



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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Media Freedom Violations in Belarus in 2004

A compilation of examples of reports from the *Belarusian Association of Journalists*, the *Committee to Protect Journalists*, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, *Reporters Without Borders*, *Charter97* and www.spring96.org

16 September 2004

Media Freedom Violations in Belarus in 2004

State agency receives exclusive right to distribute TV listings

The Presidential Administration's *BelTA* news agency was given the exclusive right to distribute the TV listings of Belarus' BT, ONT, STV and LAD channels. Many independent newspapers, among them *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, *Nasha Niva*, *Vitebsky Kurier*, *Gayeta Dlia Vas*, received a contract from BelTA that indicated a price of BLR 5,025,000 (USD 2,300) for the monthly subscription to TV Guide listings. The previous cost of the TV Programme schedule was BLR 80 000 - 250 000 (USD 40-150).

5 January 2004

Journalist receives phone threat

In the night of the 10th to the 11th of January, *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*'s correspondent Iryna Makavetskaya received several anonymous threats on her home phone. An unknown man phoned her several times demanding that she stop her journalistic activities, leave the country and threatening to otherwise "bury" her. Mrs. Makavetskaya has recorded one of the phone calls on a tape recorder. She has filed an appeal to the police demanding that they reveal the identity of the anonymous man.

12 January 2004

State distribution monopoly terminates agreement with *BELORUSSKAYA DELOVAYA GAZETA*

Belarus' national postal services *Belpochta*, which deliver newspapers to subscribers countrywide, as well as the state distributor *Belsayuzdruck*, have both cancelled their 2004 contracts with *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*.

12 January 2004

One more independent newspaper forced to print abroad

Having received refusals from all printing facilities in Minsk, the Belarusian independent newspaper *Salidarnasc* published its first issue in Smolensk (Russia). Despite higher costs of publishing abroad, the newspaper has managed to retain its circulation – 5,000 copies.

12 January 2004

Tax inspection, fire inspection and road police vs. independent newspaper

Tax inspection officials in Smorgon confiscated the remaining copies of the independent newspaper *Mestnaya Gazeta* and money recovered from selling the newspaper printout from private distributors in Smorgon. Furthermore, the editorial office is presently sealed by the fire inspection office and the car delivering the printout is frequently stopped by road police. *Mestnaya Gazeta* is now published by Ramuald Ulan instead of *Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni*.

16 January 2004

One more independent newspaper strangled

January 16 was the last day of issue for the independent newspaper *Region-Vesti* in Svetlogorsk. The regional department of Belarus' distribution monopoly *Belpochta* informed the newspaper about terminating the distribution agreement. Since the New Year, the newspaper had been publishing only TV listings, after local authorities had banned the local printer from printing any content that included information under the logo of *Region-Vesti*.

17 January 2004

Printout of *Asambleja* magazine disappears

The printout of *Asambleja* magazine printed by the NGO *Assembly* disappeared from the Minsk post-office.

22 January 2004

***Narodnaya Volya* faces two suits for a total amount of USD 50,000**

On January 15, the company *Alliance Media* (the founder of *Obozrevatel* newspaper) and the entrepreneur Sergey Atroshchanka brought a suit against *Narodnaya Volya* for defiling their honor and business reputation. The plaintiffs demand that the Lenin District Court impose penalties on the newspaper in the amount of BLR 50.000.000 (approx. USD 50 000) for each suit. The suits are based on two articles published in *Narodnaya Volya* last year.

28 January 2004

One more Belarusian independent newspaper forced to print in Russia

The first issue of a nongovernmental newspaper *Den* was printed in Smolensk (Russia) and delivered to Belarus on January 28. According to the editor-in-chief, Mikola Markevich, the *Roscherk* company terminated a distribution contract with *Den* on January 28.

