

# E-NEWSLETTER: MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

*No.1(6) (January – February 2008)*



***A journalist Alaksandr Zdvizhkov on release from colony.  
Press-conference at BAJ. Minsk, February 25, 2008***



***Belarusian Association of Journalists***

***[www.baj.by](http://www.baj.by)***

"In 21st century Europe, it is shocking to see an editor arrested, tried behind closed doors and punished beyond any acceptable limits only for reprinting cartoons produced elsewhere and that have been published everywhere.

Persecution of journalists for trying to inform the public on important issues is a misuse of hate speech laws. In fact, the Belarus government has used the international controversy around the cartoons as a pretext to eliminate a critical voice from public life."

**Miklos Haraszi,**  
*the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media*

Cover Photo: A journalist Alaksandr Zdvizhkou on release from colony.  
Press-conference at BAJ. Minsk, February 25, 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: Belarusan Association of Journalists (BAJ)  
Pl. Svobody 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@baj.by](mailto:baj@baj.by) Web: [www.baj.by](http://www.baj.by)*

*Contact: Mr. Andrei Bastunets, BAJ Deputy Chairman*

**Table of Content:**

<b>1. Statistics . . . . .</b>	<b>p. 4</b>
<b>2. Situation Development in the Belarusian Media Field (January 1 – February 29, 2008) . . . . .</b>	<b>p. 5</b>
<b>3. The Main Problem . . . . .</b>	<b>p. 7</b>
<b>4. Ratings and Events . . . . .</b>	<b>p. 10</b>

## 1. Statistics

1254 printed periodical editions (692 newspapers, 522 magazines, 35 newsletters, 4 catalogues and 1 almanac) and 9 news agencies had official registration certificates in the Republic of Belarus *on March 1, 2008*. Their quantity has decreased by 12 media outlets since the year start.

All in all, the Belarus' Ministry of Information has cancelled 1214 media registration certificates since 1996. According to the Minister of Information **Uladzimir Rusakievich**, *"it is a natural process of registration, depriving of certificates and termination of existence"* of media outlets.

Moreover, the Ministry of Information issued 86 written warnings to 76 periodical editions for violations of media legislation in 2007. Three periodicals – **"Nedela v Molodechno"**, **"Stolichnyje kvartiry"** and **"Fitness and life"** – were suspended from publishing for a three months' course. The publishers were accused of violating article 11 of the Belarus' Law "On the Press and other Mass Media" (breach of frequency of publishing, publication of materials in non-registered languages, publication of advertisements in the volume, exceeding the permitted one).

The number of registered state-owned printed periodical editions totals 393 publications, including 217 newspapers. The number of non-state printed periodical editions amounts to 861 publications, including 475 newspapers.



However, the overwhelming majority of non-state media in Belarus deal with entertainment or advertising.

According to the BAJ statistics, the number of social and political non-state printed media outlets in Belarus totals around 30 publications. Nearly a half of them have been excluded from the state-owned monopolist systems of press distribution by subscription and through the news-stalls.

62 TV and 156 radio broadcasting media outlets had the officially registered status in Belarus *on March 1, 2008*. The majority of officially registered TV and radio broadcasting media (164) belong to the state.

## 2. Situation Development in the Belarusian Media Field (January 1 – February 29, 2008)

A number of events, connected with journalists' education as well as with criminal prosecution of citizens for expression of personal views were in the centre of public attention at the beginning of the year.

The President of Belarus signed decree No. 70 on February 8, 2008. According to the document, all university entrants to departments of Journalism and International Journalism as well as Jurisprudence, Economic Law, International Law, Customs Law etc. are obliged to pass special professional and psychological tests or interviews, elaborated by the Ministry of Education prior to the entrance exams. Numerous independent experts believe that the decision installs a barrier for "political suspects", preventing them from entering the ideologically significant departments.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> year student of Journalism Department at the Belarusian State University **Franak Viachorka** was expelled from his alma mater in a week after the retrograde decree had come into power. The future journalist was flunked



from Journalism Department for "poor progress in studies", as he had spent 15 days in a police jail for taking part in a protest action during mid-year examinations. The student wasn't provided acceptable conditions for repeating the exams.

The President of Belarus Alaksandr Lukashenka visited a new building of Journalism Department at the Belarusian State University on February 12, 2008. The Head of State delivered a speech to the students of Journalism department. Among other, he told as follows: "Mass Media are the most destructive armory, and they have to be controlled by the state... Serious media, just like the whole ideology, are not privatized in Belarus."

A decision of Vitsiebsk Regional Executive Committee manifested another sign of attention to the controlled media outlets on behalf of the state. The editorials of state-owned media outlets will pay in accordance with the reduced renting rates for their premises in the year of 2008. Correspondingly,

the rental rate index will total 0.15 only. The decision was published in the “**Narodnaye Slova**” state-owned newspaper for Vitsiebsk region on February 19 2008.

