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Belarus – Freedom of the Press 2013

Belarus's media environment remained extremely restrictive in 2012, as the government continued to aggressively suppress independent voices ahead of deeply flawed September parliamentary elections in which progovernment parties won all of the seats. The authorities sustained their crackdown on opposition activists, protesters, and journalists while attempting to stave off economic deterioration, the influence of the Arab Spring uprisings, pressure to move toward European integration, political meddling by the Kremlin, and the growing influence of social media among younger Belarusians.

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 postelection demonstrations. In February, the independent newspaper *Nasha Niva*, charged with defamation by a state television journalist, was ordered by a court in Minsk to pay 5 million rubles (\$600) for causing "moral damage." In June, Andrzej Poczobut, a correspondent for the Warsaw daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* based in the western city of Hrodna, was arrested, held for nine days, and charged with libeling the president in a series of articles he published in the independent media. The charges carry a sentence of up to five years' imprisonment. As a condition of his bail, Poczobut was required to remain in Hrodna pending trial.

A draconian new media law took effect in 2009, forcing all outlets to register with the Information Ministry, including domestic and international websites, which face blockage for failure to comply. The stipulation has forced many independent publications to switch to domain names based in neighboring countries. It has also made it easier for the government to deny required accreditation and shutter outlets for coverage that does not "correspond to reality" or that "threatens the interests of the state." The law even allows penalties against outlets for reporting statements by others—for example, by political parties or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—that "discredit the Republic of Belarus."

Over the course of 2012, the police detained at least 60 journalists, newspaper distributors, and social-media activists in retaliation for their work. In June, European Radio for Belarus correspondent Pavel Sverdlov was arrested in Minsk and sentenced to 15 days in prison on hooliganism charges after he exposed security lapses in the city's mass transit system. In November, Valery Bulhakau, editor of the Hrodna-based monthly cultural magazine *ARCHE*, fled Belarus after months of harassment that included charges of engaging in "illegal business activities" for selling books at a book fair without receipts and an audit by the Department of Financial Investigations that resulted in the freezing of the magazine's bank accounts. State television reported that Bulhakau had been charged with "distributing extremist literature."

Internet penetration has increased in recent years, reaching 47 percent of the population in 2012, and the government has responded by restricting and monitoring use of the medium. The state-owned telecommunications company Beltelekom, the sole internet service provider (ISP), already controls all international data transfers and blocks some critical websites, while the State Security Committee (KGB) reportedly monitors internet communications and is believed to be behind the use of Trojan viruses to steal passwords from critical website editors. During the parliamentary elections, journalists accused Beltelekom of increasing internet restrictions as the government sought to rein in the country's few remaining independent bloggers and news websites. Government attempts to reduce the readership of independent news websites like Charter97.org and BelarusPartizan.org resulted in a 2011 resolution requiring ISPs to block access to these two and dozens of other sites from all state, cultural, and educational institutions. During politically sensitive events throughout the year, such as antigovernment protests, independent news websites and social-networking platforms were subject to cyberattacks from unknown sources. Authorities continued to censor criticism of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in news programs on Russian television stations.

The government and its supporters subjected both independent and foreign media, as well as press freedom activists, to systematic intimidation for reporting on human rights abuses and unauthorized demonstrations in 2012, especially in the months ahead of the parliamentary elections. Officials harassed the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) in retaliation for its work defending media personnel, and state television aired several programs at the start of the year that used anonymous letters and surveillance footage to smear the organization and its leaders. In March, border guards prevented BAJ chairperson Zhanna Litvina and two other journalists from boarding a flight to neighboring Poland. Another reporter had been prevented from traveling to Lithuania a few days earlier. In June, Iryna Khalip, a correspondent for the Moscow newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* who had been under partial house arrest in Belarus since May 2011, found a chicken head in her mailbox. She interpreted it as a death threat in retaliation for her criticism of the government. In September, plainclothes officers assaulted and detained at least seven journalists—including members of the foreign press—as they covered a protest in Minsk by opposition groups calling for a boycott of the parliamentary elections. Associated Press photographer Sergei Grits was punched in the face and had his pictures deleted during the detention.

At least 12 independent journalists received warnings during 2012 for working for a foreign outlet without a permit. Foreign correspondents were regularly harassed and deported in reprisal for reporting on opposition activities or human rights and election abuses. In September, during the parliamentary election campaign, customs officials at the airport in Minsk confiscated technical equipment from reporter Amos Roberts of Australia's SBS television as he was leaving the country.

Authorities responded to the growing influence of internet news sources by escalating harassment of online journalists. In July, Anton Suryapin, a blogger in the city of Slutsk, was detained for a month after being the first to post photographs of teddy bears dropped from an airplane into Belarus. The airdrop, prepared by the Swedish advertising company Studio Total, was aimed at promoting freedom of expression. The hundreds of teddy bears held placards with slogans such as "We support the Belarusian struggle for free speech." Following his release, Suryapin was placed under house arrest for the remainder of the year, facing up to seven years in prison for alleged complicity in an illegal border crossing. In August, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* journalist Iryna Kozlik and photojournalist Yuliya Darashkevich held a protest in support of Suryapin; they were arrested by Minsk police and fined 3 million rubles (\$360) each for "carrying out an unsanctioned protest."

The government maintains a virtual monopoly on domestic broadcast media, which consistently glorify Lukashenka and the benefits of a "stronger state" while vilifying the opposition. In a December 2012 report on the parliamentary elections, monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe stated, "Media coverage of the campaign did not provide a wide range of views, focusing overwhelmingly on the President and government activities with minimal attention given to candidates." State television channels censored candidate speeches that called for a boycott of the elections. Only state media broadcast nationwide, and the content of smaller television and radio stations is tightly restricted, partly through highly secretive and politicized licensing procedures. Three independent broadcasters transmit their programming from neighboring Poland—BelSat television, Radio Racyja, and European Radio for Belarus—but authorities actively obstruct the work of their journalists. Most local independent outlets regularly practice self-censorship, especially when reporting on the family and business interests of Lukashenka and his closest allies. In January 2012, the Minsk-based television channel MTIS stopped rebroadcasting news from the pan-European television channel Euronews, citing an increase in fees charged by the latter's owners. Lukashenka had been highly critical of Euronews coverage in the past, leading some experts to question whether the move was due to political rather than financial pressure.

Tax exemptions for state media give them a considerable advantage over private outlets. In the print sector, the government has barred 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. Due to the country's deepening economic crisis, independent media have struggled with rising costs and declining advertising revenue, and even the state media faced a 20 percent budget decrease in 2012.