

3.2. Belarus

Belarus is generally considered to be the last dictatorship in Europe. The governing regime has re-established a Soviet-style communist system of power and has brought the gradual democratic and economic transformation of the country, which started with the declaration of independence in 1990, to a halt. Since President Alexander Lukashenka changed the constitution in 1996 by means of a controversial referendum, all power lies in the hands of the President. This has not only led to the establishment of a centrally planned economy as well as international isolation of the country, it has also resulted in the persecution of opposition parties, the free media and non-governmental organisations. In recent months, this pressure has been aggravated. In particular, during the parliamentary elections and the referendum on the extension of President Lukashenka's term of office in October 2004, massive falsification and offences against the OSCE-standards of free and fair elections were observed. According to independent surveys, the majority of the Belarusian population has ceased to support President Lukashenka. Nevertheless, there have been only minor protests, as in general there is little interest in political matters in Belarus and political and social engagement is low.

I. General Conditions

Under a democracy, the general conditions for the media in Belarus would be described as promising: almost 100 per cent of the Belarusian population is literate and the country currently has a high ratio of university students (303 per 10,000 people). This is equivalent to the levels in a number of leading European countries. With its population of almost 10 million, Belarus in 2003/04 registered 43 higher education state establishments and 16 non-state universities.¹ Nevertheless, the quality of both secondary and university level education far from complies with European standards. Since 1998/1999 the percentage of professionals with PhD degrees working in high educational establishments has been decreasing. Furthermore, in 2002 the new state ideology designed by the Lukashenka administration and based on the Soviet model became an obligatory part of the university and secondary school curricula.

Illiteracy
and education

¹ www.giac.unibel.by/index.php?module=subjects&func=viewpage&page%20%20id=23&menuID=M51000000.

- Local media From the 1960s Belarus became one of the most developed Soviet republics with its own electronics industry. Nowadays, practically the whole population has access to TV and radio. Families living in the big cities have more than one TV or radio set. Three national TV programmes and at least two or three Russian TV channels are available to city dwellers. (In the Western part of the country, Polish TV is also accessible.) At least five FM-stations are on the air in each big city.
- Print According to information provided by the Ministry of Information (as of 1 July 2004) there were 1,324 periodicals registered in Belarus, including 813 newspapers, 463 magazines, 48 bulletins, catalogues and almanacs as well as 9 information agencies, 133 radio and 52 TV channels. This number has diminished since November 2003, when 1,492 periodicals were registered in Belarus as well as 8 information agencies and 182 radio and TV broadcasting networks. Over the intervening eight-month period, a total of three additional electronic media and one news agency emerged, but 89 newspapers, 57 magazines and 14 bulletins, catalogues and almanacs ceased to exist.²
- TV, Radio

According to the non-state Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), only 20 newspapers can be considered to be fully fledged independent publications, covering political, economic, social and cultural issues uncensored by the authorities. Belarus has no independent TV or radio stations. Out of 182 TV and radio programmes registered as of 1 November 2003, 120 were state-owned.³ As for the remaining private ones, they have been conspicuously reducing their coverage of the political or other realities of Belarusian society and public life, thereby endangering their existence. The same pertains to those 93 organisations holding cable-broadcasting licences from the Ministry of Information.

What concerns opposition political parties is that none have their own media house, either electronic or print.⁴ The only

² Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ): *Analytical Monitoring of Conflicts and Freedom of Expression Violations in the Mass-Media Field*, Minsk 2004a, p. 4.

³ Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ): *Mass Media in Belarus – 2003 Annual Report*, Minsk 2004b, p. 3.

⁴ It is important to note, however, that some newspapers are close to opposition political parties, and give more space to their politicians. One of the examples was *Vremje*, which was suspended in May 2004. According to local sources, *Vremje* was close to the United Civic Party, which partly covered the newspaper's running costs.

exception is the Belarusian Communist Party and its newspaper *Comrade*. Quite recently a state-owned publishing house refused to print the paper. The ban should be viewed as an act of revenge against the party, which during the latest parliamentary election campaign became a member of the opposition coalition Five Plus. Generally speaking, since independence, Belarus has not had any political party periodicals with a reasonable position in the market.

