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MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS

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“The mass media from the Internet to traditional media are a battlefield nowadays. And we will not win this war without reliable, capable, big-headed, and smart fighters,” – Aliaksandr Lukashenka

<https://www.belta.by/president/view/sejchas-smi-eto-pole-borby-lukashenko-vyskazalsja-o-podgotovke-zhurnalisticheskikh-kadrov-549271-2023/>

“It is deeply regretful that the Belarusian authorities continue to create a climate of harassment and fear among and towards members of the media, deliberately targeting and stifling free and independent voices,” – OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Teresa Ribeiro

<https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/538593>

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SITUATION IN MASS MEDIA FIELD IN JANUARY-APRIL 2023 (REVIEW)

The Belarusian authorities continued persecution of independent journalists and media resources since the beginning of 2023. Numerous media continued their activity for the Belarusian audience from abroad.

- 33 media workers were in custody at the end of April 2023. 9 sentences in criminal cases have been pronounced since the beginning of the year. Journalists were punished with restriction of liberty or imprisonment for the terms of up to 12 years. New criminal cases were filed against 3 journalists within the period under review.

<https://baj.by/be/analytics/represii-suprac-zhurnalistau-i-medyya-u-2023-godze-spis-znyavolenyh>

- The authorities continued to use anti-extremist legislation at a large scale as a basis for prosecuting the media, journalists, bloggers and ordinary citizens for expressing their views on socio-political matters, which differed from the official narrative. As of April 2023, 16 media organizations were labeled as 'extremist formations' in Belarus.
- Censorship was present in the information space. The number of independent information sources was further shrinking inside Belarus.



- The authorities took measures to formalize and ideologize the activity of the state media, openly declaring the priority of propaganda and the fight against dissent in their activities in the conditions of the alleged “hybrid war” “against Belarus and Russia.”

MAIN EVENTS IN MASS MEDIA FIELD IN JANUARY-APRIL 2023

Criminal prosecution of journalists

Several “high-profile” cases against journalists ended with criminal sentences within the period under review.

On February 8, 2023, the Hrodna Regional Court sentenced Andrei Pachobut, a journalist from Hrodna and a member of the non-registered “Union of Poles of Belarus”, to 8 years of imprisonment on charges of ‘inciting enmity’ and ‘calling for sanctions’ (Articles 130 and 361 of the Criminal Code of Belarus, respectively).

On March 17, 2023, Maryna Zolatava, Editor-in-chief, TUT.BY News Portal and Ludmila Chekina, Director General, TUT.BY News Portal



were sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment each. Moreover, L. Chekina was obliged to pay a fine of BYN 37,000 (around USD 12,000). Both of them were charged under Article 130, part 3 of the Criminal Code of Belarus ('inciting racial, national, religious or other social hatred or enmity based on racial, national, religious, linguistic or other social affiliation, committed by a group of persons or which resulted in serious consequences') and Article 361, part 3 ('calls for actions aimed at harming the national security of the Republic of Belarus, carried out with the use of mass media or the global Internet'). Ludmila Chekina was also charged with 'large scale tax evasion' (Article 243, part 2 of the Criminal Code of Belarus). The trial took place behind closed doors.

On March 17, 2023, Valeryia Kastsyuhova, a political scientist, the founder and the editor of 'Our Opinion' Web-site for expert community as well as the editor of 'Belorusskiy Yezhednevnik' Web-resource was sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment together with a researcher Tatsiana Kuzina for expressing her opinion about the situation in Belarus. The authorities charged her on the grounds of three articles of the Criminal Code of Belarus: Article 357 ('facilitation of activities, aimed at seizing power'), Article 361 ('calling for acts aimed at harming national security'), and Article 130 ('inciting other social enmity').

On March 23, 2023, Henadz Mazheyka, a journalist of 'Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus' was sentenced to three years in prison. (The newspaper reporter had been detained in Moscow and deported to Belarus in October 2021.)

The persecution was caused by a publication on the KP.BY Web-site, where a computer programmer Andrei Zeltser, who shot down a KGB officer and got murdered himself at the threshold of his private apartment, was positively characterized by his former classmate.



