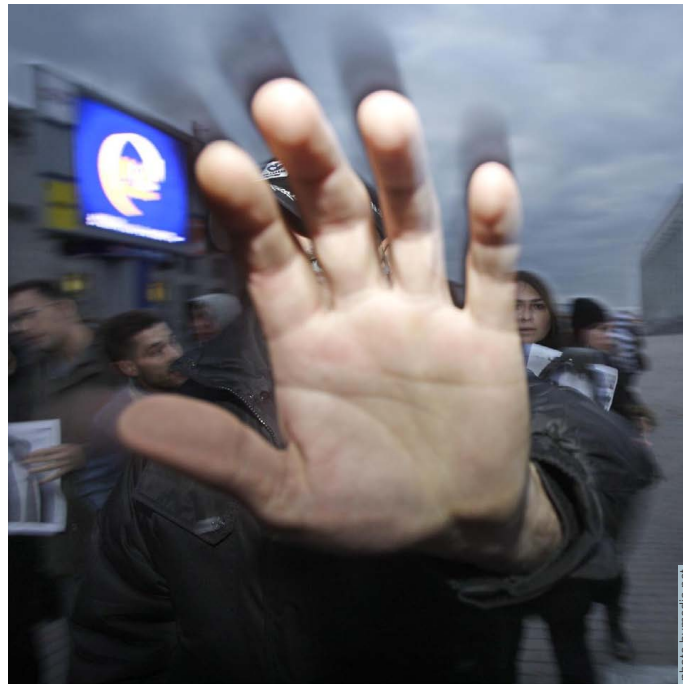
1. STATISTICS

The re-registration of media outlets, envisaged by the new Belarusian Law “On Mass Media” is still in progress. As of November 1, 2009, 45.2% of printed media and 25.8% of on-line media (594 and 59 media outlets correspondingly), registered before the new law came into force, passed the stage of official re-registration.

The re-registration has been taking place without conflicts so far. However, it is worrying that the majority of media outlets have not passed it yet, as the dead-line got appointed for February 8, 2010. The registration certificates of all the media outlets that will not manage to get re-registered within the set terms will be cancelled.

Since February 8, 2009, when the new media law came into force, till November 1, 2009 the Ministry of Information of Belarus registered 113 new printed periodical editions, including 52 newspapers and 54 magazines, 4 radio programs and 7 TV programs. The majority of registered periodicals deal with entertainment, advertising etc.

Registration of new media outlets has been implemented without serious problems until recently. However, the situation deteriorated lately. A range of newly-founded newspapers from Vorsha, Mahilou, Salihorsk, Maryna Horka, Babruysk, and Hlybokaye got refused official registration without any legal cause. Two newspapers from the list received double negative replies from the registration authorities. In order to justify the actions, the Ministry of Information of Belarus introduced amendments to the Provisions on Registration of Mass Media on October 7, 2009. Accordingly, the Ministerial ordinance set stricter requirements on registration of media outlets in comparison with the corresponding legal norms in the new Media Law.



2. DEVELOPMENT OF SITUATION IN THE MEDIA FIELD (SEPTEMBER – NOVEMBER 2009)

After several positive changes at the end of 2008 and at the beginning of 2009, situation in the Belarusian media field started deteriorating in several directions. The crisis point took place in the autumn of 2009.

On September 9 and 16, 2009 as well as on October 16, 2009, the representatives of law-enforcement bodies prevented journalists from implementing their professional duties during protest actions (see photo: <http://baj.by/m-p-viewpub-tid-1-pid-7371.html>).

Independent journalists Uladzimir Hrydzin and Yulia Darashkevich were detained by police for more than four hours on October 29, 2009. The media workers' private belongings were examined. Moreover, Ul. Hrydzin was beaten hard (see video: <http://baj.by/m-p-viewpub-tid-10-pid-168.html>).

The police prevented journalists from implementing their professional activity during an independent bard festival in Vorsha (Vitsiebsk region) on September 7, 2009. Three media workers were detained.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists addressed to the Public Prosecutor's General Office and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus with a demand to make the guilty in breaking the journalists' rights accountable for their illegal actions. The above mentioned official bodies either ignored the inquiry or sent entirely formal replies to BAJ.

The Ministry of Information of Belarus resumed preventing new media outlets from getting official registration certificates within the period under review.

Moreover, the toughening of mass media registration procedure was legalized by 'Provisions on Registration of Mass Media', adopted by the Ministry of Information of Belarus (See above: Statistics).

Moreover, the Ministry of Information intruded into the activities of registered media outlets within the reporting period.

Thus, four influential periodical editions (“Nasha Niva”, “Narodnaya Vola”, “Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus”, and “Va-Bank”) received official warnings from the Ministry of Information on October 16-17, 2009. Three newspapers were warned for the coverage of swine flu epidemic in Belarus and criticism of governmental officials, who suppressed information about the real epidemic situation in the country. The “Narodnaya Vola” editorial was warned for distributing an article, dedicated to the coming Presidential election. The Ministry of Information considered it to be extremist.

Broadcasting of EuroZOOM program, prepared by the “European Radio for Belarus” (www.belradio.fm) and presented on the air by the “Autoradio” FM radio station was terminated on October 1, 2009. It happened as soon as the “Autoradio” management had received a corresponding written notification from the Ministry of Information of Belarus on September 30, 2009.

