

E-NEWSLETTER



THE BELARUSIAN  
ASSOCIATION  
OF JOURNALISTS

# MASS MEDIA in Belarus

OCTOBER–DECEMBER 2012

## Mass Media in Belarus in Post-Election Period



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**As the internet has become an increasingly important source of information, the Belarus authorities have used a variety of different means to control it. Keeping a tight rein on information remains at the core of their policy of self-preservation.**

Index on Censorship,  
"Belarus: Pulling the Plug" report

**"If a person breaks the law in the real world, he or she has to answer for that inevitably. The same rule has to be introduced in the global network. The Web must be free of censorship and dictatorship, on the one hand, but also it has to be free of arbitrariness of anonymous provokers and criminals, on the other hand."**

Aleh Praliaskouski,  
Minister of Information of Belarus

## DEVELOPMENT OF SITUATION IN THE MASS MEDIA FIELD



**E**lections to the Chamber of Representatives at the National Assembly took place in Belarus on September 23, 2012. It is worth mentioning that according to [the ODIHR OSCE Final Report](#), the Belarusian governmental authorities failed to meet numerous OSCE commitments during the elections, including the right to free expression of opinion. The post-election period was characterized by multidirectional and controversial processes in the Belarusian media field that included:

- **termination of criminal proceedings against Mikalai Petrushenka, charged with defaming a public officer;**
- **procrastination of legal investigations on criminal cases, filed against A. Surapin and A. Paczobut;**
- **pressure on the “ARCHE-Beginning” magazine publisher and editorial, followed by the forced departure of its former Editor-in-chief Valery Bulhakau from Belarus;**
- **seizure and destruction of more than 40 copies of “Belarus Press-Photo” photo album by Belarusian customs officials;**

- continuation of official accreditation of European Radio for Belarus correspondent's office in Belarus;
- increase of budget funding to the state-owned media.

## CRIMINAL PROSECUTION IN MASS MEDIA FIELD

A criminal case against a journalist Mikalai Petrushenka (Vitsiebsk) was terminated subject to the absence of corpus delicti on October 17, 2012. The journalist was informed about that by the Legal Investigation Committee's Department for Vitsiebsk region. The case had been filed by Vorsha City Department of Legal Investigation Committee on August 17, 2012. Initially, the media worker used to be charged with defaming a public officer (article 369 of Belarus Criminal Code). The criminal charges were grounded on M. Petrushenka's article, published on nash-dom.info Web-site on August 8, 2012 that, allegedly, contained offensive public statements in relation to Deputy Chairperson of Vorsha City Executive Committee. The criminal case was passed to the Legal Investigation Committee's Department for Vitsiebsk region. Consequently, the criminal proceedings against M. Petrushenka were terminated, following the linguistic examination of the text.

The fourth linguistic examination was initiated within criminal proceedings against Hrodna journalist Andrzej Paczobut within the period under review. The journalist was informed about that by the Legal Investigation Committee's Department for Hrodna region on November 29, 2012. Legal investigation on the case was suspended for the period of linguistic examination. However, the journal-



ist still cannot leave the city of Hrodna, since he has been forced to sign a recognizance not to leave the place of his residence.

The correspondent of “Gazeta Wyborcza” daily (Poland) is charged with casting aspersion on the President of Belarus (article 367 part 2 of Belarus Criminal Code). The case was filed by the Legal Investigation Committee’s Department for Hrodna region in June 2012. It was grounded on the journalist’s publications on various Web-sites. The terms of legal investigation were prolonged twice on October 21, 2012 and November 21, 2012. However, none of legal investigation procedures have been implemented with the media worker so far.



There haven’t been undertaken any legal investigation procedures with participation of photo-journalist Anton Surapin either. It is worth mentioning that the media worker was accused of assisting a group of people to trespass the Belarusian state border and taken to KGB pre-trial jail in Minsk on July 13, 2012. A. Surapin was the first to publish photos of teddy-bears with slogans in support of freedom of speech, thrown by Swedish PR activists from a small airplane over a district center of Ivaniets, Minsk region and Minsk suburbs on July 4, 2012. The arrest of Anton Surapin by KGB led the top-ten list of most absurd arrests of 2012, published by Amnesty International. Although, the photo journalist was released from custody in August 2012, he was forced to sign a recognizance not to leave the place of his registration.

**It is worth mentioning that all three criminal cases, mentioned above, were filed against journalists for their Web publications.**

## PRESSURE ON PUBLISHERS AND BOOK/NEWSPAPER DISTRIBUTORS

**A**s reported on November 13, 2012, Valery Bulhakau, the former Editor-in-chief of “ARCHE-Beginning” magazine had taken a decision to emigrate from Belarus. According to the journalist, he was forced to take this step, facing the legal investigation, initiated by Belarusian official authorities in relation to the independent intellectual periodical edition.

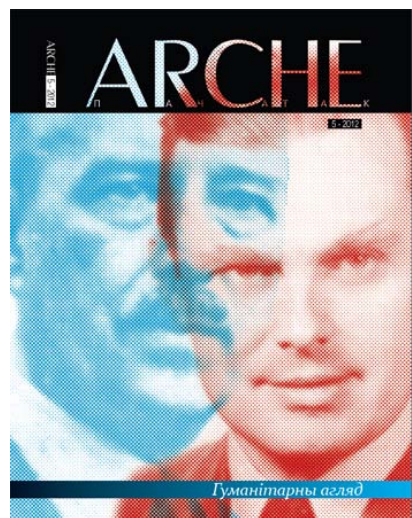
**“It is not the final decision of mine. The situation development will depend on the desire of our law-enforcement bodies to escalate the conflict or leave it out...”**

Valery Bulhakau

The pressure on the “ARCHE-Beginning” intellectual magazine publishers and editorial started on September 14, 2012, when V. Bulhakau was detained at the “Sovetization of Western Belarus” book presentation in Hrodna. He was accused of engagement in illegal business activity in the form of selling books at the presentation event.

