

# MASS MEDIA

*in Belarus*

E-NEWSLETTER

# 5 (10) September – November 2008



BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS  
[www.baj.by](http://www.baj.by)

**“The return of these two newspapers to the official press circuit is undeniably good news and a sign of goodwill from the Belarusian authorities. But... This measure must be extended to the dozen so other newspapers that were similarly sidelined, and the question of accreditation for foreign reporters must also be solved. We also urge the authorities not to yield to the temptation to increase surveillance of the Internet. The decisions taken in the immediate future on this matter will be decisive and will be seen as a sign of the regime’s real intentions.”**

*“Reporters without Borders”,  
Press-release of November 27, 2008*

The contents of this publication are copyrighted.  
It is obligatory to refer to the Belarussian Association of Journalists,  
when using the E-NEWSLETTER: MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS materials.

Publisher: Belarussian Association of Journalists (BAJ) PL Svabody 17-304, 220030 MINSK, Belarus  
Phone: +375 17 203-63-66, 226-70-98 Fax: +375 17 203-63-66., 226-70-98 E-mail: [baj@bai.by](mailto:baj@bai.by) Web: [www.bai.by](http://www.bai.by)

Contact: Mr. Andrei Bastunets, BAJ Deputy Chairman

## Contents

<b>1. STATISTICS.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. SITUATION DEVELOPMENT IN THE BELARUS' MEDIA FIELD (SEPTEMBER – NOVEMBER 2008) .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. THE MAIN PROBLEM: THE PRACTICE OF IMPLEMENTATION OF BELARUS' LAW "ON COUNTERACTION TO EXTREMISM".....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4. RATINGS AND EVENTS.....</b>	<b>7</b>

## 1. STATISTICS

1302 printed periodical editions (676 newspapers, 581 magazines, 38 newsletters and 6 catalogues) had valid registration certificates in Belarus on December 1, 2008.

Though 16 new registered media outlets have been officially registered in Belarus since September 1, 2008, the number of registered newspapers continued to drop. Thus, the number reduced by 7 periodical editions since September 1, 2008 and almost by 30 periodicals since the beginning of 2008. The quantitative rise of registered printed media outlets was reached due to registration of new magazines that avoid the social and political problematic on the pages, as a rule.

All in all, 2 new periodical editions were officially registered in Belarus in November 2008. Still, 26 media registration certificates were cancelled by the official authorities within the same period of time.

Nine news agencies remained in the country.

The situation in the broadcasting media field remains practically unchanged.

67 TV and 158 radio broadcasting media outlets had the officially registered status in Belarus on December 1, 2008. However, it should be emphasized that the majority of registered TV and radio broadcasters belong to the state (including 156 radio and 27 TV media outlets).

It should be noted that both the state and non-state TV and radio broadcasters are rigidly controlled by the national and local authorities nowadays.

## 2. SITUATION DEVELOPMENT IN THE BELARUS' MEDIA FIELD (SEPTEMBER – NOVEMBER 2008)

The following crucial events took place in the Belarus' media field in the autumn 2008:

- The election to the Chamber of Representatives of Belarus;
- The start of application of a highly regressive Belarus' Law "On Counteraction to Extremism";
- The return of private belongings, seized from a range of independent journalists during mass KGB searches on March 27-28, 2008;
- The appearance of two independent newspapers ("Nasha Niva" and "Narodnaya Vola") in subscription catalogues and at news-stands.

Unlike during other election campaigns, journalists and media outlets



didn't face mass persecution at the election to the Chamber of Representatives of Belarus, held on September 28, 2008. However, the journalists confronted with refusals to provide them with information about the election committees' activity, the voting procedure and its results in all parts of the country.

The independent press distributors were detained in Svietlahorsk (Homiel region), Polatsk (Vitsiebsk region), Salihorsk (Miensk region) and other Belarusian regions. Other legal instruments of pressure were applied in relation to independent media outlets as well.

Thus, the "Brestskiy Kuryer" and "Bobruyskiy Kuryer" newspapers received official warnings from the Ministry of Information of Belarus. ("Bobruyskiy Kuryer" received two warnings at a time.) Also, after the election, the Ministry of Information issued an official warning for an article, dwelling upon the Parliamentary election results, published in the "Borisovkiye Novosti" independent weekly. A defamation claim was advanced to the "Gazeta Slonimskaya" weekly (Hrodna region) and the newspaper journalist. Also, the Public Prosecutor issued an order to be carried out by the media outlet.

Uladzimir Bazan, the "Courier from Vitebsk" small-circulation non-state newspaper's Editor-in-chief was attacked by a hooligan on the Election Day on September 28, 2008. The assailant hasn't been identified yet. It should be emphasized that both Uladzimir Bazan and the "Vitsiebskiy Kuryer M" newspaper editorial had received threats of violence from the "RNE" pro-fascist organization members before the attack. However, the threateners' personalities weren't identified.

The KGB initiated consideration of several criminal cases on acknowledging a range of informational materials to be extremist in nature. (See more in Chapter "The Main Problem")

The positive changes in the Belarus' media field within the period under consideration were as follows:

1. The started restitution of private belongings, seized from a range of independent journalists during mass KGB searches on March 27-28, 2008 (See more in E-newsletter #2 (7));

2. The return of "Nasha Niva" and "Narodnaya Vola" independent newspapers to the state monopolist press distribution systems. Just like almost a half of other officially registered non-state periodical editions, these newspapers had been ousted from the "Belposhta" subscription catalogues and the "Belsayuzdruk" network of newsstands on the eve of the Presidential election at the end of 2005. Courts refused to consider the claims, submitted by the newspapers' readers and editorials. However, on November 19, 2008, the Belarusian top officials sent a "no-paper" to the EU institutions with a promise to return the "Nasha Niva" and "Narodnaya Vola" newspapers to the state-owned press-distribution networks. Consequently, the newspapers' editorials managed to sign contracts with the "Belposhta" and "Belsayuzdruk" enterprises at the end of November 2008. Finally, the periodical editions were included into the "Belposhta" subscription catalogues and appeared at the "Belsayuzdruk" newsstands all over Belarus. However, more than a dozen of other non-state national and regional independent newspapers are still deprived of such an opportunity of broad distribution in the country.