The Economic Court for Vitsiebsk region rejected a claim, submitted by the “**Vitsiebskiy Kuryer**” non-state newspaper editorial against illegal actions of Vitsiebsk Regional Executive Committee that had baselessly refused to re-register the editorial. (Surprisingly, the same Vitsiebsk Regional Executive Committee took a positive decision on re-registration of “Vitsiebskiy Kuryer” in October 2007. However, the state institution canceled the decision of its own on November 12, 2007. The independent newspaper editorial is preparing a claim of appeal. If the official decision remains in power, the “**Vitsiebskiy Kuryer**” newspaper will not be able to resume publishing.

The “**Novy Chas**” independent weekly newspaper had to suspend publishing as soon as a law-enforcement officer seized the newspaper editorial’s property on February 20, 2008. The arrest was done, in order to meet a court verdict upon a defamation claim, submitted by “a senator” and general **Nikolay Cherginets** against the “Novy Chas” editorial. Consequently, the newspaper editorial had to pay out 50 million Belarusian rubles (around USD 23,000) to him as moral damages. The author of “General-senator Nikolay Cherginets” article **Alaksandr Tamkovich** was urged to pay out a million rubles to the claimant on his request.

Minsk City Court considered an appeal, submitted by the newspaper editorial, and decided to leave the initial court verdict intact on February 11, 2008. Consequently, the “**Novy Chas**” editorial addressed to its readers with a request to help in collecting means for existence.

The criminal prosecution of the former Deputy Editor-in-chief of “**Zhoda**” newspaper **Alaksandr Zdvizhkov** was among the most significant events at the beginning of 2008. (See more in Chapter 3 – Main Problem).

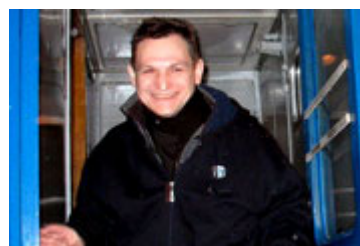


It should be reminded that the newspaper was closed down upon a claim, submitted by the Belarus’ Ministry of Information against the periodical

edition. The newspaper editorial was blamed for reprinting some “Danish cartoons” of Mohammed the Prophet in 2006. Subsequently, **A. Zdvizhkou** was sentenced to three years of imprisonment for “stirring up discord among different nations” (article 130, part 2 of Belarus’ Criminal Code) *on January 18, 2008.*

Having considered the journalist’s appeal *on February 22, 2008*, the Supreme Court of Belarus decided to reduce the term of imprisonment to three months. Taking into account the journalist had already spent the term behind bars, he was released from custody on the same day.

A politician and a publicist **Andrei Klimau** was released from jail *on February 15, 2008*. He had been sentenced to two years of imprisonment for the Web publications *on August 1, 2007*. It should be reminded that the court accused A.



Klimau of “public appeals for a violent overthrow or change of constitutional government with the use of media”, despite the fact that the Internet-resources are not treated as media outlets in accordance with the Belarusian law.

The court verdicts in relation to Klimau and Zdvizhkou were taken during close sessions. The general public learnt about A. Klimau’s imprisonment in a month after the court decision had come into force. The Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Reporters without Borders condemned the harsh punishment for a Web publication. The Amnesty International admitted A. Klimau to be a prisoner of conscience in September 2007.

Finally, the Head of State signed an act of grace in relation to A. Klimau *on February 11, 2008.*

### **3. The Main Problem**

A criminal case in relation to **Alaksandr Zdvizhkou**, the “**Zhoda**” independent newspaper’s Editor-in-chief, sentenced to imprisonment for reprinting Mohammed the Prophet cartoons from the Danish press was in the centre of public attention in Belarus *at the beginning of 2008.*

The cartoons appeared in the “**Zhoda**” weekly (No.6 of February 18-26, 2006). The court didn’t take into consideration the fact that the newspaper print-run had never been distributed.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus delivered a statement *on February 21, 2008*. Among other, it was declared that the Ministry “*decisively condemned any purposeful actions, which could lead to stirring up religious hatred*”.

The KGB representatives held a search in the “Zhoda” editorial office *on February 22, 2008*. On the same day, there was filed a criminal case in accordance with article 130, part 1 of Belarus’ Criminal Code (‘stirring up racial, national or religious hatred’). The case was initiated by the State Committee on Religions and Nationalities as well as the Muslim Communities of Belarus. It was cleared out later that the officials from the Committee showed a xero-copy of the newspaper issue to representatives of Muslim communities and proposed them to go to the law. The Head of Muslim Religious Group in Belarus Ismail Varanovich made this speech during the court session. According to the mufti, he disagreed with the prison penalty to A. Zdvizhkou. Moreover, he didn’t know anything about the closure of “Zhoda” newspaper that reprinted the caricatures.



