

Belarussian Journalism and the 2006 Presidential Election Campaign



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“A violent seizure of power through arson and explosions is being prepared on March 19, the head of the KGB said today... Hot-headed Georgian lads have promised a night of the long knives... bombs in schools... murder of peaceful citizens... plans to poison the water supply... Any disorder will carry a sentence from 8 years imprisonment to the death sentence... The KGB has proved why [presidential candidate] Milinkevich is asking people to come out onto the streets on March 19.”

Panorama, BT1, 21.00, March 16, 2006

“The media ought to be like humanitarian aid, like medicine or food. People here simply do not know what is going on.”
Svatlana Kalinkina, editor, Narodnaya volya

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Cover Photo: A journalist covering demonstrations. © Radio Svaboda, www.svaboda.org

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Introduction

This report presents an overview of the Belarussian media before and during the presidential election campaign of 2006. It:

- (i) Draws a general picture of the current state of the media;
- (ii) Briefly recounts the history of censorship and attacks on press freedom in Belarus over the last decade or so, which forms the background to the events during the election;
- (iii) Reports the situation during the election, including the use of propaganda and censorship, and state pressure on the privately-owned media and journalists during the campaign;
- (iv) Analyses the problems facing journalists' organisations.

The report is largely based on information contributed by western journalists who were present in Minsk during the presidential election campaign, who conducted interviews with journalists, editors of both state and independent newspapers, representatives of journalists' organisations and the head of the central electoral commission, and material from publicly available Belarussian sources (which are acknowledged in footnotes). As far as possible we identify our sources, while in some cases we have accepted information off the record from colleagues in both state and privately-owned media whom it would be inappropriate to name.

The report aims to present a general picture, and may be considered alongside the monitoring of election coverage conducted by the Belarussian Association of Journalists (BAJ), and the monitoring of specific attacks on journalists and newspapers by the BAJ, the Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations and international NGOs, a summary of which is presented in appendix 1.

Executive summary

□ During the presidential election campaign of January-March 2006, the level of pro-Lukashenko propaganda in state-controlled media, which are overwhelmingly dominant, and the level of state attacks on independent media, which are weak and struggling to survive, increased markedly. Coverage of the president was consistently associated with peace, stability and well-being, while that of the opposition candidates was associated with chaos, poverty and lawlessness.

In the weeks leading up to the elections, the main news bulletins painted an extreme picture of a country about to be pitched into violence and chaos by foreign forces, with terrifying consequences for ordinary Belarussians, thereby justifying severe methods in combating opposition to president Lukashenko.

In the immediate pre-election period police attacks on, and confiscations of, privately-owned newspapers were stepped up and most of these publications failed to reach their readers. In the week before the election a privately-owned newspaper was closed by the courts on spurious grounds.

The threatening atmosphere for independent journalists covering the election was epitomised by the public beating-up by police of a journalist who was covering the arrest of an opposition candidate.

□ During the week after the elections more than 30 Belarussian journalists, all members of the Belarussian Association of Journalists (a non-governmental organisation that defends

journalists' rights), were arrested across the country; eight journalists working for foreign media were also detained.

The large number of journalists among the total number of arrests (300-500) suggests that journalists were targeted by the authorities because of their potential role in disseminating information about the scale of anti-government sentiment and protest.

The constant wearing-down of the non-state media that has taken place over the last 10 years is likely to continue after the elections. The IFJ fears that increasingly serious attacks may be made on the Belarussian Association of Journalists.

□ The presidential elections intensified and accelerated decade-long trends in the Belarussian media. More than three-quarters of media output in Belarus is state-owned and state-controlled, thoroughly censored, and there is a large element of propaganda with no attempt at balance or right of reply. The main TV channel is a state organ of mass propaganda; information programmes portray events in the country and in the world very one-sidedly and are often factually incorrect.

The privately-owned newspapers, which attempt to various degrees to exercise free speech and adhere to recognised standards of journalism, are in decline as a result of state pressure -- the non-state newspaper sector is between one-fifth and one-tenth of its size in the mid-1990s, when it was at its height. The internet is limited and in its infancy.

Some newspapers have been closed down by the government, but more often newspapers have suffered continuous administrative pressure on owners, editors, journalists, advertisers and printing houses, and been denied access to the state's monopoly postal distribution system and near-monopoly network of newspaper kiosks. Dubious libel suits have contributed to some closures.

In other cases, regulatory authorities have harassed newspapers on the basis of minor infringements. The leading independent newspapers have been forced to start printing in Russia; others have abandoned their printed editions and are only published on the internet.