29 January 2004

Grodno branch of Belarus' press distribution company refuses to distribute *Den* newspaper

On January 30, *Den* was delivered to the distribution department of Grodno Regional Union of Publishing (*Belsayuzdruk*). However, the head of the department refused to accept the newspaper for distribution referring to orders from the assistant director, Galina Makarevich. According to the distribution agreement signed on January 22 between the publishers of *Den* and the distribution company, the company undertook to distribute 450 copies of the newspaper in the Grodno Region.

30 January 2004

Journalist sentenced for on-line publications

The Court of Minsk Central District fined Natallia Kaliada, who updates the section "Monitoring of Human Rights Violations in Belarus", BLR 350.000 (approx. USD 160). The judge considered the distribution of information on the *Charter-97* web site to be a violation of articles 167-10 of the Administrative Code. Authorities became interested in the activity of Mrs. Kaliada after the journalist was detained during a street action in Minsk on December 10 2003. The Assistant General Prosecutor started legal proceedings against the journalist on January 16 of this year.

3 February 2004

Belarus cuts down Russian TV broadcasting

Russian programs on the Belarusian TV channel *ONT* were cut to the minimum. From now on *ONT* will broadcast only an edited version of the news program *Vremia*.

3February 2004

Local newspaper censored by publisher

An issue of a weekly newspaper *Volnaje Hlybokaje* dated 15-21 January was published with an ad instead of an article about the meeting of the *Belarusian Popular Front*. The decision to censor the newspaper was made by the directors of the *Peramoha* publishing house.

5 February 2004

Vitebskij Kurjer published with “white spots”

The Friday issue of the private newspaper *Vitebsky Kuryer* came out with blank spaces in place of its TV guide section. The publication could not afford to pay the 5,025,000 BLR (USD 2,330) charged by the state-controlled BelTA news agency for subscription to TV programming schedule.

6 February 2004

Ministry of information suspends another independent newspaper

The Ministry of Information suspended for one month the publication the newspaper *Zgoda*. The order was issued by the Minister of Information, Vladimir Rusakevich, pursuant to two warnings that had been issued to the newspaper.

6 February 2004

Journalists declined access to executive authorities' session

The reporters of the *www.belarusfree.org* website and the non-governmental newspaper *Den* were denied access to the meetings of the Grodno Regional Executive Committee where the chairman was to present his annual report.

9 February 2004

Ministry of Information suspended *Veczernij Stolin*

Aliaxandar Ihnaciuk, the editor-in-chief of the non-governmental newspaper *Veczernij Stolin*, received an order from the Ministry of Information instructing him to interrupt publication for 3 months. According to the Minister of Information, Uladzimir Rusakevich, the paper *Veczernij Stolin* violated the Law on the Press as well as a few decrees of the cabinet council.

12 February 2004

Journalists removed from the hall

Independent journalists Andzhej Pisalnik (*Den*) and Iryna Czarniawka (*Beloruskaja Gazeta*) were removed from the hall at the beginning of the Grodno Regional Executive Committee's meeting. This is the second time that Grodno authorities have interfered in the work of journalists this week.

13 February 2004

Court partially satisfies a suit against *Narodnaya Volya*

A court in Minsk partially satisfied the suit of *Alliance-Media* against the newspaper *Narodnaya Volya*. The court obliged *Narodnaya Volya* to pay court and lawyer fees for *Alliance-Media* (founder of the *Obozrevatel* newspaper). However, the court waived the claimant's demand of USD 25,000 in compensation of moral damages. The suit was triggered by an article in *Narodnaya Volya* covering the conflict between *Obozrevatel* and Mr. Levin, the head of the *Union of Jewish Organizations*.

18 February 2004

Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta fails to overrule oppressive verdict

Belarus' Supreme Court rejected an appeal made by the newspaper *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* against the Ministry of Information's warning issued on December 26 2003. The warning concerned three investigative articles written by Sergey Satsuk that the ministry claimed did not correspond to reality.