The de-facto ban on broadcasting the ERB program by “Autoradio” contradicted the following decision, taken by the Belarusian governmental authorities on November 11, 2009, to permit opening an office of ERB and accredit 12 journalists and technical assistants, cooperating with the European Radio for Belarus, in the country. Apparently, the Belarusian official authorities aimed at meeting partially a recommendation of EU structures to register the local offices of European Radio for Belarus, Radio Racyja, and “Belsat” TV channel in Belarus as well as to accredit the journalists, cooperating with the media outlets, in the country.

However, the activity of “BelSat” and “Radio Racyja” is still banned in Belarus. The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused the “BelSat” TV channel to open its representation in Miensk at the beginning of December 2009. On the one hand, the public prosecution bodies continued to issue warnings to journalists for cooperation with foreign media outlets without valid press credentials. On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus kept on refusing to accredit the “BelSat” and “Radio Racyja” correspondents in the country.

The “Belposhta” and “Sayuzdruk” Belarusian state monopolist enterprises, dealing with the press distribution, still refuse to distribute 12 independent socio-political newspapers. The Ministry of Communication and Informatization stated on October 6, 2009 that it wasn’t planning to increase the quantity of independent periodical editions in the “Belposhta” Subscription Catalogue for the year of 2010. According to Deputy Minister Nina Haurylava, such cooperation is unprofitable to the state (http://www.racyja.com/news/materyyaly/padzeya_dnya/20111.html).

Situation in the Belarusian media field was reflected in the report “For Free and Fair Media in Belarus”, prepared by a group of international journalist and human rights organizations, following a visit of their representatives to Belarus on September 20-24, 2009.

The report was placed on the Web-site of the International Federation of Journalists (<http://ifj.org>) on October 16, 2009. Also, it can be found on the BAJ Web-site in English (http://baj.by/download/monitoring/for-free-and-fair-media-in-belarus_2009.pdf), Belarusian (<http://baj.by/index.php?module=p&tid=4>), and Russian (http://baj.by/download/doc/Mission_report_RUS.pdf).



3. RATING LISTS AND EVENTS

“If the press is not self-regulated, it will be regulated by someone else,” Flip Voets, Secretary-General and Ombudsman of the Flemish Council for Journalism in Belgium once noted. Actually, this quotation can be used as an epigraph for the seminar on “Self-Regulation of Mass Media”, held in Miensk on September 8-9, 2009. It should be reminded that the event was arranged by the OSCE Representative’s on Freedom of the Media office in Vienna and the OSCE Representative’s Office in Miensk. It was supported by the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus.

The circle of seminar participants was very broad. Among other, representatives from the President’s Office, the Chamber of Representatives, the Ministry of Information of Belarus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, the Press House National Unitary Enterprise, the Institute of Journalism at the Belarusian State University, the Belarusian Union of Journalists, the Belarusian Association of Journalists as well as journalists from Belarusian Web-resources, news agencies, radio and TV channels, state-owned and non-state periodicals from Miensk and the Belarusian regions participated in the discussion.

A mission of journalist and human rights organizations to Belarus took place on September 20-24, 2009. The mission was arranged with the purpose of informing more profoundly the international structures and organizations about the situation in the Belarusian media field.

The following organizations participated in preparing the final report: Article 19, Civil Rights Defenders, Committee to Protect Journalists, Danish Union of Journalists, Index on Censorship, International/European Federation of Journalists, International

Media Support, International Publishers' Association, International Pen, International Press Institute, Open Society Institute, PressNow, Reporters without Borders, World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers. "The mission group prepared the report to ensure that media freedom and journalists' rights remain top of the agenda at the ongoing EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue," - noted the authors in the introduction to the report, placed on the IFJ Web-site. The report was presented in Sweden that presided in the European Union then.

Five years passed on October 20, 2009 since the day, when an independent lady journalist Vieranika Charkasava had been assassinated in her private apartment.

Legal investigation within Vieranika Charkasava's murder case has been suspended. The Public Prosecutor's Office for the City of Minsk cannot tell anything new to the public, Siarhey Ivanou, a legal investigator on the cases of top importance informed the BAJ Press Service on October 19, 2009.

In order to commemorate the murdered colleague, the Belarusian Association of Journalists has established V. Charkasava Memorial Contest for Journalists.

A famous Belarusian journalist Iryna Khalip received a prestigious award "For Courage in Journalism", founded by the International Foundation of Women in the Media. The awarding ceremony took place in New York on October 20, 2009. It has to be mentioned that some unknown people started threatening I. Khalip in connection with her journalist activity after the awarding ceremony in November 2009.

Belarus is holding the 151st position among 175 countries of the world in the annual Press Freedom Index, prepared by Reporters without Borders. Despite certain improvement of situation in comparison with the previous year, the country remains in the group of states with non-free media. (Belarus moved from the 154th position in 2008 to the 151st position in 2009 in the rating list.)

The relative improvement of situation is connected with the statements, delivered by Belarusian governmental officials about some cautious liberalization in the media field in the framework of the started dialogue between Belarus and the European Union.