Media
ownership

Since 1994 the most controlled sector of society in Belarus has been the electronic media. The current (and stable) media policy actively tries to prevent domestic or foreign capital from investing in electronic media.⁵ The opposition has no access to state-run electronic or print media, where members of the opposition are frequently portrayed in a very negative way. The Internet is currently underdeveloped in Belarus. Internet users are mostly young people, scholars and administration officers in private and state enterprises.

Internet
media

The Internet is, however, a dynamic sphere of communication and every year there is a significant increase in its users. Nowadays the total number of Internet users is around 4 per cent of the Belarusian population. Internet prices are monopolistically high; many regional and local newspapers can afford an Internet subscription only with the help of foreign assistance. This is also a sector where there is relative freedom, although the government is tightening control over Internet sites and email as well. There is no targeted email news within the country, except the daily news update of human rights watchdog Charter 97 to the international community. On the other hand, a few examples of Internet-based projects (such as the campaign 'Self.Made.Man' by Studentskaya Dumka) have shown the potential for Internet-based activity among young people.

According to different sources the audience of the three national TV channels varies from 30 per cent (the channel Culture) to 65 per cent (All-National TV Channel) to 80 per cent of the population (The First National Belarusian TV). The audiences of FM stations are significantly smaller and are listened to by only 30 per cent of the population. The state-run broadcaster (The First National Programme) has a larger audience (around 40 per cent) because it is

Media
access

TV, Radio

⁵ It should be noted that in Belarus investments are completely under the control of the presidential administration. The only exception is the black market, which is not interested in being visible through media or publications.

retransmitted by wire. Although the electronic media (both Belarusian and Russian) have the largest influence on public opinion, the Belarusian state and independent printed media (with different target groups) are undoubtedly influential.

Print Total daily circulation of all state newspapers is around 2 million copies, and their readership is around 4 million people. These figures are obviously on a different scale from the independent media. The total circulation of independent newspapers is no more than 200,000 copies, including the independent weekly editions. Their permanent readership is estimated by BAJ at around 600,000 people. The small circulation of the independent newspapers (compared to the circulation of the state media) can be explained by different factors: apart from the very difficult financial situation of the newspapers, the authorities often create obstacles to their distribution and cause frequent problems for publishing houses.

International satellite programmes are only accessible to a small portion of the Belarusian population. This could be explained mainly by two factors: 1) the significant cost of satellite equipment and 2) the low percentage of people who speak foreign languages at an acceptable level. Rough estimates show around 200,000 people or 2 per cent of the population have access to satellite programmes.

Media consumption Thus, TV is used very often [4] as a source of information, followed by the radio [often: 3] and the press [often: 3]. The Internet occasionally [2] serves as an information source while the verbal exchange of information is uncommon [almost never: 1].

Media influence on political opinion In general, the media has a significant influence [3] on the formation of political opinion in Belarus. This influence is mainly exerted by the state-owned TV channels, radio and newspapers. The Belarusian authorities are extremely vigilant about any increase in popularity by the independent newspapers. The more popular or influential a national or regional independent newspaper becomes, the higher the probability of its closure by the authorities or the danger of it losing its readership because its publication is suspended. As an example, the publication of the Minsk-based *Belorusskaja delovaja gazeta* (BDG/Belarusian Business Newspaper), one of the most popular independent newspapers in Belarus, was suspended for three months last year. The formal reason for this were the warnings issued by the Ministry of Information. After the end of the suspension

the newspaper could not find a printer in Belarus and the state distribution monopolists (Belasajuzdruk, the retail seller, and Belposta, the subscription distributor) unilaterally cancelled their contracts with *BDG*. As a result *BDG* lost a significant part of its readership.

The influence of state-owned and independent media varies significantly depending on the different social and political sectors of Belarusian society. The independent press is mostly distributed in the big cities. Its readers are the local intelligentsia, businessmen, some students and socially or politically active state employees as well as workers. The latter categories buy the independent press not so much for its unbiased information, but rather in order to find arguments to reinforce their own social or political positions. The state-owned media, being easily accessible throughout the country, gather a much larger audience and readership.⁶ These are mainly state employees and workers at state enterprises whose social expectations are more or less satisfied by the existing political and economic system. A significant part of this media audience are people with non-critical attitudes or low social expectations such as the rural population or retired people.