It should be reminded that the newspaper was closed down by verdict of Belarus’ Supreme Economic Court *on March 17, 2006*. The Ministry of Information had submitted a corresponding claim to the court.

The Public Prosecutor’s Office of Belarus accused A. Zdvizhkou of re-printing the caricatures. However, the case was suspended, as legal investigation couldn’t find out, where A. Zdvizhkou was residing at that time.

It leaked out *in January 2008* that A. Zdvizhkou had been detained and kept behind bars. The journalist was arrested *on November 18, 2007*, when he came to visit his father’s tomb. Since then, he was kept in the KGB investigatory ward.



The court hearings started *on January 11, 2008*. They were declared private in a short while. The Public Prosecutor demanded to sentence A. Zdvizhkou to 4 years of imprisonment, according to article 130, part 2 of Belarus' Criminal Code. Finally, a judge of Minsk City Court Ruslan Aniskievich sentenced the media worker to three years of imprisonment in a high security colony.

**The Committee to Protect Journalists** (CPJ, New York), the **OSCE** Representative on Freedom of the Media Miklos Haraszti, the '**Reporters without Borders**' International Organization, the **Danish Journalist Union** as well as other journalist and human rights organizations and officials expressed their deep concern with the prison sentence to A. Zdvizhkou.

The Supreme Court of Belarus regarded A. Zdvizhkou's appeal at a closed session *on February 22, 2008*. Consequently, the term of imprisonment was reduced to three months. The judges took into account the journalist's poor state of health and the necessity to support his elderly mother. At the same time, the Supreme Court considered the journalist's guilt to be proven. On the same day, A. Zdvizhkou was released from jail, as three months of imprisonment had ended by then.

As soon as A. Zdvizhkou was released, he stated that he would be going to leave Belarus and change his citizenship.

*"I don't want to be a citizen of THIS Republic of Belarus that has THESE courts, THIS Public Prosecutor's Office and THESE prisons", the former Deputy Editor-in-Chief of "Zhoda" newspaper emphasized during his speech. "I understand pretty well that I'm not in safety now, and that I will be able to breathe calm only as soon as I leave the territory of Belarus", the journalist noted.*

As before, A. Zdvizhkou believes that the scandalous caricatures, which were re-printed on his initiative in "Zhoda" had nothing in common with offending the Muslims' religious feelings, as the caricatures were re-printed as pictures without the offending notes. They were aimed at demonstrating the reasons of the "caricature" scandal in Europe. (The newspaper article dwelt upon the issue.)

#### 4. Ratings and Events

A current report of “**Human Rights Watch**” international human rights NGO was published *in January 2008*. Among other, the report highlighted reinforcement of repressive control over the media freedom and other political liberties in Belarus. “Human Rights Watch” noted the Belarusian government’s attempts to regulate the Internet space in Belarus, a two-year term of imprisonment to Andrei Klimau for a Web publication, detentions of journalists, who covered court processes in relation to young leaders in the autumn 2007, the arrest of “Tovarisch” newspaper print-run *in September 2007* and the exclusion of Yuras Aleynik (an excellent student and a BAJ member) from the Academy of Public Administration at the President of Belarus for his active participation in the social life.

A large part of “Attacks on the Press in 2007” annual report, prepared by the **Committee to Protect Journalists** (CPJ, New York) was dedicated to Belarus. Among other, it was stated in the report that the authorities had been



enthusiastically strengthening control over the Internet, destroying the remnants of independent non-state printed periodical editions, while the KGB agents and the police had arrested journalists on framed-up charges.

The authors mention police searches and seizures of the printed production among the facts, which manifest deterioration of situation with the freedom of speech in Belarus. Simultaneously, they emphasize the absence of any progress in legal investigations upon D. Zavadski and V. Charkasava murder cases.

The closed down “**Belaruskaya maladziozhnaya**” radio station was celebrating 45 years since its foundation at the beginning of February 2008. The radio station was founded in 1963 in the framework of Belarusian State Radio. It was a starting ground for numerous famous Belarusian journalists.

The radio station was closed down on the eve of the first Presidential election in the spring of 1994. In protest, the majority of “**Belaruskaya**

**maladziozhnaya**” journalists left their work in the state system and started cooperation with independent media outlets.

It became known *on February 27, 2008* that the “**Gazeta Slonimskaya**” regional independent newspaper (Slonim) and the “**Yezhednevnik**” e-newspaper won “The Free Press of Eastern Europe 2007” Gerd Bucerius Prize, founded by ‘**ZEIT**’ **Foundation** (Germany). The awarding ceremony will take place *on May 19, 2008*.