□ There are some instances of opposition journalists being killed or disappearing. The lack of any serious investigation of these crimes acts as a deterrent to other independent journalists, who are reminded that should anyone attack them physically, they will do so with a high level of impunity.

Libelling or insulting the president are criminal offences with punishments of up to five years in prison -- comparable to sentences for aggravated assault, rape and robbery. There have been a number of successful prosecutions of journalists under these laws, which have been supplemented to include outlawing "discrediting the republic of Belarus" and "passing libelous information to representatives of foreign states", making journalists wary of how they cover politics in the country.

□ The International Federation of Journalists will continue to do all it can to publicise the attacks on free speech in Belarus and to support those of our colleagues there who face intimidation and repression.

I. The Media in Belarus

The Ministry of Information of Belarus states on its web site that two-thirds of media outlets, including all broadcast news media outlets and the largest newspapers, are in the private sector. However the state-owned media, and broadcasters in particular, have vastly greater audiences than the privately-owned media. We estimate that, if the figures are adjusted to take account of viewing, listening and readership figures, more than three quarters of media output is state-owned and state-controlled.¹ Output there is thoroughly censored, and there is a large element of propaganda with no attempt at balance or right of reply. The privately-owned newspapers, which attempt to various degrees to exercise free speech and adhere to recognised standards of journalism, are in decline as a result of state pressure. Only on the internet, which is in its infancy but growing, is relatively free journalism expanding.

a. Television

Television channels with news content and nationwide coverage are all either state-owned or state controlled (i.e. state bodies own more than 50 percent of the shares). There is no privately owned TV channel with nationwide coverage. Licences for TV and radio broadcasters are issued by the Republican Commission on Television and Radio Broadcasting, the chair of which is the minister of information; other regulatory functions are undertaken by the information ministry directly. The only producer of broadcast news is the Belarussian Television and Radio Company (BT). Regional channels produce 25-40 percent of their own programming; they do not produce their own news or current affairs programmes, relying instead on news from national channels. Content is bought from Russian channels, but most news programmes are substituted with BT's output. Those few Russian news and current affairs programmes that are relayed from Russian TV are routinely blocked when they broadcast items about Belarus.

There are 121 privately-owned cable channels in Belarus, of which 97 are privately owned; 19 of these are licenced to produce programmes of their own. In the other cases, content consists mainly of a "social package" of programmes agreed by the Ministry of Information, made up mainly of broadcasts from state-owned Belarussian and Russian channels.² Cable channels also carry programmes from up to 42 foreign channels, of which 25 are Russian; the journalists we spoke to said that none of these channels carried independent news programming. Last year cable operators were banned from carrying Polish programming (see below). Some 400,000 homes in Belarus have satellite dishes.

According to independent sociological research,³ the most popular channel is ONT (watched regularly by 62 percent), which consists almost entirely of broadcasts from the Russian state channel, Channel One; ONT carries its own Belarussian-produced news bulletins in addition to Russian news bulletins. ONT is followed in popularity by RTR (38 percent), also a Russian national channel, and only then by BT1 (30 percent), the "channel 1" of Belarussian state television.

b. Radio

According to the Ministry of Information, 134 of 151 radio channels in Belarus are state-owned. Only 30 broadcast on FM frequencies. In 2005, 18 warnings were issued to FM stations about breaking their content schedules agreed with the state.⁴ Six of the most listened-to stations – a general news and current affairs station, a cultural station, three

¹ www.mininform.gov.by/main/massmedia. We have statistical information for the national press, while the situation in broadcasting is explained in the text.

² www.mininform.gov.by/main/massmedia/digital

³ Eduard Melnikov, *Teleprogramma na Zavtra* (Moscow, 2005), p. 20.

⁴ According to the Ministry of Information: www.mininform.gov.by/main/massmedia/digital

music-based stations and a station for broadcasting abroad – are owned by BT. The only non-state broadcasters with news and current affairs output are based outside the country e.g. Radio Liberty and Deutsche Welle. European Radio for Belarus (ERB), a small radio station funded to the tune of €2m by the European Union (EU) and other international donor bodies, started broadcasting from Warsaw in late February 2006, with mainly music content but also some news. It is broadcast on the internet, on an FM frequency which is accessible only in the Brest region near Poland but not in Minsk, and on a MW frequency for one hour a day. The project is intended to continue after the elections. In discussions, journalists in Minsk were sceptical as to whether the channel could attract listeners in its current form. The independent Russian TV channel RTVi was also commissioned by the EU to broadcast 30-minute afternoon programmes to Belarus every day.⁵