The vast majority of young people do not watch Belarusian TV (except for music or entertainment programmes), and sometimes are not even aware of the names of either state or independent newspapers. The most active among them consider the Internet as their main source of information.

The state-owned electronic and print media are under tight administrative control. The directors of TV and radio stations and the editors-in-chief of state-run newspapers are appointed by the President.⁷ Nowadays, as a result of the total control established over the state-owned media, they are overtly viewed by the authorities as tools for implementing state, or rather presidential, policy in the country. The main message of the state media is: the state is good; everything else (including opposition, civil society, and the independent media) is bad.

State-owned
media

⁶ Being subsidised, the retail and subscription costs for state-owned newspapers are 30–50 per cent lower than those for independent ones.

⁷ It is perhaps worth mentioning the ironic fact of contemporary Belarusian history, i.e. that the first – democratically – elected President (Lukashenka) won in 1994 using the existing freedom of speech. He started his presidency by taking total control of the state broadcasting and TV company as well as of all state-owned newspapers and printing houses by replacing chief editors and directors.

	<p>There is no legal protection, since there are no independent courts in the country. The warnings needed to suspend media outlets are issued by the Ministry of Justice. The new media law (under preparation) is likely to worsen this situation, introducing censorship of the Internet.</p>
State-owned media and published opinion	<p>Since there are no independent electronic media in the country and since the number of independent newspapers has dramatically diminished over the past two years, it is evident that the state-owned media have a dominant position in determining published and broadcast opinion. A demonstration of this was the latest parliamentary elections and referendum campaign conducted by the state-owned media in favour of the President and pro-government candidates. On the national TV channels during the campaign 'there was a significant increase in the number of negative or even hostile portrayals of opposition candidates ... Such materials were shown at prime time'. The President remained the main political subject. As before, he was presented 'either positively or extremely positively in all state-owned media'.⁸ There is no doubt that in the absence of any independent TV or radio stations the independent Belarusian newspapers cannot withstand the absolutely <u>dominant position of the state-owned media</u>. Their share of published opinion is at least 10 times smaller than that of the state-owned press. Moreover, the circulation of just one presidential newspaper, <i>Sovetskaja Byelorussia</i>, is almost twice as large as that of all the non-state (independent) press. The <u>propaganda</u> coverage of state-owned media is clearly in favour of the President and the government [+3].</p>
Government press conferences	<p>Being the main political figure, President Lukashenka is also the main 'speaker' of the Belarusian government. Press conferences held by the government or by parliament's representatives are almost non-existent. There is strict selection of the journalists invited to the press conferences held by the President. The official reports broadcast by the state-owned TV channels are, as a rule, carefully edited.</p>

II. Legal Environment

Freedom of expression	<p>While much of the existing legislation can be said to provide for individual freedoms, the freedom of expression, etc, conditions are such that activities in most areas are severely curtailed.</p>
-----------------------	---

⁸ Media Monitoring (MEMO): *Parliamentary Election 2004 – Coverage in the Belarusian Mass-Media*, Minsk 2004, p. 1.

The right of freedom of expression in Belarus is guaranteed both domestically, by Article 33 of the Belarusian Constitution, and by international treaties which Belarus has ratified and is therefore legally bound to observe. As with other areas in Belarus, the same is true of media legislation: what is guaranteed by the laws of the state has little in common with what happens in practice. As international organisations usually report, Belarus has one of the worst freedom of expression records of all the former Soviet republics. Since 1994 the general trend has actually been towards monopolisation and censorship as well as towards increasingly numerous attacks against independent or opposition press, and the closure of a number of private newspapers as well as the only independent FM station, Radio 101, 2.⁹

The media in general are controlled by the Ministry of Information, but the Ministry of Justice (through frequent court cases) is also involved in regulating media coverage (mainly through its State Press Committee issuing warnings to the independent printed press). The State Control Committee is also engaged in the confiscation of property. Due to new legislation implemented in spring 2004 the Ministry of Communication is also involved in the process of media control: since then, private courier firms have had to obtain a licence from the Ministry of Communication in order to be allowed to distribute any form of printed material. The main courier, the Belarusian Post, is run by this ministry.