On October 4, 2012, the Department of Financial Investigations blocked accounts of “ARCHE” Establishment that acts as the founder and editorial of “ARCHE-Beginning” magazine. Consequently, publication of “ARCHE-Beginning” magazine had to be suspended. On October 18, 2012, V. Bulhakau was fined 500,000 Belarusian rubles (around EUR 50) for engagement in illegal business activity. However, the pressure on him continued and the blocked editorial accounts weren’t released.

The “Zone X” TV program on “Belarus-1” state TV channel presented twice propagandist stories about V.



Bulhakau, where the latter was accused of distributing extremist literature. Among other, it was noted that the 'book case' could be further treated under criminal law.

Another conflict, connected with mass media and book publishing, happened on November 12, 2012.

More than 40 copies of "Belarus Press-Photo 2011" photo album were seized from independent photo journalists Yuliya Darashkevich and Aliaksandr Vasiukovich at the Belarus-Lithuanian border by Belarusian customs officers. According to the journalists, the seizure was explained by the necessity of checking the presence of "information that may be dangerous to the Belarusian state" in the photo albums. The journalists' explanations about the completely legal publication of the photo albums and their import to Belarus weren't taken into consideration. Consequently, Ashmiany Customs Department informed A. Vasiukovich that "following the customs examination, the printed production – BELARUS PRESS PHOTO – in the quantity of 41 copies was found illegal and subject to destruction, since it was out of line with "Publications. Output data" State Standard of Belarus 7.4-2009".



<http://charter97.org>

**BELARUS PRESS PHOTO is the annual contest of media photographers, founded by photo reporters in 2009. Dozens of Belarusian photographers participate annually in this prestigious event. The final expositions are presented abroad. Photo albums with the winners' works have been published twice by now.**

## I POSITIVE TRENDS

The positive events of the last months of 2012 include continuation of official accreditation of “European Radio for Belarus” correspondent’s office in the country till November 10, 2013. The corresponding executive order was signed by the First Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Siamashka on November 12, 2012. It is worth mentioning that the radio station received an official permit to work in Belarus in November 2009. Presently, the radio broadcaster has 10 accredited journalists in the country.

Another positive event is connected with the change of provisions on identifying the visitors of Internet-cafes, Wi-Fi areas etc. The Council of Ministers of Belarus adopted executive order No. 1191 of December 22, 2012 that introduced alternative means of identifying Web-users, apart from ID or passport presentation, since the end of January 2013. In particular, the alternatives include photo- or video-registration, SMS-registration etc.



**The compulsory identification of Web-users in Internet-cafes and other places of collective Internet-connection got introduced by the Presidential decree of February 1, 2010 “On Measures to Improve the Use of the National Segment of Internet”**



## INCREASE OF BUDGET FUNDING TO THE STATE-OWNED MEDIA

**A**gainst the background of continuing discrimination of independent media that includes limitations on distribution, advertising activity etc. there has strengthened the state support to the state-owned media. According to the Belarus law “*On the National State Budget 2013*”, adopted in October 2012, the state budget subsidies to the state-owned media totaled 669 206 189.2 thousand Belarusian rubles that equals to around EUR 60 million. The amount of subsidies is almost by EUR 15 million bigger in comparison with the year of 2012. The majority of budget funds are directed to support the state TV and radio broadcasters (approximately, EUR 46 million). Around EUR 6 million is directed to support the periodical press and publishing houses. EUR 7.5 million is aimed at dealing with “other issues in the media field”.



The considerable increase of budget funding to the state-owned media contradicts to declarations of top governmental officials about the necessity of saving and cutting budget investments in the media. Thus, the president of Belarus Aliaksandr Lukashenka noted during a meeting with the head of the National State TV and Radio Company Henadzi Davydzka on November 27, 2012 that the state subsidies

to the Belarusian TV channels could be significantly cut in 2013. (Surprisingly, the State Budget Law for 2013 had been signed by him before that.) However, on December 22, 2012, the president prolonged implementation of his **decree on exemption of the National State TV and Radio Company with all affiliates from VAT and income taxation in 2013.**

**"I strongly demand to carry out staff reduction by 25-30% and take pains to improve the work efficiency" – Aliaksandr Lukashenka, president of Belarus.**

Similar processes take place in the field of periodical press of Belarus. Thus, the state officials have declared amalgamation of 11 nation-wide printed periodical editions to two holding companies.

According to the Minister of Information of Belarus Aleh Pralaskouski, the "Zviazda" Publishing House has practically been founded. Apart from "Zviazda" newspaper, it will gather cultural periodical editions, including "LiM" Publishing and Editing Enterprise, "Literature and Art" newspaper as well as "Polymia", "Maladosts", "Neman", and "Vozhyk" magazines. The social and political Publishing house will unite 5 largest nation-wide socio-political newspapers: "Sovetskaya Belorussia", "Narodnaya Gazeta", "Respublika", "Belaruskaya Niva", and "Znamya Yunosti". However, the declared "print media optimization" doesn't lead to decrease of their support from the state budget. Just on the contrary, the state subsidies increase.



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