c. Newspapers

There are two types of newspaper, divided into sharply contrasting camps, namely state-owned and privately-owned. Journalists we spoke to estimated that state-run newspapers make up some 80-85 percent of newspapers in circulation (for available statistics see appendix 2). The state-owned newspapers have large circulations running into hundreds of thousands. The most important of these is the daily *Sovetskaya Belarussia – Belarus segodnya* (*Soviet Belarus – Belarus Today*), published by the presidential administration, with a circulation of about 500,000. Other significant state-owned newspapers are the daily *Respublika* (*The Republic*), published by the Cabinet of Ministers, and the weeklies *Sem' Dnei* (*Seven Days*) and *Narodnaya Gazeta* (*The People's Paper*).

State bodies and departments give support of various kinds to these newspapers. During campaigns to increase the number of subscribers, government officials send instructions to state and private enterprises, urging them to finance the subscriptions of pensioners, veterans etc, to state-supported publications, and to urge employees to subscribe. Such methods are used in particular to ensure the large circulation of *Sovetskaya Belarussia*. In schools, teachers are called upon to collect money from parents to ensure that each class receives several copies by subscription. The editorial policies of the state-owned media are without exception completely supportive of the Lukashenko administration. It is currently unthinkable that even mild or implied criticism of government policy could appear in them.

The privately-owned newspaper sector has been in continuous decline for about 10 years, mainly because of state repression and harassment of these newspapers, which have offered a range of opinions between vigorous criticism of the government to an independent, but not hostile, view. We estimate, on the basis of interviews with journalists and representatives of the BAJ, that the non-state newspaper sector is between one-fifth and one-tenth of its size in the mid-1990s, when it was at its height, if measured by the number of readers, number of journalists and financial turnover. For example, the circulation of the largest non-state newspaper, *Narodnaya Volya*, has fallen from 200,000 at its high point to 20,000.

Some newspapers have been closed by decision of the Ministry of Information, but more often newspapers have suffered continuous administrative pressure on owners, editors, journalists, advertisers and printing houses, and been denied access to the state's monopoly postal distribution system and near-monopoly network of newspaper kiosks. Extremely heavy libel suits have contributed to some closures. In other cases, tax, fire, sanitary or other regulatory authorities have harassed newspapers on the basis of minor infringements. The leading privately-owned newspapers have been forced to start printing in Russia; others have abandoned their printed editions and are only published on the internet.

Only three privately-owned national newspapers – the business weekly *Belarusy i rynek* (*Belarussians and the Market*), and the weeklies *Svobodnye novosti plius* (*SNP*) (*Free News*

⁵ AP newswire, February 23, 2006.

Plus) and *Belgazeta* (*Bel-newspaper*) – are still distributed through the state-owned news kiosk network, *Belsoiuzpechat'*, and the postal subscription system run by the state-owned postal monopoly, *Belpochta*. Among those which, unable to find a printer in Belarus, have recently been printed in Smolensk, in western Russia near the Belarussian border, are the largest opposition-oriented weekly *Narodnaya Volya* (*The People's Will*), the leading financial (weekly) newspaper *Belarusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* (*BDG*) (*Belarussian Business Newspaper*), and the popular weekly *Tovarishch* (*Comrade*), issued by the Communist Party. The printing house used by all three titles abruptly withdrew from its contract in the week before the elections, a decision which, together with the repeated seizure of print runs by Belarussian police and customs officers, meant that none of them reached their readers in the pre-election period (see below).

Igor Vysotskii, editor of *BelGazeta*, said: "One can sum up the situation by saying that there is a market for entertainment and consumer publications, but no market for quality newspapers. There is no way to distribute them, no advertising market and no journalists. We have worked in these conditions for 10 years." Editors and journalists on independent newspapers frequently stated in interviews that, for example: "The space in which independent journalism operates in Belarus is being reduced, and will soon disappear completely"; "The state and independent sectors are two different worlds. The state sector exists on subsidies and serves the authorities 100 percent."

d. Russian newspapers in Belarus

Russian newspapers, like Russian TV stations, are a significant force: mass-circulation Russian newspapers, chiefly the daily *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarussii* (*KPvB*) (*Komsomol Truth in Belarus*), and the weeklies *Argumenty i Fakty* (*AiF*) (*Arguments and Facts*) and *Trud* (*Labour*), publish Belarussian local editions. The circulation of these newspapers has fallen in recent years, but even now they have a far greater aggregate total readership than that of the independent Belarussian newspapers. Both *KPvB* and *AiF* have offices in Minsk and employ teams of local journalists. There are also a number of influential Russian titles, in the first place the daily *Izvestiya* (*The News*), printed in Minsk and circulated in smaller numbers (under 5000).

