

MASS MEDIA

in Belarus

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Persecution
of Journalists and Mass Media
after the Presidential Election
2010 in Belarus



BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS
www.baj.by

Current information on violations of journalist and media rights during the Presidential election campaign – see: <http://baj.by>

Outcome of monitoring of coverage of Presidential election 2010 in the media – see: <http://baj.by/index.php?module=p&tid=6&filter=typemon^sub^15&cv=15>

“It’s time to stop mocking at the authorities and the people. You will bear full responsibility for every word. Even if your editorial boards are located far abroad, we will file claims against the countries where these editorial boards are located.”

*Alexander Lukashenka, President of Belarus.
Press-conference, December 20, 2010*

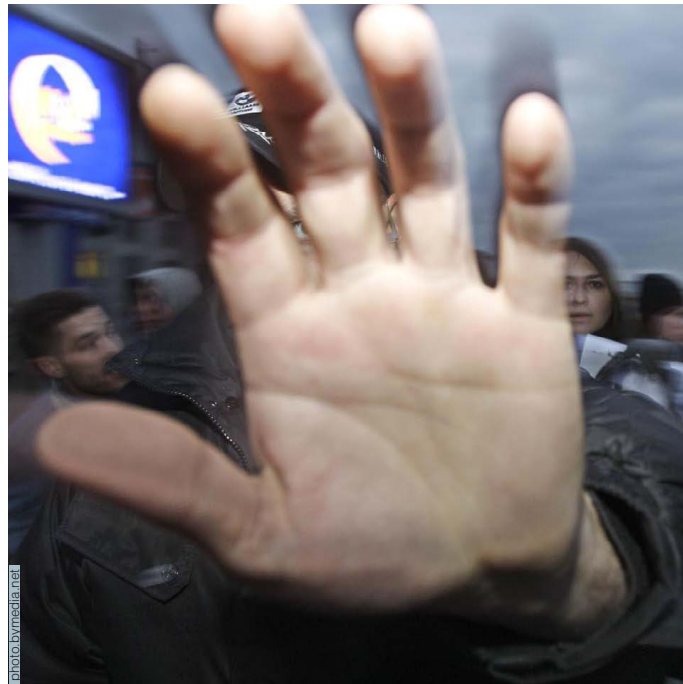
“I am deeply concerned by the unprecedented wave of violence, intimidation, arrests and prosecution of journalists that started in the wake of the 19 December 2010 presidential election.”

*Dunia Mijatovic, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.
Letter to Belarusian Foreign Minister Siarhei Martynau.
December 21, 2010*

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Mass Media in Belarus: Attacks on Journalists

The Presidential election was held in Belarus on **December 19, 2010**. It was accompanied with mass violations of journalist and media rights. The unprecedented persecutions for free expression of opinion have been taking place in the country since then.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists sent an appeal to the Minister of Internal Affairs of Belarus A. Kulashou, the Chief Police Officer on Civil Security Yauhien Paludzien and the Commander of Internal Troops Valery Haydukevich on **December 17, 2010**. The BAJ leadership reminded the police of journalists' right to report from street actions (including the unauthorized events) and asked the police commandment to pass the reminder to common policemen.

"We hope that the undertaken measures will help to avoid conflicts and violations of media and journalist rights and help to ensure the Belarusian citizens' constitutional right to receive and disseminate information," the BAJ Board members underscored in the appeal.

However, several journalists of Belarusian and foreign media that covered a rally, arranged by a Presidential candidate Uladzimir Niaklayeu and his supporters towards the city center of Minsk, were knocked down and beaten by a group of security agents even before the closure of polling stations on *December 19, 2010*. The masked offenders were seizing and breaking the journalists' professional photo and video equipment, disregarding the press cards and credentials available.

Detentions and physical attacks on journalists continued after the protest action in the evening of December 19, 2010. According to the BAJ updates, no less than 26 media workers were detained then. More than 20 reporters were beaten hard by the riot police. 10 journalists were sentenced to 10-15 days of custody.

