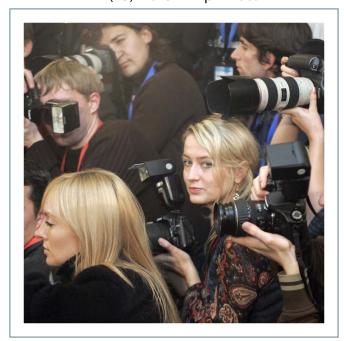


# 2 (13) March - April 2009





BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS www.baj.by

"A new media law... in any case mustn't impede the freedom of speech in Belarus. However, we state that it is regularly used against the mass media that wish to get press credentials in the country."

Jean-François Juillard, General Secretary, RSF

"We are incensed by the Belarusian authorities' punishment of Andrzej Poczobut for his critical reporting by denying him press credentials... Instead of going after a journalist for doing his job, the government should investigate the harassment against him and his family."

Nina Ognianova, Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator, "Committee to Protect Journalists" (USA)

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## 1. STATISTICS

Re-registration of massia media organizations has been taking place in Belarus since February 8, 2009, when a new law "On Mass Media" came into force. 132 printed periodical editions, including 66 newspapers, 63 magazines and 3 newsletters, passed the re-registration procedure as of April 1, 2009. Particularly, there were officially re-registered 32 state-owned media and 100 nonstate media. Moreover, the Ministry of Information of Belarus registered 6 new printed periodical editions. Thus, all in all, 138 printed periodicals were included in the State Registry of Mass Media as of April 1, 2009. More than 1,180 printed periodicals haven't passed the re-registration procedure yet. However, they still have some time to apply. Media outlets have one year to get officially reregistered, according to the law.



Similar situation can be seen in the TV and radio broadcasting media market. Thus, only 4 radio broadcasters and 9 TV broadcasters got re-registered by April 1, 2009. In addition, two new radio broadcasters were registered by the Ministry of Information of Belarus. It means that 216 TV and radio broadcasting media still have to pass the official re-registration procedure.

According to the Gemius Company's survey results, the number of Internet users in the age of 15 and older amounts to 2.16 million people (21.66% of all population of Belarus). The majority of users (44.5%) are young people in the age group from 15 to 24 y.o. 37% of Internet users reside in Miensk.

According to the data, provided by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, 28.9% of adult population of Belarus uses the Internet at least several times a month, 9.1% of adult users appear on-line every day and 12.1% of them enter Web-resources ar least several times a week. This information was received during a survey, implemented by IISEPS in March 2009. However, the survey results showed that only 7.3% of Internet users surf Web-sites in order to get actual social and political information. The majority of respondents make use of the Internet to get professional or entertaining information or in order to use of e-mailing services.

## 2. SITUATION DEVELOPMENT IN THE MEDIA FIELD IN MARCH – APRIL 2009

The European Parliament hailed a resolution on Belarus with a majority of votes on April 2, 2009. The document evaluated the results of the dialogue between the EU and Belarus, held within the recent half a year. In particular, it focused on the situation with the media freedom in the country.

The European Parliament enlisted several points that could be regarded as hallmarks of changes to the better. They included:



- provision of equal rights to all media outlets by means of lifting a ban on distribution of independent printed periodical editions through the "Sayuzdruk" and "Belposhta" state-owned press distribution networks;
- exclusion of articles 367, 368, 369, and 369-1 of Belarus' Criminal Code that envisage liability for libel and offense in relation to the President of Belarus, governmental officials as well as for defamation of Belarus that appear to be frequently misused in order to persecute journalists for implementing their professional activity;
- simplification of procedure of getting press credentials for the local and foreign media representatives.

Moreover, the European Parliament called upon the European Commission to render financial assistance to the Belarusian independent "Belsat" TV Channel, broadcasting its programs from the territory of Poland and urged the Belarusian government to have the TV channel officially registered in the country.



Similar recommendations had been included in the EP resolution on situation with the media, adopted on January 15, 2009. However, no progress can be seen in different fields, mentioned in the previous EP resolutions.

13 independent media still cannot be distributed through the "Sayuzdruk" and "Belposhta" state-owned press distribution systems. Several periodical editions, including "Gazeta Slonimskaya", "Otdushina", and "Volhaye Hlybokaye" received repeated refusals to distribute the periodicals from the state monopolist institutions, mentioned above. Moreover, Babruysk branch of "Belpostha" terminated a contract with the "Bobruyskiy Kuryer" local independent newspaper on distributing the periodical by subscription in the city and in the vicinity (the newspaper used to enjoy this opportunity in the past). The Criminal Code of Belarus still contains the repressive articles, mentioned above.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus has suspended the procedure of regarding an application package for opening the "Belsat" TV Channel's representation in Belarus, referring to mistakes in the package. At the same time, two Belarusian journalists received official warnings from the Public Prosecutor's office for cooperation with "Belsat". The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused to issue press credentials to a "Radio Racyja" (Poland) correspondent Ivan Roman and nullified a press accreditation of another journalist from Hrodna Andrei Pachobut, who used to work as a "Gazeta Wyborcza" newspaper correspondent.