The complexities of the Russian-Belarussian relationship in politics, the economy and diplomacy are mirrored in the Russian media in Belarus. The Russian newspaper market has become commercialised in a way that the Belarussian one has not, and mass-circulation Russian newspapers have expanded into the Belarussian market for commercial reasons (although many Russian dailies still remain loss-makers for their owners, who sponsor them for mainly political reasons). The owners of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the Prof-Media group, have also acquired holdings in Belarussian privately-owned newspapers, including *BelGazeta*. Politically, both *KPvB* and *AiF* are frank in their reporting and critical of Belarussian state bodies, in a way that their mass-circulation state-owned Belarussian rivals are not. But their editorial policies stop short of open criticism of president Lukashenko; we understand this stance is strongly influenced by their Russian owners.

The Belarussian authorities' tolerance of this limited openness contrasts with their attitude to *Moskovskii Komsomolets* (*Moscow Komsomolite*), arguably the most strident critic of Russian government among the mass-circulation titles in recent years. Its attempt in 2002 to establish an editorial office in Minsk was blocked by administrative measures, and that year it published a Belarussian edition for four months before it closed. Some journalists in the privately-owned Belarussian media fear that the Russian mass-circulation papers, thanks to their high production standards and freedom to criticise some aspects of government, will gain ground at the expense not only of state-owned papers but also of those privately-owned publications that extend high editorial standards to criticising the president when appropriate.

e. Polish media

About half a million Poles live in Belarus, roughly 5 per cent of the population. Most live in the west of the country, which belonged to Poland before the second world war. Although the country's Poles have not been strongly engaged in politics, until last summer the Union of Poles had been the largest organisation in the country free of government control. In July 2005, Belarussian police stormed the organisation's headquarters in Grodno, and the authorities briefly detained several members of the organisation. Poland, which joined the EU in 2004, has been viewed with increasing suspicion by the Belarussian government, following Warsaw's active intervention during Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" in November-December 2004 and Polish officials have been particularly unsparing in their criticism of president Lukashenko. Local Poles have been treated as a potential fifth column, and the Polish-language media has suffered serious restrictions, particularly in the pre-election period (see below).

f. The internet and news agencies

Internet use is growing rapidly in Belarus. According to statistics compiled by the International Telecommunications Union, in 2004 there were 1,409,780 internet users, i.e. about 14 percent of the country's total population. A recent survey conducted by the Belarussian Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research indicates that people aged 20-24 are the most active internet users, and 50 percent of all respondents are university graduates. Some 40 percent of internet users are government officials. The majority of users (45.6 percent) live in regional centres, and 22.9 percent are inhabitants of the capital of the country.⁶

Internet publications – both those of editorial staffs whose printed editions have been closed, and those conceived as internet projects from the start – are becoming a significant element of the privately-owned media. The state-owned telecommunications company Beltelecom owns all internet servers in the country; although some capacity is leased to sub-contractors, Beltelecom controls all access. We understand from interviews that this has been used for political censorship: for example in the run-up to the 2001 presidential elections, internet access in Grodno, western Belarus, was closed down entirely on an evening when people had been due to come out into the streets in protest. In January this year, the opposition website *Belarussky Partisan* was temporarily blocked.

The level of internet use for access to news is not that high: there are no news sites in the top 50 sites most accessed by Belarussian users. Ales Lipay, editor of *Belapan*, the privately-owned news agency, said that the site has on average 7000 visitors per day. He said that this number increased as the election approached: on Thursday 16 March it was 10,000 and on Sunday 19 March, election day, 20,000. Igor Vysotskii, editor of *BelGazeta*, said that recent market research showed that the newspaper has 70,000 individual readers of its 20,000 printed copies, plus a further 100,000 readers of its web site.

Belarus's single non-state news agency, *Belapan* (www.belapan.by), distributes information on the internet for free. There are also internet projects with regularly-updated news content (e.g. the most widely-used Belarussian portals, www.tut.by and www.open.by). *Belapan* was founded in 1991 with political, business and sports output. Ales Lipay, editor, said the agency has been constantly harassed by the authorities in recent years. Last year *Belapan* had to move its offices three times, having failed to receive approvals from the fire service, approval for using premises as an office, etc. Its journalists experience similar problems to those in other media: threats by telephone, difficulty in gaining access to local officials, withdrawal of accreditation by state bodies, etc.

