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MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

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SITUATION IN BELARUS MASS MEDIA FIELD: MAY-AUGUST 2024. REVIEW

Repression against independent journalists and bloggers as well as censorship of mass media continued in Belarus in May – August 2024.

In particular:

- The regime in power intensified its pressure on the employees of independent media projects in exile; the media workers' relatives in Belarus were subjected to harassment and intimidation.
- The Belarusian authorities continued criminal prosecution of journalists both inside the country and in exile. The journalists and bloggers who are outside the country's borders were regularly convicted in accordance with the so-called special proceedings, i.e. in absentia. Thus, court verdicts were handed down against 9 journalists (4 of them - in absentia) in the period of May – August 2024, <https://baj.media/be/aglyady-manitoringi/represii-suprac-zhurnalistau-i-medyya-u-2024-godze-spis-znyavolenyh/>
- 33 media workers remained behind bars in Belarus. The convicted journalists Kseniya Lutskina, Dzmitry Luksha and his wife Palina Palavinka were pardoned and released from detention within the period under review, <https://baj.media/be/z-za-krata-vypuscili-kseniju-luckinu/> <https://baj.media/be/na-voli-byly-zhurnalist-bt-dzmitryj-luksha/>



- The regime in power further applied the counter-extremism legislation to limit access to independent sources of information. Detentions continued for any form of cooperation with “extremist” independent media in Belarus,
- The Belarusian state-owned propagandist media circumvented the sanctions imposed on them, among other, by violating the rules of broadcasting sports competitions.

Repressions against journalists in exile

Quite a few journalists in exile were prosecuted in criminal cases

Thus, Minsk Regional Court pronounced verdicts in absentia to 20 people in the so-called ‘Tsikhanouskaya’s Analysts’ case on July 2, 2024. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus recognized them as participants of ‘Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s Analysts’ extremist formation. The journalists of Belarusian independent media Yury Drakakhrust and Hanna Liubakova were criminally charged in absentia. Each of the media workers was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

On August 2, the verdict in absentia was announced to Ales Kirkevich, who was found guilty of ‘facilitating extremist activities’ (Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code) and sentenced to 7 years of imprisonment and fined 24,000 Belarusian rubles (approx. EUR 6,700).

The case of journalist Uladzimir Khilmanovich was considered by Hrodna Regional Court in accordance with the so-called special proceedings within the period under review. The media worker was accused of ‘facilitating extremist activities’ and ‘taking part in an extremist formation’ (Articles 361-4 and 361-1 of the Criminal Code). On August 19,

the journalist was sentenced in absentia to 5 years of imprisonment in a high security colony and fined 40,000 Belarusian rubles (approx. EUR 11,200).

Reportedly, a number of criminal cases were filed against journalists in exile in May-August 2024. The list of affected media workers included the Deputy Chairperson of BAJ Barys Haretski, independent journalists Zmitser Kazakevich, Iryna Charniuka, Zmitser Lupach, Ihar Kazmiarchak, Zmitser Pankavets as well as the founder and head of Belarusian Investigative Center (BIC) Stanislau Ivashkevich, the author of his video programs Siarhei Chaly, three former BIC employees Aliaksandr Yarashevich, Aliaksei Karpeka, and Volha Alkhimenka, who currently work as the journalists of "Bureau Media", and others.

<https://baj.media/be/aglyady-manitoringi/represii-suprac-zhurnalistau-i-medyya-u-2024-godze-spis-znyavolenyh/>

The criminal prosecution of bloggers in absentia continued within the period under review. Thus, Andrei Pavuk and Volha Pavuk were criminally charged for "leading an extremist formation" for their "Rudabelskaya pakazukha" media project. They were sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment in a high-security colony and 8 years in prison, respectively. Also, huge fines were imposed on both of them.



Volha and Andrei Pavuk / D. Umbraso/LRT nuotr

An opera singer Marharyta Liauchuk, a blogger Ilya Saliankou, and a musician Uladzislau Navazhylau were also sentenced to imprisonment for their participation in this project.

<https://baj.media/be/zavochny-sud-nad-blogerami-rudabelskaja-pakazuha/>

A criminal case was filed against the blogger Anton Matolka in Belarus within the period under review. It was based on 13 articles of Belarus Criminal Code. Among other things, the creator of “Belarusian Hayun” Telegram channel and previously an urbanist blogger was accused of an attempt to seize power, extremism and high treason. <https://baj.media/ru/protiv-blogera-antona-matolko-vozbudili/>



Andrei Hniot. Photo courtesy Andrei Hniot

A film director and journalist Andrei Hniot is under threat of extradition to Belarus based on the decision of the Supreme Court of Serbia dated June 13, 2024. He collaborated with SOS. by project, recognized as an “extremist formation” by the Belarusian authorities. (The journalist was detained by the Serbian border service, since he was wanted internationally at the request of the Belarusian Bureau of Interpol.) <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/70659.html?tg=7>

4 journalists were detained, and 3 media workers were sentenced to different terms of administrative arrest in Belarus in May-August 2024

Pressure on journalists who were forced to leave Belarus and continue to work abroad was carried out through searches at their places of registration in their native country within the framework of criminal proceedings in absentia, intimidation of relatives, threats to confiscate property for the benefit of the state (including housing). Thus, criminal investigators searched and seized the apartment, owned by Zmitsier Kazakevich, a journalist from Vitsiebsk, on May 16, 2024. <https://baj.media/be/kvatjera-nezalezhnaga-zhurnalista/>

The Belarusian Association of Journalists registered 26 searches in the period under review (mainly in June-July). 21 of these searches took place in the apartments of colleagues who have fled Belarus and continue to work in the media. In most cases, the law enforcement agents showed search warrants within criminal cases, filed against the affected media workers.