19 February 2004

Prosecution resumes criminal investigation into the case of *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* journalist

Prosecutors in Minsk reopened a libel case against Irina Khalip, deputy editor-in-chief of the *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*. Ms. Khalip was summoned to the Minsk Prosecutor's Office for questioning in connection with an article that she had written nearly 18 months before for the investigative supplement *Dlya Sluzhebnoho Polzovaniya*. The story dealt with an official investigation into allegations of corruption against Viktor Kozeko, the former head of the Belarusian State Food Industry, and his son.

1 March 2004

President prescribes mass media to promote "civil security and discipline"

Starting March 20, all printed and electronic media will have to introduce regular rubrics or series promoting "civil security and discipline". This is due to Directive 1 "About Measures to Improve Civil Security and Discipline" issued by Alexander Lukashenka on March 11.

12 March 2004

Independent newspaper office invaded

Police called by an incidental witness, detained two men who were attempting to unlock with false keys the office of the private newspaper *Den* in Grodno around 10pm. Editor-in-chief Mikola Markevich reported that he recognized a Committee for State Security (KGB) officer among the detainees. The KGB Office for the Grodno region denied that any of its officers were involved in the attempted break-in.

19 March 2004

Executive authorities prescribe that businessmen subscribe to governmental editions

Last week, the Glybokaje District Executive Committee issued a prescription to local private enterprises and single entrepreneurs indicating that they should subscribe to governmental editions by March 19. Each enterprise must subscribe for at least 3 editions and this must include a subscription for every staff member for one national and one local newspaper. Executive authorities refer to the instructions Alexander Lukashenka gave during the seminar on ideological activity on March 27-28 2003. The letter also lists state-owned enterprises that are obliged to subscribe to the governmental press, that is: "every workshop, production section, farm, office, station, kindergarten, school, class, drugstore, dispensary, shop, etc."

25 March 2004

Ministry of Information prescribes stricter control for the distribution of foreign media

The Belarusian Ministry of Information put in force a new direction "On Distribution of Periodicals Registered Abroad in the Territory of the Republic of Belarus". The document prescribes a stricter control of the distributors of foreign media in Belarus.

26 March 2004

Public Prosecutor's Office closes the Investigation of Dmitry Zavadsky's Case

The investigation into the disappearance of journalist Dmitri Zavadski was closed. International media observers are confident that those responsible have still not been found and the possible implication of the highest levels of government has still not been properly investigated.

6 April 2004

Printrun of *Den* arrested

The printrun of the newspaper *Den* was seized while being transported from Grodno to Minsk. All 4,800 copies were confiscated due to 'problems with transport documents'.

8 April 2004

Prosecution warned editor-in-chief of *Birzha Informacii*

The Grodno Lenin district prosecutor's office issued a warning to Mrs. Elena Ravbetskaya, the chief editor of the non-state paper *Birzha Informatsii*, for violation of Article 5 of the Media Law. The chief editor was warned for publishing information on behalf of the unregistered political entity.

15 April 2004

Belarus censors Russian state TV

The broadcast of the Russian TV channel *Rossiya* was interrupted on April 17 and 18 from 5PM to 8:30PM. The cut-off clashed with the broadcast of the analytic shows *Zerkalo* and *Vesti Nedeli*. The Belarusian TV Center explained the cut-off with the claim of "unplanned repair work" at the *Rossiya* TV channel. However, *Rossiya* denies technical reasons for the incident.

21 April 2004

Court fines journalist of *Gazeta Dlia Vas* for slandering election committee chairman

The Bjaroza District Court fined journalist Tamara Schapioktina of the *Gazeta Dlia Vas* newspaper BLR 300.000 (about USD 150) for slandering the chairman of the divisional election committee. The suit was based on an incident that took place during the by-election to the Belaazersk Soviet of Deputies on November 23 2003.