Also, the journalists of Belarusian media have come across numerous refusals to get press credentials and be provided with information. The attempts to claim against such refusals appear to be unsuccessful in the majority of cases. Moreover, the courts even refuse to accept such claims for consideration. On March 26, 2009, the Board of Judges on Civil Cases of Miensk City Court declined an appeal against a court decision to disregard an application for getting press accreditation at the Chamber of Representatives of Belarus, taken by a City District Court in Miensk. The claim and the appeal were submitted by the "Narodnaya Vola" editorial and the newspaper's journalist Maryna Koktysh, deprived of her professional right to be accredited at the state body. It was the third abortive attempt to appeal against the refusal to provide the media worker with press credentials at the Lower Chamber of Belarusian Parliament.

Rebroadcasting of five Russian TV channels ("The First Channel. Global network", "RTR-Planet", "NTV-Mir", "Ren TV", and TVCI) by cable network operators has been terminated in Belarus since April 1, 2009. This decision was taken by the Telecommunicational Branch Union of Belarus (www.tos-by.com). Initially, the disconnection of five TV channels was explained by the absence of permits for broadcasting in Belarus, issued by the Ministry of Information of Belarus. (According to the new Belarusian law "On the Media", all foreign media outlets are obliged to receive such permits. However, the terms of getting them are not stipulated by the law.) Also, the disconnection was explained with economic reasons, including high rebroadcasting costs and denude of advertising returns from Belarusian TV companies.

The Director of "TV-Centre" Foreign Broadcasting Department Vladimir Kokashvili has disclaimed economic underlying reasons of cutting off the Russian



TV channels in Belarus, Radio Liberty (www.svaboda.org) reports. According to him, the TVCI costs were minimal (lower than the costs of a number of other TV channels, rebroadcast by cable TV operators) and hadn't been changed since 2008. V. Kokashvili added that the TV channel didn't present any advertisements at all. He treated as a joke the version of cutting off the TV channels on the cable TV operators' initiative.

Thus, despite the started dialogue with the European Union, the Belarusian authorities continued to infringe upon the media freedom in the country in March – April 2009. On the one hand, the journalists' access to information was restricted. On the other hand, the readers' access to mass media was complicated. The authorities hindered distribution of non-censored information inside the country as well as dissemination of free information from Belarus to the foreign audiences and from abroad to Belarus.

## 3. RATING LISTS AND EVENTS

Traditional meda are losing popularity with city dwellers in Baranavichy (a district center in Brest region, the 8<sup>th</sup> largest city in Belarus), the "Intex-press" independent newspaper reports. Baranavichy residents expended 13% less money to purchase newspapers, magazines and other periodicals last year in comparison with the year



of 2007. The sales of TV-sets in Baranavichy fell almost twice – from 11,221 to 6,597 items. At the same time the city residents spent 30% more funds to buy nonfoods.

However, the number of Internet users increased considerably in Baranavichy in 2008. The number of ADSL Internet users increased almost four times from 1,000 to 3,700 clients. Around 11,000 private apartments had dial-up Internet connection last year. Thus, the number of dial-up Internet users increased by 500 clients in 2008.

The first session of the Public Coordination Council on the mass media field took place on March 26, 2009. It is worth mentioning, the Council has been founded, basing upon the legal norms of the new Belarusian law "On Mass Media". Despite the title, the Council members as well as the Council's statutory notes are adopted by the Council of Ministers of Belarus. The Council's first session was mainly dedicated to "procedural" issues as well as to the following session, scheduled for mid-May 2009, and its agenda.

"Journalists for Ecological Welfare" media campaign was started in Miensk on April 30, 2009. It was initiated by young leaders of Belarusian Association of Journalists. The media campaign initiators aim at drawing journalists' attention to the problems, connected with the lack of information about construction of APP in Belarus and hushing up the information about alternative energy sources and the consequences of Chernobyl disaster in the country.

Among other, the media campaign includes discussions with the participation of supporters and opposers of the idea to build the APP in Belarus, monitoring of coverage of this problematic in the media, press-tours to the "problem" areas, information support of anti-nuclear activity of civil initiatives and non-governmental organizations. A special *section*, dedicated to the "Journalists for Ecological Welfare" media campaign has been launched on the BAJ Web-site – *www.baj.by*.