Media
coverage

Access to information is guaranteed by the Constitution. However, in practice access to independent newspapers is limited for many sections of the public because of the higher prices of some of them (they do not receive state subsidies, unlike the state-owned ones) and their limited distribution.

New laws adopted in 2003 on mass media and information security are, according to the UK-based global campaign for free expression, Article 19, 'woefully inadequate. The fact that the changes introduced following consultations with domestic and international NGOs and IGOs have been purely cosmetic reveals that the Belarusian authorities simply do not appreciate the magnitude of the task facing them in meeting Belarus' human rights commitments'.¹⁰

Regulation
of media
coverage

⁹ The year of the first presidential election, marking the beginning of authoritarian rule in Belarus.

¹⁰ Article 19: *Belarus: Instruments of Control*, London 2002. www.article19.by/laws/memomassmediae.html.

Specific areas breaching international standards of concern were regulatory issues, including registration; the independence of regulatory bodies; self-regulation; the regulation of journalists and broadcasting; content issues, including false news and positive obligations on the media; freedom of information; and the protection of sources and penalties. More importantly, the imposition of registration, licensing and accreditation systems, all overseen by bodies which are not independent of the government, represents an excessive exercise of state control over the media, inconsistent with international guarantees of freedom of expression.¹¹

According to the Law on the Press, the Ministry of Information (through the State Press Committee) or any type of court judge can issue official warnings to newspapers for alleged violations of the law without a court decision. As a result the publication is suspended. Once a newspaper has been issued with two warnings within a given year, it can be (and usually is) closed down. Three issued warnings result in the closure of the newspaper. The most important legal acts are not the related laws, but presidential decrees and special regulations regarding the media (e.g. licences). The Criminal Code also contains several articles which are often used by the authorities: Article 367 (slander against the president), Article 368 (insulting the president), and Article 368 (insulting government officials), all of which stipulate prison sentences for journalists found guilty of these offences. More frequent are 'honour and dignity' cases since the prosecutor only has to prove that the subject of an article or report suffered emotional distress as a result of its publication.¹²

Warnings by the State Press Committee can be (and often are) successfully appealed against, and if a paper is closed by decision of the court, that decision can also be appealed. There has never been a case where a newspaper has successfully appealed closure, but until now there have only been two papers closed under this procedure: *Nasha Svaboda* in 1994, and *Pahonya*, in 2001.

There is no official censorship permitted by law or decree; however, the editors-in-chief of the state print media and the directors of state broadcast and television are selected by the President. It has been a practice of independent

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² IREX: *Media Sustainability Index 2002*, Washington 2002, p. 58.
www.irex.org/publications-resources/msi_2001/index.htm.

newspapers since 1994 to publish a blank space where the government has censored them. Since independent newspapers with blank spaces drew a lot of public attention, the authorities started using more sophisticated methods, such as confiscating the printed issues of a newspaper, so called 'post-censorship' punishments.¹³ Another means is the refusal to print a newspaper containing suspicious material. For example, in the beginning of August 2003 Niasvzh (district town) Publishing House refused to print the issue of *Niasvizhski Cas* newspaper after the head of the Information Department of the local Executive Committee became acquainted with its contents. The same year the Ministry of Information obliged all commercial FM stations to submit printouts of their news programmes. The job of analysing these news programmes was given to the Main Analytic Department of the ministry. One of the leading experts of this department commented, 'a lot of things happen in mass media, and sometimes it is necessary to have proofs'.¹⁴

There are many ways of complicating the lives of independent newspapers, including frequent tax controls and the resulting fines. What is more, all newspapers wanting to receive grants from foreign aid organisations are obliged to apply for permission to the Department of Humanitarian Aid in the Presidential Administration. Permissions are rarely granted. Also quite frequent is the confiscation of newspapers for far-fetched administrative or legal reasons. One example is the confiscation of 8,000 copies of *Predprinimatelskaya Gazeta*, on 11 June 2003 by officers of the Ministry of Interior, because it contained articles by journalists of *BDG*, whose publication at that time was suspended. No authorising document was shown while the copies were being confiscated.