22 April 2004

Newspaper denied access to printing facilities

Three publishing houses, *Tytul*, *Palesdruk*, *Svetoch* refused to print the Gomel regional newspaper *Volny Chas*.

27 April 2004

Radio Liberty reporter detained

On May 7, during the Street Action dedicated to the anniversary of the disappearance of the ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs Yuri Zakharenko, the police arrested *Radio Liberty* reporter Vines Mudrow. On May 10, along with seven arrested protesters, Vines Mudrow went on trial for "participation in unsanctioned action."

11 May 2004

KGB interrupts issuing of *Den*

Searches were made in the offices of NGOs, one of which served as an Editor's office of *Den* in Grodno. The KGB investigators were looking for places where the leaflets dedicated to May 1 were printed. In the leaflet, there was a poem in which the KGB found an insult of the president. As a result, PCs of the Editorial Offices of the *Den* newspaper were seized.

12 May 2004

Minsk printer refuses to print *Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni*

The Minsk printing company *Svetach* refused to sign a contract for printing the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni*. *Svetach* managers also declared that they would no longer print the Smorgon edition of *Mestnaya Gazeta*. *Mestnaya Gazeta* has been published since last autumn at which time the publication of *Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni* was suspended.

17 May 2004

Mikola Markevich fined USD 10

A Grodno Court approved the confiscation of the newspaper *Den* and fined the newspaper's editor-in-chief, Mikola Markevich, USD 10.

27 May 2004

Censorship at *Svetoch* Publishers

Svetoch publishing house cancelled their agreement with *Mestnaya Gazeta*, a Volkovysk non-governmental newspaper.

27 May 2004

No mercy for *Narodnaya Volya*

The panel of judges of the Supreme Court decreased the amount of the penalty imposed on Marina Koktysh, journalist of the newspaper *Narodnaya Volya*, and on the former broadcaster Eleanora Ezerskaya, to USD 500. The appeal to revise the amount of moral damage was initiated by the vice-chairman of the Supreme Court, Valery Vyshkevich. The appeal did not concern USD 25.000 in damage claims that *Narodnaya Volya* has to pay Egor Rybakov.

31 May 2004

Journalists kept out of Parliament

A number of Belarusian and foreign journalists accredited at the Chamber of Representatives, were forbidden to enter the building of the Parliament. Valery Frolov, the deputy of the *Respublika* group, was expected to address the parliament today.

3 June 2004

Journalists not admitted to the Parliament

Several journalists of Belarusian and foreign media accredited by the Belarusian Parliament were not admitted in the Parliament building by men in civilian clothes who refused to identify themselves. The heads of Belarus' legislature claimed that some media is biased in covering the work of Belarusian MPs. From 8AM on, the access to the building was blocked by secret services, according to the press release distributed by the group *Respublika*. The journalists included Maryna Koktysh (*Narodnaya Volya*), Yury Patsiomkin (*BelaPAN*), Andrey Makhousky (*Reuters*) and Yuras Karmanau (*AP*).

8 June 2004

Journalist deported from Belarus

Mikhail Podolyak, a Ukrainian freelance journalist, was expelled by the Committee for State Security (KGB) as a person responsible for allegedly biased coverage of social and political events in the country. In addition, the KGB accused Mr Podolyak of violating regulations governing foreign citizens' stay in the country.

21 June 2004

Radio Liberty correspondent detained

Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty journalist Yuri Svirko was forcibly expelled from the Parliament building. Mr Svirko's accreditation card and the tape recorder were taken away by a person in civilian clothes with intercom equipment claiming to represent security and the content of the recorded disc was erased. No reasons were given for the expulsion. A correspondent for the *Narodnaya Volya* newspaper was also barred from the Parliament, where a debate on the amendments to the Electoral Code proposed by the group *Respublika* was taking place.