### 3. THE MAIN PROBLEM: THE PRACTICE OF IMPLEMENTATION OF BELARUS' LAW "ON COUNTERACTION TO EXTREMISM"

Hrodna Regional Department of KGB (State Security Committee) initiated a criminal case in September 2008 and asked courts to acknowledge a newspaper, some books, human rights newsletters and music CDs to be "extremist materials". Among other, the list of "potential extremist materials" comprised an issue of "Svaboda" non-registered newspaper; a copy of "Glos znad Niemna na Uchodzstwie" newspaper, published by the Belarusian Poles' community; "The Chronicles of Human Rights Violations in Belarus in 2004" review; a book "Letters from the Forest" by Paval Seviarynets, "The Accidental President" documentary essay by Sviatlana Kalinkina and Pavel Sharamet, recordings of Polish Radio programs and CDs with records of "Solidarity with Belarus" concert etc. These were the materials confiscated by cross border officers in Hrodna in 2005–2007 from different people who tried to cross the Belarus' state border with Poland.

Hrodna Regional Department of KGB demanded the court to authorize destruction of the publications and audio-video materials, mentioned above, referring to legal norms of Belarus' Law "On Counteraction to Extremism".

Kastrychnitski District Court of Hrodna considered the case, initiated by Hrodna Regional Department of KGB in September 2008. Consequently, the judge acknowledged three CDs with records of "Solidarity with Belarus" concert in Warsaw (2006), 6 CDs with records of "Lekcja Bialoruskiego" ('A Lesson of Belarusian') documentary (Poland) that won a number of international film awards and 7 CDs with photos, depicting protest events on Kastrychnitskaya Square in Miensk in 2006 to be "extremist materials" and resolved to destroy them. The court verdict came into force on September 16, 2008.

On September 9, 2008, Iuje District Court considered an issue of non-registered "Svaboda" newspaper (No. 127 of August 14-27, 2008) to be extremist and authorized destruction of 5,000 copies of "Svaboda", previously confiscated by the police. The appeal concerning "Svaboda" newspaper was based upon the "War in Georgia" article.

The court verdict was cancelled by the Panel of Judges at Hrodna Regional Court on November 10, 2008. It was noted by the judges that the court of original jurisdiction had regarded the case without informing all the people concerned.

Kastrychnitski District Court of Hrodna left other criminal cases on "extremist materials", initiated by Hrodna Regional Department of KGB without consideration for procedural reasons in October 2008.

However, Brest Regional Department of KGB appealed to court with a demand to acknowledge as an extremist material and to destroy an issue of "ARCHE. The Beginning" magazine (##7-8, 2008) in November 2008. Ten copies of the magazine issue had been seized by the Belarusian customs officers in Brest on October 24, 2008. The KGB officers didn't specify concrete publications in the magazine they considered to be "revolting". ("ARCHE. The Beginning" magazine is a literary and analytical publication, dwelling upon the social, political and cultural problematic. It is

the only Belarusian periodical, invited to the “Eurozine” network of European intellectual magazines.)

The Belarusian Association of Journalists delivered a statement on October 16, 2008, where the Association activists expressed their deep concern with the cases on acknowledging some information products to be extremist materials.

“Courts took verdicts on recognition of information products as extremist materials without prior expertise. Therefore, such decisions are very dangerous as citizens can be subject to criminal prosecution according to the Law “On Counteraction to Extremism”, the statement authors emphasized.

## 4. RATINGS AND EVENTS



The Reporters without Borders international organization published the annually composed rating list, depicting the situation with the freedom of speech in the world. Belarus took the 154th position in the list of 173 countries of the world. It is preceded by Somali (the 153rd position) and followed by Yemen (the 155th position) this year. Eritrea, North Korea and Turkmenistan form the bottom of the list 2008. Belarus has lost three positions in the list since the year of 2007.

“Stand Up for Journalism!” campaign was held all around the world on November 5, 2008. The action was initiated by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and supported by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (<http://baj.by/m-p-viewpub-tid-1-pid-5947.html>). The BAJ members in different Belarusian regions were drawing the public attention to the journalists’ problems and the absence of freedom of speech in Belarus in different ways. Moreover, the “Stand Up for Journalism” campaign was backed by a large number of Belarusian on-line periodical editions and bloggers’ communities.

A virtual demonstration, dedicated to the global campaign for freedom of speech, was held on the BAJ pages [in the Live Journal](#).

A round-table discussion, dedicated to the regulation of on-line media activity was held in Miensk on November 24, 2008. The event was arranged by the OSCE Office in Miensk in cooperation with the Ministry of Information of Belarus. The Head of Chief Ideological Department at the President’s Office Usievalad Yancheuski stated during the event that the Internet “had been, was and would be free” in Belarus. However, a Deputy Minister of Information told that a set of governmental provisions on regulation of on-line media activity and registration of on-line media outlets in Belarus was elaborated at that time. The OSCE representatives proposed their expert assistance in the process of preparing and evaluating the legal draft. Among other, the round table participants insisted on introducing a voluntary procedure of registration of on-line periodical editions in the country.