Independent journalists were harassed by the state-owned propaganda media. In particular, the exiled journalists were subjected to insults and defamation. On July 23, security forces announced that they had filed criminal cases against two hosts of the 'Zerkalo' TikTok channel and forced their parents to record a video reel with words of condemnation against their children. <https://nashaniva.com/347649>

The use of “anti-extremist” legislation to persecute the distributors of “banned” content of independent mass media and oppositional Web-resources

Three more media projects were recognized as extremist formations within the period under review, namely Orsha.eu, Media IQ and “The Ordinary Morning”. Moreover, the Web-resources “We are not slaves”, “The People’s Reporter” (a project of ex-political prisoners and bloggers Aliaksandr Kabanau and Siarhei Piatrukhin), as well





as the blogger Aleh Zhalnou's social media were labeled as extremist formation, in May-August 2024, too. <https://www.mvd.gov.by/ru/news/8642>

Numerous online-sources and publications were recognized as extremist materials by the regime in power. Most of them were Instagram and TikTok accounts, run by opposition groups and mass media. As before, the regime in power applied the administrative persecution for the dissemination of information deemed "extremist".

It was for the first time that, reportedly, a criminal case was filed for facilitating extremist activities due to a single repost of a news item from an "extremist formation" website. Previously, such cases were usually classified as administrative offense. The Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus stated: "It was enough to send a single message to public chats, previously published by an extremist organization, to initiate a criminal case under Art. 361-4 of the Criminal Code of Belarus. This righteous method will be further actively used from now on and such deliberate actions will be severely punished." <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/67689.html?tg=9>

The imprisoned journalists Aliaksandr Ziankou, Ihar Karnei, Ales Marchanka, Alena Tsimashchuk as well as the convicted in absentia media worker Aliaksandr Kirkevich and the imprisoned blogger Aliaksandr Ihnatsiuk were added by the authorities to the List of citizens of Belarus, foreign citizens or stateless persons, involved in extremist activities within the period under review. <https://www.mvd.gov.by/ru/news/8642>

Blocking access to online resources

The Ministry of Information and other governmental agencies limited access to “unwanted” information through censorship restrictions

Thus, the Ministry of Information restricted access to the Websites baranovichi24.by (due to the presence of a link to the “extremist” media) and [Katolik.life](http://katolik.life) (without providing any reason). The latter was previously blocked in Russia, probably since it touched upon the topic of the war in Ukraine.

<https://mediazonaby.com/news/2024/06/21/baranovichi>

<https://katolik.life/bel/news/sotsium/item/5451-khrystsiyanski-praekt-zablakavali-belarusi-i-rf-chamu-i-shto-z-getym-rabits.html>



Kaboompics.com / pexels.com

The stated-owned CTV channel censored the broadcast of the European Football Championship, having taken the last-minute decision to avoid showing the matches of the Ukrainian national team to the Belarusian audience. It was done despite the fact that the matches had been included

in the TV program. <https://euroradio.fm/ru/v-belarusi-ne-pokazhut-match-evro-2024-s-uchastiem-sbornoy-ukrainy>

The Web-archive of ‘Culture and Art’ holding company was blocked for public access in the period under review. It contained online exhibits, representing the whole history of Belarusian art since the beginning of the 21st century.

Among other it contained quite a few publications about the people of culture and art, who appeared in prison or in exile, and whose works of art do not meet the current ideological requirements. <https://baj.media/be/kultura-i-mastactva-stau-nedasjazhnyim-dlja-navedvalnikau/>

On June 25, the Belsat TV channel was blocked for public access in Russia (among other foreign media) in response to the blocked access to a number of Russian media in the EU. <https://baj.media/be/u-rasii-zablakavali-belsat/>

Events in the state media sector

The Ministry of Information supplemented the list of sports competitions that can be broadcast in Belarus without the rights holders' consent. These are the Nations League matches and friendly matches with the participation of the Belarusian national football team. They were allowed to be shown without UEFA's consent.

<https://baj.media/be/mininform-razreshil-piratskij-pokaz-matchej-lig-nacij-i-tovarishheskih-matchej-sbornoj-po-futbolu/>

On August 5, the European Union introduced new sanctions against a number of Belarusian law-enforcement officers and propagandists, including Iryna Akulovich, the CEO of "BelTA" News Agency, Dzmitry Zhuk, the ex-head of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's press service, and Mikita Rachylouski, the host of "Senate" TV program on the CTV channel.



Dušan Cvetanović / pexels.com



The Ministry of Information of Belarus called these sanctions the “grossest violation of international law” in a corresponding statement, delivered on the same day. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/08/05/belarus-eu-lists-further-28-individuals-for-participation-in-internal-repression/>



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