

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	110
Land:	Belarus
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom of the Press 2010
Udgivet:	1. oktober 2010
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	6. januar 2011

Title	Freedom of the Press 2010 - Belarus
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Belarus
Publication Date	1 October 2010
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom of the Press 2010 - Belarus</i> , 1 October 2010, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ca5cc6526.html [accessed 5 January 2011]

Freedom of the Press 2010 - Belarus

Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 29

Political Environment: 35

Economic Environment: 28

Total Score: 92

Belarus's level of press freedom remained extremely restricted in 2009. The global economic crisis and deteriorating relations with neighboring Russia forced President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to briefly reach out to the European Union, suggesting that he might implement domestic reforms in exchange for increased trade and visa privileges. By April, however, he made it clear that his country had "had enough" political liberalization, and the government continued suppressing the few remaining independent media outlets.

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of the press, criticism of the president and government is considered a criminal offense, and libel convictions can result in prison sentences or high fines. Judges and police officers regularly used politicized court rulings and obscure regulations to harass independent newspapers during the year. A draconian new media law approved in 2008 took effect in February 2009, forcing all media to register with the Information Ministry. This made it easier for the government to deny required accreditation and to shutter outlets for coverage that does not "correspond to reality" or "threatens the interests of the state." In March, the Foreign Ministry revoked the accreditation of reporter Andrzej Poczobut of the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* on the grounds that his articles were "biased and insulting to the Belarusian president," according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Also in the spring, the Information Ministry used the new registration provisions to deny five Russian television channels - Channel One, RTR Planeta, NTV Mir, Ren TV, and TVCi - permission to broadcast on domestic cable television, the Moscow-based Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations (CJES) reported. In July, the Foreign Ministry denied registration to the Poland-based Belsat TV, claiming that one document was missing in the submitted package. In the fall, at least five prominent opposition publications, among them *Mahilyouski Chas*, *Novaya Gazeta Bobruiska*, and *Marinahorskaya Hazeta*, were denied registration on extralegal grounds, such as the outlet's location at a private address or the editor's lack of a university education.

The government subjected both independent and foreign media to systematic political intimidation, especially for reporting on the deteriorating economy and human rights abuses. In February 2009, Poczobut reported that the door of his apartment in Hrodna was damaged and his eight-year-old daughter received anonymous calls on her mobile telephone. He said the harassment was likely being committed by the authorities in retaliation for his journalistic activities. In April, the KGB security service in Hrodna threatened journalists Ivan Roman and Viktor Parfenenko of the Polish Radio Ratsiya with the criminal charge of "discrediting the Republic of Belarus" for reporting about the economic situation in the country, according to CJES. In September, the special police in

Minsk attacked reporters from the Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France-Presse, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and the website Charter 97, as well as the independent newspapers *Nasha Niva* and *Belgazeta*, to prevent them from covering the violent dispersal of a peaceful opposition rally, the British Broadcasting Corporation reported. Throughout the year, journalists were harassed and detained for reporting on unauthorized demonstrations or working with unregistered media outlets. In April, reporter Tamara Tschepetkina of Radio Ratsiya was detained by the police for covering the anniversary of the 1986 accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in neighboring Ukraine. Most local independent outlets regularly practice self-censorship.

The state maintains a virtual monopoly on domestic broadcast media, which consistently glorify Lukashenka and vilify the opposition. Only state media broadcast nationwide, and the content of smaller television and radio stations is tightly restricted. 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. According to CJES, Information Ministry official Nina Gavrilova said in October that increasing the number of publications would not be good for the state. 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. For example, in July, police detained activists of the opposition Communist Party in the southeastern city of Homel who were distributing the newspaper *Tovarishch*, which contained articles about the poor state of the economy. In November, the opposition activist Boris Khamaida was detained by the police in Viciebsk for distributing copies of the newspaper *Nasha Niva*.

Although internet access continued to grow, reaching about 46 percent in 2009, the government restricted and monitored internet use. The media law that was approved in 2008 and took effect in February 2009 requires domestic and international websites to register with the Information Ministry or be blocked. This has forced many independent print publications to switch to foreign domain names based in neighboring countries. The state-owned telecommunications company Beltelekom already controls all internet access and blocks some critical websites, while the KGB reportedly monitors internet communications. Charter 97 was hacked throughout the year, which interrupted access to its content, according to CJES. In August, the Prosecutor General's Office announced its intention to toughen criminal penalties for the dissemination of slanderous information through the internet. Since 2007, internet cafe owners have been required to keep records of their customers' identities and the websites they visited, facilitating inspection by the security services.

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