Although the newspaper editorial deleted the text in several minutes after its publication, the Web-site KP.BY was blocked on decision of Ministry of Information of Belarus in connection with publishing information that 'facilitates forming the sources of threats to the national security'. Mazheyka was presented charges on two articles of the Criminal Code of Belarus – Article 130 ('inciting the racial, national, religious or other social enmity) and Article 368 ('an insult to the President of the Republic of Belarus').

On March 23, 2023, Dzmitry Semchanka, a former employee of the state ANT TV channel was sentenced to three years in prison under Article 130 of the Criminal Code ('inciting enmity'). It should be mentioned that used to be the head of the presidential pool of journalists. However, he resigned in protest against violence in August 2020. The journalist was criminally charged for publications in "Vkontakte" and Instagram, which in the judge's opinion were aimed at "forming a negative stereotype and undermining trust in law enforcement officers and representatives of the authorities, and ultimately weakening the current system of governance."

On April 6, 2023, Kantsantsin Zalatych, director of 'Belorusy I Rynok' newspaper was sentenced to four years in prison. His case was considered behind closed doors. He was charged with committing the crimes, mentioned in four articles of the Criminal Code of Belarus: Article 426 He was charged with committing crimes mentioned in four articles of the Criminal Code of Belarus: Article 426 ('exceeding authority or duties'), Article 130 ('inciting racial, national, religious or other social enmity'), Article 369 ('insulting a governmental representative). And Article 368 ('insulting the President of the Republic of Belarus').

There was filed a range of new criminal cases again journalists. A journalist Pavel Padabed from Minsk contributed publications to a number of independent media. (He had been detained on

January 20, 2023.) The reporter was charged with participation in extremist formations (Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code). Another journalist Vyachaslau Lazarau was accused of ‘facilitating extremist activities’ (Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code). The latter had been detained on February 9, 2023.

Another criminal case was filed against Aliaksandr Mantsevich, the founder and Editor-in-chief of ‘Rehiyanalnaya Gazeta’ (Maladziechna). The detention followed a range of criminal police searches in the regional media on March 15, 2023. The Chief Editor was charged with discrediting the Republic of Belarus (Article 369-1 of the

Criminal Code of Belarus, as if the information published in the newspaper was aimed at “causing significant damage to state and public interests, undermining the authority of the country and its government, causing damage to national interests, destabilizing the situation among the citizens of Belarus, forming false ideas about non-fulfillment of the rights and freedoms of citizens in the country”.

<https://nashaniva.com/31359100>

Bloggers faced more criminal prosecution in Belarus. Thus five ‘administrators’ of the Black Book of Belarus Telegram channel were sentenced in absentia to 12 years in prison each on January 18, 2023. The Telegram channel published information about the governmental representatives, who were connected to persecution of Belarusian opposition. The list of prosecuted bloggers included Zmitsier Navosha, a civil society activist, a journalist, and a co-founder of popular sport Web-resources Tribuna.com and Sports.ru.



The criminal cases were filed by the Investigative Committee of Belarus on Article 130 ('incitement of hostility') and Article 203-1 ('illegal collection and dissemination of personal data') of the Criminal Code of Belarus. It was the first case of application of the institution of "special court proceedings" (conviction of political emigrants in absentia).

<https://baj.by/be/content/12-gadou-zavochna-pershы-belaruski-zhurnalist-asudzhany-dystancyyna-spartyuny>

Pressure on journalists and mass media

21 searches took place in journalists' houses and media editorial offices in Belarus in the period of January – March 2023. 22 cases of detention were recorded during the period. Journalists were subjected to interrogations, administrative charges in the form of arrests (10), fines (3), and other types of pressure.

<https://baj.by/be/analytics/represii-suprac-zhurnalistau-i-medyya-u-2023-godze-spis-znyavolenyh>

The imprisoned journalists were subjected to brutal treatment in the colonies. It was reported that Siarhei Satsuk, the former editor of the 'Yezhednevnik' online publication, had problems with access to the medicines he must take constantly. The wives of imprisoned



journalists Dzianis Ivashyn and Andrey Pachobut expressed concern about the physical condition of their husbands, who have health problems but do not receive qualified medical care behind bars.

