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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Belarus

2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 93

Legal Environment: 29

Political Environment: 36

Economic Environment: 28

Belarus's level of press freedom remained extremely restricted in 2011, as the government continued to aggressively restrict independent voices following the fraud-marred December 2010 presidential election, in which President Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed to have won a fourth term. After the election, security forces violently dispersed thousands of protesters, arresting more than 600, including 26 journalists; 10 of those journalists were sentenced to 10 to 15 days in prison. In 2011, the government sustained its brutal crackdown on opposition activists, protesters, and journalists, in response to the Arab Spring uprisings, a mysterious subway bombing in April, and antigovernment flash mobs that were held in Minsk and other cities during the spring and summer. Throughout the year, the government clamped down aggressively on news coverage of the protests, as well as the deteriorating state of the economy. Lukashenka's moves to

increase salaries and pensions in an effort to bolster his popularity for the 2010 election had sparked inflation, the devaluation of the Belarusian ruble, restrictions on the availability of hard currencies, and price controls on food. Lukashenka became further isolated as his crackdown alienated the European Union, and his refusal to accept economic concessions irritated the Kremlin.

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. Judges, prosecutors, police officers, tax officials, and bureaucrats from the Information Ministry regularly used politicized court rulings and obscure regulations to harass independent newspapers and websites during the year – especially those reporting on the postelection demonstrations. On January 17, KGB officers in the eastern city of Mogilev arrested Boris Goretsky, a reporter for the Belarusian language Poland-based Radio Racya, while he was interviewing relatives of detainees in a local KGB detention center, and then sentenced him to 14 days in prison. One of the journalists who was beaten and then detained after the December 19 election – Irina Khalip, the Minsk correspondent of the Moscow-based independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* – was held in a KGB detention facility until January 29 and indicted on charges of organizing mass disorder. During her detention, child welfare officials initiated an inquiry to determine if Khalip was fit to be a mother and if her three-year-old son should be removed from her custody, but dropped the inquiry after an international public outcry. After her release, she was placed under house arrest for three and a half months with two KGB officers posted in her Minsk apartment to monitor her. A brief trial was held and in May, she was convicted of "organizing and preparing activities severely disruptive of the public order" and sentenced to a suspended two-year prison term. Another journalist who was detained and beaten after the December 2010 vote and released from detention on January 28, Natalya Radina, the editor of *Charter 97*, a human rights news website, was also charged with organizing mass disorder during the protests; Radina fled Belarus at the end of March. She eventually settled with the Charter 97 staff in Lithuania, where she was granted political asylum.

A draconian new media law took effect in 2009, forcing all media outlets to register with the Information Ministry. This made it easier for the

government to deny required accreditation and to shutter outlets for coverage that did not "correspond to reality" or that "threatens the interests of the state." The law also allows for penalties against outlets that merely report statements – for example, by political parties or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) – that "discredit the Republic of Belarus." In 2011, media regulators targeted the few local broadcast media that had given airtime to opposition candidates during the presidential campaign. In early January, the National Broadcasting Commission withdrew the broadcasting license of the private Minsk-based Autoradio station for airing what it alleged were "extremist" advertisements by opposition candidates during the December election campaign.

Officials continued pressuring the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) to cease its defense of journalists, with the NGO receiving a letter from the Justice Ministry in February demanding that it stop providing legal assistance to some two dozen journalists arrested after the December election and stop issuing membership cards, according to *Charter 97* and local press reports.

The government subjected both independent and foreign media as well as press freedom activists to systematic political intimidation for reporting on human rights abuses and unauthorized demonstrations, especially in the weeks following the presidential election. On January 10, police raided the office of the independent weekly *Borisovskiy Novosti*, based in the city of Borisov just outside of Minsk, and confiscated all of the newspaper's technical equipment – 12 computers, 3 fax machines, 3 cameras, a printer, a scanner, flash drives, computer discs, and the editor's personal laptop and camera. On January 12, KGB officers raided the home of Larisa Shchirokova, a Gomel-based reporter for Polish-owned satellite television channel Belsat, and confiscated all of her technical equipment – three computers, dozens of DVDs, flash drives, and two voice recorders. In April, the Information Ministry filed a motion with the Supreme Economic Court of Belarus to shut down independent newspapers *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva*, on the basis that the papers had received two official warnings within the previous year for publishing false information. (The media law allows the government to shut down outlets that receive two or more warnings from the Information Ministry in one calendar year.) The alleged false information was related to their coverage of the December protests and the subway bombing earlier that month. The motion was dropped in July

after an outcry from domestic and international civil society groups. However, in August the two papers were fined 14 million rubles (\$1,660) each for the warnings they had received.