During the past five years more than 20 independent newspapers have ceased to exist because of the reasons given above. It should be stressed that after the presidential elections in 2001, western donors significantly reduced their support for the independent press (and to NGOs as well) because of administrative obstacles (e.g. *IREX* and *Internews* have been closed down by authorities), but also due to the lack of a strategy.

Changes in
the past five
years

¹³ After publication of material disliked by the authorities pressure is exerted on the editor-in-chief. As a result contracts for printing a newspaper can be revoked by the printing house. Printing houses in Belarus are state-owned.

¹⁴ BAJ 2004b, p 13.

In 2004 the administration also successfully reduced the broadcasting time of some Russian TV channels. The objective was achieved by substituting some Russian TV programmes with Belarusian ones on such channels as ONT or RTR. Moreover, the Belarusian channel Lad replaced the Russian TV channel Culture. In some other cases 'disobedient' Russian journalists were expelled from the country. In reaction to the administrative pressure many independent media (especially some regional and district ones) have become more cautious when covering political issues, or do not cover sensitive political issues at all.¹⁵ Evaluating the effect of these legal modifications on freedom of the media one can speak of extreme aggravation [-3]. As a consequence the current state of media coverage ranges between extreme aggravation to abolishment [-3].

Censorship
under the
law

Even though there is no legal censorship, criminal persecution of journalists is common. By law, nobody, regardless of the groups or organisations they belong to, can be excluded from working as a journalist. In practice, both court and police intimidation is frequently used against independent and opposition journalists. The consequences journalists, media companies or organisations have to fear range from minor to major fines that might endanger the economic viability of some individuals and/or media companies/organisations. In 2002, for the first time, the Belarusian authorities applied the provisions in the Criminal Code on 'Slander of the President' against Mikola Markievich and Paval Mazheika from the Hrodna-based newspaper. They were sentenced to one and a half year's external exile. In general, official debarment, compulsory liquidation of media companies and physical punishments of critical journalists occur.

Compared to these measures tax controls, confiscation of equipment and property and above all suspension are quite common. In August and September 2004, just before the 2004 parliamentary elections and referendum the Ministry of Information suspended for a three-month period several

¹⁵ However, at the same time, a new understanding of the role of an (independent) press has emerged. Instead of tight affiliation with opposition political forces or concrete political parties some independent periodicals have made attempts to take as independent and professional a position as possible (for example, *Belorusskij Rynok* or *Belorusskaja Delovaja Gazeta*). This is evident in a wider coverage of the political, cultural and social realities of Belarusian society, as well as in a less didactic and politically motivated approach, without, however, refusing to criticise the authorities.

newspapers and magazines including *Vremya*, *Novaya Gazeta Smogorni*, *Navinky*, *Predprinimatelskaya Gazeta*, *Regionalnaya Gazeta* and *Narodny Predprinimatel*. Most of these newspapers were suspended because of violations of the formal requirements regarding the newspapers' registration. Being suspended and therefore not having any revenue for three months makes it very difficult for independent newspapers to survive financially.

An additional instrument is licensing. The State Press Committee controls the licensing of media; however, it commonly violates the correct procedures. Licences can be revoked at the whim of the committee, for example if a media outlet is regarded as too controversial (as happened with the Radio Station 101.2 in 1994), or they can be withheld altogether at the discretion of the committee. Licences or registrations are very often refused or taken away. Further on the *milicia* (police) frequently harass overtly independent opposition publications. Equipment seizures (the biggest threat to any aid programme to support the independent press) and unsolved burglaries are not uncommon either.

Media
licences

Journalists in Belarus officially do not need state permission to practise their profession. In practice access to presidential press conferences is restricted to a carefully selected group of journalists. Representatives from the independent media are seldom present. Even if accredited they are frequently excluded. A legal challenge to this practice is all but impossible. The official reports broadcast by state-owned TV channels are as a rule carefully edited.