<https://baj.by/be/content/pagarshaecca-zdaroue-asudzhanagazhurnalista-syargeya-sacuka-u-siza-yamu-naumysna-ne-dayuc>

<https://baj.by/be/content/garadzenskih-zhurnalistaupalivyaznyau-katuyuc-karcarami-dy-izalyacyyay>

According to the information of human rights defenders, while staying in the penitentiary of Navapolatsk colony, Ihar Losik went on hunger strike for a long time, and then he cut his hands and neck. Consequently, he was sent to the medical ward.

<https://baj.by/be/content/palitznyavoleny-igar-losikzdzeysniu-sprobu-suicydu-u-kalonii>

In February 2023, the editorial office of “Intex-press” newspaper (Baranavichy, Brest region) was searched and technical equipment was seized. In March 2023, searches and detentions of independent journalists took place across the country, including the editorial offices of regional newspapers “Info-Kuryer” (Slutsk, Minsk region) and “Rehiyanalnaya Gazeta” (Maladzechna, Minsk region).

The pressure on these publications was of a ‘complex’ nature. It had already been applied by the authorities and included interrogations, detentions and administrative prosecution of employees, removal of equipment, refusal to distribute print runs,

harassment in pro-government media, recognition of their content as “extremist materials”. Consequently, “Info-Kuryer” was forced to terminate its activity after 23 years of work. (“Rehiyanalnaya Gazeta” was published only on social media at that moment of time).

<https://news.zerkalo.io/life/36443.html?tg>

The media that continued to operate in Belarus, faced censorship and other restrictions. Thus, onliner.by and officelife.by were forced to delete certain content from their Web pages. The latter was temporarily blocked for public access.

<http://baj.by/be/content/onliner-udalil-vetku-foruma-svyazannuyu-s-polucheniem-karty-polyaka>

<https://baj.by/be/content/sayt-izdaniya-office-life-snova-dostupen-ego-blokiroval-mininform-iz-za-narusheniy>

Two independent online media were deprived of their domain names in the *.by zone.

<https://baj.by/be/content/aperatyuna-analitychny-centr-pazbaviu-damennaga-imya-nezalezhae-vydanne-ex-pressby>

Application of anti-extremism legislation to limit freedom of expression and access to information

On March 24, the law “On Amendments to the Codes on Criminal Responsibility” entered into force, adding new categories of “extremist” crimes to the Criminal Code, including Article 289-1 (‘propaganda of terrorism or its public justification’) with the maximum sanction of 7 years of imprisonment).

This article is likely to be used for prosecution for covering any kind of violent resistance to the authorities.

Article 369-1 ('discrediting the Republic of Belarus') was supplemented with responsibility for 'spreading knowingly false information that discredits the armed forces of the Republic of Belarus, other troops and military formations, as well as paramilitary organizations of the Republic of Belarus.

<https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12300256&p1=1&p5=0>

The practice of recognizing independent media resources as "extremist formations" continued during the period under review. During the first months of 2023, they list of "extremist formations" was supplemented by "Brestskaya gazeta" and "Malanka Media", as well as volkovysk.by News Website for the town of Vaukavysk, Hrodna region.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists was labeled as an 'extremist formation' by the KGB on February 28, 2023. (It is worth mentioning that BAJ was liquidated by the Supreme Court of Belarus in August 2021, and the organization continues its work in exile.)

<https://mvd.gov.by/ru/news/8642>

There were registered more often the cases of criminal prosecution for any form of cooperation with independent mass media, which had been included in the list of 'extremist formations.' Thus, in January 2023, Darya Losik, the wife of Ihar Losik, a convicted employee of Radio Liberty and the administrator of the 'Belarus of the Brain' ('Belarus Halaunoha Mozha') Telegram channel, was sentenced to two years in prison for an interview with the Belsat TV channel about her husband's situation.