22 June 2004

Narodnaya Volya to lose its title

The Board of Appeal of the National Intellectual Property Center upheld its December 2003 decision passing the trade mark *Narodnaya Volya* to the entrepreneur Syarhey Atroshchanka. Syarhey Atroshchanka can ask the editors of *Narodnaya Volya* to change the title at any moment.

1 July 2004

Ministry of Foreign Affairs shuts down RTR representatives

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs deprived all four Minsk *RTR* office employees of accreditation. The Ministry considered that the Russian *RTR* channel inaccurately covered a street action which took place in Minsk on July 21 and was dedicated to the tenth anniversary of Alexander Lukashenka's presidency. But it was a reporter from Moscow who covered the event during his two-day visit to Belarus, not the Minsk *RTR* office.

30 July 2004

Narodnaya Volya's equipment distrained

Court officers distrained property worth USD 29500 belonging to editors of *Narodnaya Volya*. This distraint is meant to cover moral damage as defined in the suits *Sergey Atroshchanka vs. Narodnaya Volya* and *Egor Rybakov vs. Narodnaya Volya*.

2 August 2004

Statement of the Belarusian Association of Journalists regarding the interruption of *Narodnaya Volya*

The newsprint of the newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* was confiscated from the Minsk-based publishing house *Krasnaya Zvezda*. The director of the publishing house was given a written direction to suspend the publishing of *Narodnaya Volya* until the editors pay off about USD 32500 to the former head of the *National State TV and Radio Company*, Egor Rybakov, and to the entrepreneur Sergey Atroshchenko as sentenced at two court trials.

4 August 2004

***Rabochaya Solidarnasc* ceases to exist**

The Supreme Court of Belarus decided to liquidate the *Belarusian Labor Party* (BLP) which led to the close-down of a partisan newspaper called *Rabochaya Solidarnasc*. The Ministry of Information explained that *Rabochaya Solidarnasc* was closed because the BLP was registered as the newspaper's founder.

2 August 2004

***Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni* suspended**

The Minister of Information, Vladimir Rusakevich, signed the order to suspend *Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni* and published by an entrepreneur named Ramuald Ulan. Mr. Ulan is accused of violating article 10 and article 12 of the Law on Press and other Mass Media. According to article 10, a newspaper must have a charter in order to register. Article 12 claims that an edition can only be founded by a legal entity. However, former rules of registration, according to which *Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni* was founded, don't presuppose those conditions.

19 August 2004

Executive authorities forbid shop owners to sell independent press

A number of large shops in Minsk refused to sell leading nongovernmental editions, such as *Belorussky Rynok*, *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, *Belorusskaya Gazeta* and *Narodnaya Volya*. The owners of some shops didn't even notify the editors while canceling the distribution agreements.

24 August 2004

***Navinki* suspended**

The minister of Information, Vladimir Rusakevich, signed an order to suspend the *Navinki* newspaper for 3 months. The newspaper is accused of violating a number of articles of the Law on Press and other Mass Media.

30 August 2004

Police questions origin of *Vremya*

On August 31, the Zhlobin District Court charged a local police with the task of "checking the origin" of the newspaper *Vremya*. On 12 August, policemen seized more than 1000 copies of the newspaper from Uladzimir Katsora, a United Civil Party activist, as well as 15 packages of leaflets issued by the coalition 5+. The court imposed a fine of USD 270 on Mr. Kastora. The judge of the Zhlobin District Court, Alena Yarmolchyk, considering that the

transportation of these printed editions by Mr. Katsora was an activity on behalf of an unregistered political party or public organization, decided to destroy all the leaflets. The district police will additionally investigate the origin of *Vremya*.

1 September 2004

Vremya and Predpinimatelskaya gazeta suspended

The registration department of the Ministry of Information confirmed that a number of non-state editions including the newspapers *Vremya*, *Predpinimatelskaya gazeta*, *Luboy kapriz* and *Allo! Kuplyu, prodam, menyayu* were suspended for 3 months. The ministry stated the intention of “establishing order” in the field of the press.

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