

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

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Freedom of the Press 2015 - Belarus

2015 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

93

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

29

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

36

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

28

Belarus's media environment remained extremely restrictive in 2014 as the government of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka continued to suppress independent journalism. The regime was facing pressure to move toward European integration as well as political meddling by the Kremlin, and these tensions took on new urgency in light of Russia's invasion of neighboring Ukraine. Some correspondents for international outlets were denied accreditation to cover the World Ice Hockey Championship, which Minsk hosted in May.

Legal Environment

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of the press, criticism of the president and the government is considered a criminal offense, and libel convictions can result in prison sentences or high fines. There are no effective legal guarantees of public access to government records. Judges, prosecutors, police officers, tax officials, and bureaucrats from the Information Ministry regularly use politicized court rulings and obscure regulations to harass independent newspapers and websites.

There were roughly two dozen cases during 2014 in which journalists and other media workers were questioned, warned, or fined for offenses such as “illegal production and distribution of media products.” Freelancers, bloggers, and citizen journalists are especially vulnerable to such charges. Several journalists were targeted during the year for contributing without accreditation to foreign media or Belarusian media outlets based in neighboring Poland.

In November, journalist Alyaksandr Alesin of the Minsk-based independent newspaper *Belorusy i rynek* was detained by the State Security Committee (KGB) and later charged with espionage and treason. He was released with travel restrictions in December, and the treason charge was dropped. He had recently written and spoken about military matters related to the conflict in Ukraine.

The Information Ministry serves as the country’s media regulator, and its procedures for licensing and registration are opaque and politicized. Under a 2009 media law, all outlets are required to register with the ministry, including domestic and international websites, which face blockage for failure to comply. Many independent publications are forced to use domain names based in neighboring countries. The law has also made it easier for the government to deny accreditation and shutter outlets for coverage that “threatens the interests of the state.”

The media legislation was amended in December 2014, allowing the Information Ministry to block websites without court order if they have received two warnings within 12 months. Other provisions of the amended law expanded the range of sites with mass media status and increased their legal responsibility for content, including user comments.

In August 2014, a government decree created a state expert commission, along with similar commissions at the regional level, to evaluate whether informational products contain vaguely defined “extremist” materials. Such content can be banned under a 2007 law on countering extremism.

Political Environment

The state-dominated mainstream media consistently glorify Lukashenka and vilify the political opposition. Most private outlets based in Belarus practice some degree of self-censorship, especially when reporting on the family and business interests of Lukashenka and his closest allies. Bloggers and online journalists produce independent or critical content. However, as internet penetration has increased, reaching 54 percent of the population in 2013, the government has devoted more attention to censoring the medium. The state-owned telecommunications monopoly Beltelecom controls all international data transfers and blocks some critical websites, while the KGB reportedly monitors internet communications.

Independent news websites and social-networking platforms were subject to blocking and cyberattacks on several occasions during 2014. Beltelecom blocked the website of the newspaper *Nasha Niva* in March; the editors speculated that the security services were testing new methods to be used during the presidential election period in 2015. In July, the EuroBelarus website reported a cyberattack that was thought to be related to the platform’s coverage of the conflict in Ukraine. Many sites were blocked on December 19, including Belapan.by, Naviny.by, Belaruspartisan.org, Charter97.org, Gazetaby.com, Zautra.by, and Udf.by; the obstructions remained in place at year’s end.

The government and its supporters continued to subject both independent and foreign media, as well as press freedom activists, to various forms of harassment and intimidation in 2014. Correspondents for some foreign outlets, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), were denied accreditation to cover the May 2014 hockey championship, ostensibly because the International Ice Hockey Federation favored specialized sports media. A journalist for Britain’s Channel 4 who had been accredited was turned back at the border without explanation. Those who were approved to cover the sporting event were required to obtain a separate accreditation from the Foreign Ministry to cover other topics while in the country.

The family of Aleh Zhalnou, a blogger from the town of Babruysk who actively exposes legal violations by local authorities, again became a target of police pressure in 2014. Prosecutors initiated a criminal investigation of Zhalnou’s wife for alleged violence against a police officer during a May raid on their home. In July, the blogger’s son was sentenced to three years in an open penal colony and a fine of nearly \$5,000 for alleged violence against a traffic police officer. In recent years, Zhalnou himself had faced over a dozen criminal, civil, or administrative

cases, was repeatedly summoned by police for questioning, and had multiple video cameras and other devices confiscated.

Economic Environment

The government maintains a virtual monopoly on domestic broadcast media. Only state or indirectly state-owned television stations broadcast nationwide, and the smaller television and radio stations tend to focus on entertainment. Most print outlets are privately owned, but few produce original journalistic content.

Three independent broadcasters transmit their programming from neighboring Poland: Belsat television, Radio Racyja, and European Radio for Belarus. These outlets have faced various forms of harassment from the authorities. In addition to the spate of fines and other legal pressure on Belsat's journalists during 2014, in September the Supreme Court of Belarus banned the outlet from using its name and trademark when broadcasting to Belarus and on its website. The ruling came in response to a lawsuit by a Belarusian company called Belsat Plus, which sells television equipment but does not compete with Belsat as a broadcaster. The judgment was not expected to significantly affect the television station's operations in practice.

Foreign ownership of media outlets in Belarus is restricted by law. The media law amendments enacted in December 2014 lowered the maximum share of foreign ownership to 20 percent, from the previous 30 percent. The new rule would not apply retroactively.

The state controls the terrestrial broadcasting infrastructure, and private cable companies cannot carry channels without government approval. Independent and opposition newspapers often face restrictions on access to the state-owned postal and kiosk distribution systems, state-owned printing facilities, and state advertising contracts or media subsidies. Such papers are forced to sell directly from their newsrooms and use volunteers to deliver copies, but authorities sometimes harass and arrest the private distributors. Beltelecom controls the internet infrastructure; secondary service providers depend on its network and access speeds.

Lohvinau, an independent publisher and bookstore, had its license revoked in 2013 and was repeatedly denied registration in 2014 on various technicalities. At year's end it was facing the possibility of a large fine for selling books without a license.

State media are supported by tax exemptions and direct subsidies from the state budget, giving them another significant advantage over potential private-sector competitors. Media outlets reportedly self-censor to please major advertisers that wish to avoid association with any criticism of the president.