Six media workers and BAJ members are kept in KGB jail in Minsk. The list of detainees includes **Natallia Radzina**, the “Charter’97” Web-site Editor, **Iryna Khalip**, a “Novaya Gazeta” (Russia) newspaper correspondent and A. Sannikau’s wife, as well as the alternative Presidential Candidates’ activists **Siarhei Vazniak**, the “Tovarisch” newspaper’s Editor-in-chief and a BAJ Board member, **Pavel Seviarynets**, a BAJ Council member, **Alaksandr Fiaduta**, an independent columnist, and **Dzmitry Bandarenka**. All of them were detained in Minsk on **December 19-20, 2010**.

The media workers were presented preliminary charges within a criminal case on ‘mass riots’ 10 days afterwards. Consequently, the term of their detention was extended to two months. The legal investigative bodies will be able either to prolong the term of custody, or close the case, or hand over the case materials to court then.

The criminal case has been filed by the Preliminary Investigation Office of City Department of Interior at Minsk City Executive Committee. The detained journalists and civil activists are preliminary suspected or accused of breaking article 293, parts 1 and / or 2 of Belarus’ Criminal Code (“Mass Riots”).

Article 293, part 1 of Belarus’ Criminal Code (“Arrangement of mass riots”) provides for 5 – 15 years of imprisonment.

Article 293, part 2 of Belarus’ Criminal Code (“Participation in mass riots”) provides for 3 – 8 years of imprisonment.

On **December 20, 2010**, the Board of the Belarusian Association of Journalists adopted a statement of protest against “shocking fact of severe force used by the police against journalists and civil activists in the evening of December 19, 2010” as well as against the extremely biased coverage of the peaceful civil protest action by the state broadcasting media. *“The Belarusian society was absolutely misinformed as for the aims of the event, the number of its participants, and their actions as well as about the brutality, applied by the police agents to disperse the peaceful action participants.”*

Consequently, the Ministry of Justice of Belarus sent a cross-request for explanation to the Belarusian Association of Journalists on **December 21, 2010**. The Ministry was curious what paragraph of the BAJ statutes had allowed the association to appeal on behalf of “civil activists” apart from journalists.

A broad range of international organizations and journalist associations condemned the use of force against journalists, applied by the riot police and other security troops during the mass events in Minsk on **December 19-20, 2010**.

In particular, letters of protest to Belarusian official authorities were sent by OSCE, the International Federation of Journalists, Reporters without Borders, the Exiled Journalists’ Network, the **International Press Institute** and its South-East European Branch SEEMO, the Russian Union of Journalists, “Stop Censorship!” Movement (Ukraine), the Lithuanian Union of Journalists, the Norwegian Union of Journalists (NJ), the Human Rights House Network, Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists (New York, USA), the Association of Polish Journalists, the Journalist Association of Jerusalem (JAJ) and other organizations.



On **December 24, 2010**, the Belarusian Association of Journalists appealed to the Public Prosecutor General, the Minister of Internal Affairs, and the Minister of Justice of Belarus with a request to pay attention to numerous offences of law that had taken place since *December 19, 2010*, to take all possible efforts to restore the rule of law and prosecute all the guilty of breaking the law. However, the Public Prosecutor's office refused to consider the appeal on the merits and the Ministry of Justice urged the Belarusian Association of Journalists again to explain the reasons for adopting the appeal.

In the meantime, the wave of repressions against journalists and media continues. The journalists are summoned to the KGB interrogations. The police and KGB searches are conducted at media editorials as well as at journalists' private apartments.