Journalists'
status

There is no law regulating the formation of monopolies and cartels by private media companies. The dominance of the state-owned media is anyway overwhelming. There are two major journalists' organisations in Belarus – the state Union of Journalists and the non-state Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). Whereas the state-run organisation has not reported any significant problems for journalists, the Belarusian Association of Journalists stated in its 2003 Annual Report¹⁶ that the state is denying registration to new titles, trying to limit the influence of the non-state mass media by denying information to their journalists, and introducing restrictions on the printing and distribution of independent newspapers. BAJ also concluded that the

Monopolies
and cartels

¹⁶ Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ): *Mass Media in Belarus – 2003 Annual Report*, Minsk.

pressure on non-state media has been strengthened in 2003 and 2004.

III. Political Conditions

Coverage of
marginal
groups

Belarus is a country under authoritarian rule. The role of the state-owned media in maintaining the existing system of power is extremely important. The basic message of the state-run media can be described as follows:

- Thanks to the strong and successful politics of the President, Belarus has not only escaped from a number of the problems peculiar to other post-Soviet nations, but is even flourishing.
- Subsequently, all kind of criticism is denied and political opposition remains the principle target of attacks.
- Thus, being ideologically oriented, the state-owned media are inevitably selective in their coverage of the current political, cultural, economic or social situation, and do not reflect a number of alternative views and issues. For example, they do not cover social and career prospects, alternative youth culture and music as well as democratic values and the activities of civil society and NGOs. The absence of representatives of national minorities in state-owned media means that they neglect the existing national minority problems. Social problems (like the quality of communal services or the growth in prices for food and manufactured goods) are also non-issues, as are business conditions and market transformations. The voice of representatives of cultural and intellectual elites opposed to the discrimination of Belarusian culture and language is ignored.

The political opponents of the regime, with their appeals for the democratic transformation of Belarusian society and for a change of the present political system, are denied access to the state-owned media. Thus, a significant portion of the population is deprived of unbiased information about different social and political perspectives as well as the activities of different political parties and NGOs and national minority organisations.

Self-
censorship

The role of state-owned media as instruments of propaganda makes the situation of journalists working for them quite strange. They are obliged to serve the regime and its ideology. As a result, self-censorship is a common

phenomenon. The long period of repression against the independent press in Belarus has also had its repercussions on the non-state newspapers and journalists working for them.

The pressure is exerted with some regularity. Repression against the independent media occurs in advance of and during important political events such as elections. This is a 'prevention' policy by the authorities in an attempt to limit the influence of the independent media on public opinion. It usually continues after the elections. The authorities take note of active media outlets during the elections and take administrative steps against the most active ones. State repression is thus used very often.

Illegal state repression

On election days access to some web pages of both independent newspapers and NGOs is usually blocked. This happened for the first time during the 2001 presidential elections and was repeated, most recently, on the day of the parliamentary elections and the referendum (17 October 2004).

Obstacles to Internet access

The independent print media were also repressed before and after the parliamentary election and referendum periods. In view of the presidential election that is to take place in 2006, it is likely that the repression will continue. And the possibility cannot be excluded that by 2006 few, if any, independent newspapers will survive. Thus, during the past five years state repression has brought the present situation of freedom of the media in Belarus to an extreme aggravation [-3].

Changes in the past five years

Administrative measures include the refusal of access to state-owned printing facilities or to state monopolised distribution systems in order to deliver independent newspapers to their subscribers. Independent printing presses are few and state-run ones have been known to often refuse to print material from papers considered too oppositional.¹⁷

Government control over print media

IV. Economic Pressures

Generally, the economic situation of independent newspapers in Belarus is very weak. According to the law 'On Press and Other Mass Media' non-state newspapers are

State subsidies

¹⁷ IREX 2002, p. 57.
www.irex.org/publications-resources/msi_2001/index.htm .

allowed to devote up to 30 per cent of the whole newspaper to advertising.¹⁸ However, for political and economic reasons the majority of independent newspapers have never reached this level.¹⁹ National, regional and district independent newspapers have different opportunities and access to markets. The volume of advertising materials published in them varies significantly according to the scale of their circulation. Thus, the volume of advertising material published in district newspapers ranges from 3 per cent (for example *Miascovy cas*, Pinsk district) to 8 per cent (*Hancavicki cas*, Hancavicy district) of the newspapers' space. Their advertising incomes constitute accordingly around 0.05 per cent and 10.17 per cent of the total newspaper revenue.²⁰ At the same time, some successful district newspapers, for example *Hazeta Slonimskaja* (Slonim district), earn on up to 50 per cent or more of their entire revenue from advertising. Even this relatively high level, though, does not necessarily mean business success. The total newspaper revenue is only sufficient to cover all its expenses.