Foreign correspondents were regularly harassed and deported in retaliation for reporting on opposition activities and human rights abuses in 2011. Andrzej Poczobut, a local journalist based in the Western city of Grodno for the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, faced a year-long campaign of harassment in retaliation for his reporting on the December 2010 protests – he was interrogated and beaten by police on January 8, had his technical equipment confiscated by KGB officers on January 12, was fined 1.75 million rubles (\$580) on January 13, sentenced to 15 days in prison on February 11, and on July 5 was convicted of defaming Lukashenka and given a suspended three-year prison sentence. In May, Rodion Marinichev, a reporter for the Moscow-based online television station Dozhd (Rain), was detained by police after interviewing the journalist Irina Khalip, and then searched, questioned, and deported to Russia. In August, Belarusian authorities expelled Lithuanian National Radio and Television correspondent Ruta Lankininkaitė in retaliation for her reporting on antigovernment protests, and in October, Igor Karmazin, a reporter for the Moscow-daily *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, was detained, fingerprinted, photographed, and deported after he interviewed journalist Irina Khalip. Following the December 2010 presidential election campaign and throughout 2011, authorities censored criticism of Lukashenka in news programs on Russian television stations Channel One, RTR, and NTV, which were broadcast in retaliation for Lukashenka not joining a Russian customs union and not recognizing two Kremlin-backed secessionist regions in Georgia.

The state maintains a virtual monopoly on domestic broadcast media, which consistently glorifies Lukashenka and vilifies the opposition. Only state media broadcast nationwide, and the content of smaller television and radio stations is tightly restricted – with the procedures for obtaining a broadcasting license remaining highly secretive and politicized. Most local independent outlets regularly practice self-censorship – especially when it came to reporting on the family and business interests of Lukashenka and his closest allies – and this intensified in the wake of the December 2010 presidential election. Tax exemptions for state media give them a considerable advantage over private outlets. In the print sector, the

government has banned most independent and opposition newspapers from being distributed by the state-owned postal and kiosk systems, from being printed by the state printer, and from any access to state advertising contracts or media subsidies. Independent papers are forced to sell directly from their newsrooms and use volunteers to deliver copies, but regional authorities sometimes harass and arrest the private distributors. Some of these restrictions were partly and briefly relaxed prior to the presidential election – allowing activists to distribute opposition newspapers somewhat freely – but reintroduced during the postelection crackdown and maintained throughout 2011. Due to the country's deepening economic crisis, independent newspapers also faced an 80 percent rise in the price of newsprint, while state newspapers received significant discounts on their higher process, the BAJ reported.

Although internet access continued to grow, reaching about 39.6 percent in 2011, the government continued to restrict and monitor internet use. A media law that took effect in 2009 requires domestic and international websites to register with the Information Ministry or be blocked, forcing many independent print publications to switch to domain names based in neighboring countries. The state-owned telecommunications company Beltelekom, which is the sole internet service provider (ISP), already controls all international data transfers and blocks some critical websites, while the KGB reportedly monitors internet communications. Journalists accused Beltelekom of increasing internet restrictions during the presidential election campaign and the postelection crackdown. The government continued trying to reduce the readership of independent news websites like *Charter 97* and *BelarusPartizan*, with the prosecutor general's office approving a resolution, which took effect on November 28, that required ISPs to block access to these two and some 33 other sites from all state, cultural, and educational institutions. During politically sensitive events throughout the year, such as antigovernment protests, independent news websites as well as social-networking sites were subject to cyberattacks from unknown sources. On July 6, more than two dozen independent reporters were beaten and detained – with at least nine of them sentenced to 10 to 12 days in prison – along with protesters participating in the weekly protests held around the country. Bloggers and citizen journalists responded to the repression by increasing their reporting on the protests via their websites and social-networking sites.

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