<https://baj.by/be/content/daryu-losik-asudzili-na-2-gady-turmy-za-intervyu-pra-muzha-palitivyaznya>

A new trend appeared during the period under review, when apart for civil society representatives, ordinary citizens who commented on some social and political events for journalists were persecuted, too.

<https://baj.by/be/content/u-roznych-garadah-belarusi-za-intervyu-ekstremisckim-smi-raspachynayuc-kryminalnyya-spravy>

There continued the practice of bringing people to administrative responsibility for the distribution of “extremist materials” (Article 19.1 of the Code of Administrative Offenses), including reposting and forwarding publications in chat rooms. Since almost all independent media and opposition resources have become “banned”, it is considered a crime to disseminate virtually any information that the authorities do not want. During the period of January-March 2023, human rights defenders learned about 111 detainees, whose liberty was restricted for the distribution of “extremist materials”. The courts increasingly began to punish people with administrative arrests rather than fines.

<https://humanconstant.org/obzor-borby-s-ekstremizmom-v-belarusi-za-yanvar-mart-2023/#1>

Events in the state media sector

Ideologization of the state media activities and their reorientation to purely propaganda work continued during the period under review.

The Minister of Information Uladzimir Pertsou noted at a meeting with representatives of the regional press on January 20, 2023, that journalists of the state media are front-line fighters of the information resistance, who take the brunt of the

enemy forces: “There is an information war going on against Belarus and Russia. And we are not losing the battle yet.”

<https://baj.by/be/content/nihto-uzho-ne-gulyae-u-gulni-maski-znyatyya-yaki-paradak-dnya-zhurnalistam-farmue-ministr>

At the same time, political purges continued among state media employees. It became known that 8 people were fired at Homiel TV company at the end of 2022. Also, Andrei Rasafonau, the journalist of “Dragichynski vesnik” regional newspaper was deprived of his job.

<https://baj.by/be/content/na-gomelskom-televidenii-proizoshli-massovye-uvolneniya-uvolen-propagandist-so-stazhem>

<https://brestspring.org/tpost/zv5eyuola1-zhurnalst-dzyarzhnaga-vidannya-dragchin>

In March 2023, Andrei Pinchuk, the honored director of sports broadcasts was detained in a TV studio, taken to the police in handcuffs for a “preventive interview” and fired for his sideline remarks.

<https://baj.by/be/content/ad-elity-da-izgoyau-z-bt-zvolnili-chargovaga-laureata-konkursu-televyarsdynya>

New international sanctions were introduced against state media and propagandists. In particular, the Belarusian



TV and Radio Company was excluded from the list of Olympic games broadcasters for the coming 10 years.

<https://baj.by/be/content/belteleradyokampaniyu-vyklyuchyli-sa-spisa-vyashchalnikau-na-blizheyshyya-alimpiyady-azhno>

Ukraine introduced sanctions against the odious propagandists Ryhor Azaronak, Ihar Tur, and Aliaksandr Shpakouski as well as Aliaksandr Aseyenka, Director General of CTB TV Channel on January 15, 2023.

Moreover, the Embassy of Ukraine sent a note of protest to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus in connection with the video shown on state television, which claimed that the embassy operates as a 'recruitment center' for sending 'mercenaries' to Ukraine.

<https://nashaniva.com/307630>

<https://reform-by.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/reform.by/posolstvo-ukrainy-napravilo-mid-belarusi-notu-iz-za-sjuzheta-bt-o-posle-kizime/amp>

In February 2023, the TikTok social media blocked and then deleted the account of 'Minskaya Prauda' with around 70,000 subscribers. The state periodical is published by Minsk City Executive Committee.

<https://reform-by.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/reform.by/tiktok-udalil-akkaunt-minskoj-pravdy/amp>

RATING LISTS, INDEXES, STATISTICS

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Belarus ranks third in the world for the number of female journalists in prison (10 people), after China and Iran. While women make up 13% of imprisoned journalists in all countries of the world, this figure reaches 30% in Belarus.

<https://rsf.org/en/73-women-journalists-will-spend-8-march-behind-bars>



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