There is no available data on government political advertising in or support for state-owned media. According to opposition estimates, the authorities spent around US\$ 10,000,000 on the last referendum campaign (17 October 2004). Support for the state media is fostered by the authorities in a variety of ways: For example, subscription to the largest state newspaper *Sovietskaya Belarussia* is compulsory for most education establishments, state institutions, factories, agricultural centres, etc. What is more, the state-owned newspapers are distributed through the state monopoly of the post office and the state-controlled distribution network and are widely available in retail outlets throughout the country. The state-owned distribution network Belsojuzpechat refused to increase the number of copies they distributed of non-state newspapers.

¹⁸ *On the Press and Other Mass Media*. Law of the Republic of Belarus, adopted on January 13, 1995, cf. Article 30.

¹⁹ Private businesses in Belarus are not well developed and face obstacles from the administration in every area of their existence. As for state-owned businesses, the government completely avoids publishing advertising in non-state newspapers. The authorities consider advertising as one of the sources of their support and are always vigilant about where it is placed.

²⁰ Interview with Uladzimir Janukievich, head of Intex-Press Publishing House, August 13, 2004.

There is no independent TV in Belarus. The state runs four channels. For broadcasting the most effective economic pressure is the licence control exercised by the State Press Committee. In the past few licences have been revoked for programmes that were critical of the government. As has already been mentioned FM stations are obliged to submit daily transcripts of their newscasts for the Ministry of Information to review. Other means of putting pressure on broadcasters include the order that 75 per cent of the music broadcast must be Belarusian (or Russian), which is a form of official propaganda and maintains the self-isolation of Belarusians. Several restrictions on Russian TV channels before the referendum in 2004 deprived the population of their last remaining alternative source of information.

The independent media are quite often entirely dependent on foreign assistance – largely out of necessity because of the paucity of domestic advertising. The conditions for free media are repressive but they are not impossible and there are several independent papers, for example *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, *Belarussky Rynok* and *Belorusskaya Gazeta*, that operate on a fairly professional level, offering balanced reporting and political analysis. The state media, however, are a propaganda tool for the government [+3].

There are various ways to economically harm a newspaper. For example, independent newspapers – in contrast to state-run newspapers – receive no state subsidies. They also charge higher rates for subscriptions and pay higher rates for the delivery services of Belposta, the Belarussian postal service (in 2002 the cost for independent publications was 45–60 per cent higher than for state-run ones). Since January 2004, the independent media has faced another serious problem. According to a resolution of the Presidential Administration dated 27 October 2003, and a letter from the President's Office No. 10/403 dated 15 December 2003 and 5 January 2004, all rights for publishing the listings for Belarusian TV channels (BT, ONT, STV, Lad) were passed to the state information agency BelTA, which belongs to the President's Office. Previously, the TV listings were distributed by several private companies.²¹ The fee quotes sent to different newspapers varied from 50,000 Belarusian roubles (US\$ 25) to over 5 million Belarusian roubles (US\$ 2,500) per month for the 'basic package' (four Belarusian channels and the Russian channels RTR, NTV and TVC). The difference is explained by the system of 'discounts' (up

Further
aspects

²¹ www.belta.by/42256CBF002E4A04/TVprogram!ReadForm .

to 99 per cent), defined by BelTA in accordance with the so-called 'individual approach' to each newspaper. All the newspapers that received the 5 million rouble quotes were private companies. The editors regard it as economic pressure by the authorities, aimed at depriving non-state newspapers of a large part of their audience.²²

V. Non-state Repression

Repression by non-state groups Non-state repression against journalists and media companies is rare in Belarus. One of the reasons is the absence of real competition from private capital in the media business. Most court prosecutions of independent newspapers by private individuals or companies have been on behalf of the authorities. This was the case in the latest court appeal by a Belarusian businessman against the only independent daily, *Narodnaja Volia*. The absurdity of the accusations and the court's decision to impose a fine of US\$ 30,000 upon the daily (a fantastic amount of money for an independent newspaper) undoubtedly reveal the authorities' intention to ruin the newspaper.