The Minsk bureau of European Radio for Belarus was searched by the KGB agents in the absence of the editorial staff on **December 25, 2010**. The state security agents seized 43 items of office equipment, including PCs, laptop computers, a server, dictaphones, photo cameras, and portable video cameras. It is worth mentioning that the European Radio for Belarus is an international radio station, registered in Warsaw. Its office and correspondents have been officially accredited in Belarus by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The KGB agents broke into the office of "BelSat" independent satellite TV Channel in Minsk at night on **December 26, 2010**. They used a special electric saw to open the door. However, practically nothing could be found at the moment of the raid in the office, since the journalists had taken the equipment and left the premises several days before. The "BelSat" satellite TV Channel broadcasts its programs from the territory of Poland. It doesn't have any official status in Belarus for the time being, since the Belarusian official authorities have rejected repeatedly the "BelSat" managers' applications for accreditation of its office and correspondents in the country.

12 computers, flash drives, and CDs were confiscated by KGB officers after a search, conducted at the premises of the **Belarusian PEN** and editorial board of “**Nasha Niva**” independent weekly that share an office in Minsk on **December 28, 2010**. Besides, a computer was confiscated during another search at the private apartment of “Nasha Niva” Editor-in-chief **Andrei Skurko**.

According to the presented warrant, the searches were related to two criminal cases: on mass disturbances and on affront to state symbols.

The KGB agents conducted a search at **Katsiaryna Tkachenka**’s private apartment on *December 30, 2010*. They seized the “BelSat” representative’s laptop computer.

The KGB agents conducted a search at **Yulia Darashkevich**’s private apartment on *December 31, 2010*. They seized the “Nasha Niva” photo correspondent’s portable HDDs, 2 laptop computers, and a dictaphone.

On the same day, the KGB agents searched a private apartment, belonging to **Tatsiana Haurylchyk**, a “Nasha Niva” cameraman. The media worker was called to come to the KGB for “a talk” on *January 3, 2011*. Tatsiana refused to obey, since her attorney wasn’t allowed to accompany her during the talk. On the following day, an unknown person phoned to the journalist and menaced her with beating.

Moreover, a broad range of KGB searches was conducted at the private apartments of the journalists, preliminary accused of arranging the ‘mass riots’ in Minsk on December 19, 2010.

The seizure of information carriers and professional equipment from journalists indicates that the official authorities attempt to restrict dissemination of unbiased information about the events on December 19, 2010 and later.

The same goal was met by means of disabling access to a range of Web-resources on the Election Day. Among other, the access was blocked to the Web-sites of *charter97.org* (“Charter’97”), *belaruspartisan.org* (“Belorusskiy Partisan”), *gazetaby.com* (“Salidarnasc” On-line newspaper), *ucpb.org* (The United Civil Party), *udf.by* (The United Democratic Forces), *electroname.com*, *bchd.info* (The Belarusian Christian Democracy), *spring96.org* (“Viasna” Center for Human Rights).

Periodically, there appeared problems with access to the Web-pages of “*European Radio for Belarus*” (*belradio.fm*), *Radio Liberty* (*svaboda.org*), and *zapraudu.info* (“Tell the Truth!” civil campaign). Moreover, the Web-users couldn’t log in to their *Facebook* and *LiveJournal* accounts as well as *Google*. The access to the Web-sites of popular anonymizers was disabled as well.

Also, it should be emphasized that the Belarusian authorities keep on censoring the news programs of Russian TV broadcasters and cut out their reports about the events in Belarus.

Being deeply concerned with the intensifying crackdown on the media and KGB raids at the editorials and private apartments of independent journalists in Belarus, Reporters without Borders adopted a special appeal on December 30, 2010.

“The press freedom organization is alarmed by the intensity of the repression since the election and calls on the governments of the European Union, the Russian government and international institutions to respond firmly in order to prevent an even harsher crackdown on the media by Lukashenka,” RSF emphasized.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatovic condemned detentions and assaults of Belarusian and international journalists in Minsk following the 19 December presidential election. “Violence against the media is unacceptable. The police should assist reporters who cover public events — not beat or intimidate them, damage their equipment and imprison them. I call on authorities to immediately release all jailed journalists,” Ms. Mijatovic said.