When journalists have been attacked and beaten, the police have never been able to find the people responsible. The fate of journalist Zmiecer Zavadski, who disappeared in July 2000, still remains unknown.

Changes in the past five years The use of non-state repression against journalists during the past five years has slightly aggravated [-1]. This evaluation is explained by the authorities' use of much more efficient means of repression against media and journalists.

VI. Conclusions

Evaluation of media coverage During the past five years free media coverage has developed to the point where it ranges from extreme aggravation to almost abolishment [-3]. It is generally expected that this trend will have further increased by the 2006 presidential elections. If the free media were able to present an alternative view of the current situation in Belarus, it would threaten the existence of the present authoritarian rule and its supportive ideology.

²² www.memo98.sk/en/index.php?base=data/newsletter/6/belarus_jan2004.txt.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation has supported journalists and the free media only on a small scale so far. Due to its limited means, KAF has focused on topics rather than targeted groups. Nevertheless, in all projects, independent journalists have been an important target group.

KAF
support

Considering the enormous significance of free and unbiased information for the population in the run up to the presidential elections in 2006, but also for the long-term development of democratic thinking, media projects will become increasingly important in the future. It should be stressed, however, that any intensified support should be well coordinated with other donors to avoid cross-funding. Moreover, it should also be remembered that the Belarusian situation requires a systematic and long-term approach.

There are several ways in which foreign donors, and among these the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, could support a free media in Belarus:

- Support of remaining independent newspapers through technical and financial aid as well as with a series of training workshops
- Projects focusing on editors of selected independent newspapers (in many cases they are the key to newspaper content and should be encouraged to reproduce prepared articles in the local press as well as to give more space to regional and local stories in their newspapers in order to raise political interest in the country)
- Projects focusing on young people (magazines, Internet sites, etc.) linked with capacity building for journalist students and young journalists
- Financial and technical support to specified magazines (not only for young people, but also, for example, literary, cultural, women's, men's and national minorities' magazines), as independent magazines have always received much less attention from the authorities
- Local ad hoc printing projects, especially in those regions, where there is no significant coverage by regional or national independent press
- Specified websites linking newspapers (portals)
- Specified research projects to create linkages between the independent press and Belarusian/German analytical centres

- Exchange programmes (in journalism, but not only in journalism) between Belarusian and German NGOs which have access to the country and are able to organise in-country events. This would allow the sending of an increased number of experts to the country. Study trips could also be part of this kind of effort. However, most important is the increase of field activities in Belarus
- Belarusian programme (in the Belarusian language) at the Deutsche Welle.

Freedom of the media:
general situation

Generally speaking, it is evident that in Belarus there is no freedom of the media. The country is tightly controlled by an efficient state apparatus. Dissent is quickly muted, the country's international isolation aggravates the situation for the Belarusian media.

Major obstacles

From the point of view of Belarusian journalists the major obstacles to free media coverage are: serious state interference in the media market, the suspension and closure of the independent press, libel suits against journalists and independent media, the poor economic condition of the independent media, and the lack of foreign assistance to the media.

From the point of view of foreign observers, the major obstacles to free media coverage are: the lack of media alternatives (especially electronic) in the country, no sustainable media support from international donors (especially for electronic media), no sophisticated strategy (based on a readers' survey) for the independent press and a lack of support for the promotion of journalists.

Aliaksandr Antsipenka / Balazs Jarabik

Aliaksandr Antsipenka is a media theorist from Minsk. Balazs Jarabik is a political consultant in Slovakia.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Antsypienka, Ales, Bulhakau, Valer (eds): *Belarus: Reform Scenarios*, Warsaw 2003.

Article 19: *Belarus: Instruments of Control*, London 2002.

Belarusian Association of Journalists: *Mass Media in Belarus – 2003 Annual Report*, Minsk 2004.

Freedom House: *Nations in Transit – Belarus*, Washington 2004.

IREX: *Media Sustainability Index 2002 – The Development of Sustainable Media in Europe and Eurasia*, Washington 2002.

Karlekar, Karen Deutsch (ed.): *Freedom of the Press 2003 – A Global Survey of Media Independence*, Washington 2003.