⁶ Marina Sokolova and Mikhail Doroshevich, Human rights organisations and the internet in Belarus, www.e-belarus.org/article/hro.html

II. Freedom of speech and censorship in Belarus under president Lukashenko

a. Historical background

At the end of the Soviet period and the immediate post-Soviet period (late 1980s to early 1990s), the media in Belarus underwent a transformation not dissimilar from that in Russia and Ukraine. The advance of glasnost (openness) led first to a relaxation, and then to the almost complete disappearance, of censorship in the state-owned media, and then to the proliferation of privately-owned media and the beginnings of commercialisation of the market.

The media's heyday came in the mid-1990s, i.e. in the first two years after president Lukashenko came to office in 1994. But then the trend towards openness reversed, and the situation has deteriorated progressively ever since. Lukashenko effected a transition from the chaotic proto-democracy of the early 1990s to authoritarianism, via two rigged referenda that extended his own term of office and disbanded the legitimate parliament. Political parties were harassed, rather than banned outright, but the official mass media assisted Lukashenko's creation of tame, "virtual" political parties by defaming their rivals and depicting the new ones as genuine organisations. Increasingly, the political spectrum was filled with ostensibly competing political parties, creating an impression of pluralism, while enabling social discontent to be directed into safe channels under Lukashenko's control. Opposition movements that attempted to intervene in the 2001 elections were largely ineffectual.⁷

Over the last 10 years, the state media have been consolidated and strengthened and the editorial freedoms achieved in them in the earlier period reversed. The privately-owned media were increasingly subject to harassment and restrictions of the types referred to above, and in some cases to openly repressive measures. As in Russia and Ukraine, some particularly outspoken journalists were targeted and killed, most likely by forces within government. The situation with the state media was summed up in an interview by Eduard Melnikov, deputy director of Belarussian state television from 1992-94 and now vice-president of the BAJ. He said that BT1, the main TV channel, "has turned into a state organ of mass agitation and propaganda. ... An overwhelming majority of information programmes portray events in the country and in the world extremely one-sidedly and are often factually incorrect. This is especially noticeable during election campaigns."

Censorship and restrictions on the privately-owned media have advanced in concert with an increasingly dictatorial style of government. Petr Martsev, editor of *BDG*, said in an interview: "The real problems began in 1996. Since then, the space in which independent and non-state media work has narrowed continuously. Then, our publishing house was financially healthy and had four newspapers. Each year it became more and more difficult. They stopped us printing here; we moved to Vilnius; they stopped us distributing, and then allowed us to do so again. This goes on continuously and the problems are not only for the media: there were also incursions in the political sphere, with the closure of political parties; in civil society, with the closure of organisations; and in the economy. The result is a juridical dictatorship, based on the usurpation of power in the illegal referendum of 1996."

b. Deteriorating legal environment

The legal environment in which Belarussian journalists work is characterised, first, by the frequent use of the information ministry's power to close newspapers by administrative order; second, by the constant investigation of journalists by the committee for state security (KGB) and the presidential security service, which have wide powers and have participated in bringing many of the notorious politically-motivated cases against journalists in recent years; and, third, by the introduction of new laws that give these and other security forces ever-wider scope for prosecutions.

⁷ Pavel Sheremet and Svetlana Kalinkina, *Sluchainy Prezident* (Moscow, 2004), p. 256; Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics* (Oxford, 2005), pp.164-169, 196-200.

Mikhail Pastukhov, a former justice of the now-dissolved Belarussian constitutional court, and Yuri Toporashev, both of the Law Centre for Media Protection, said in an interview that among the most important legal changes in recent years was the introduction in January 2001 of Articles 367, 368 and 369 of the Belarussian Criminal Code, which respectively make libelling the president, insulting the president, and insulting representatives of the state into criminal offences. Punishments of up to five years in prison, i.e. comparable to those for aggravated assault, rape and robbery, are provided for under these Articles. There have been a number of successful prosecutions under these Articles, including those in June 2002 of Mikalai Markevich and Pavel Mazheika, journalists on the newspaper *Pahona (Pursuit)*, which was closed by a court ruling in October 2001, and in October 2002 of Viktor Ivashkevich, editor of *Rabochy (The Worker)*. These journalists served sentences of two- and two-and-a-half year internal exile.⁸ *Rabochy* was closed in October 2003 by order of the information ministry.

Pastukhov and Toporashev said that these laws have been supplemented by Article 369.1 of the criminal code, which has come into force this year, which outlaws “discrediting the republic of Belarus” and “passing libellous information to representatives of foreign states”. This statutory threat to free speech is part of a series of measures that threaten the activity of political and non-governmental organisations, including the outlawing of “participation in an organisation that endangers the state”, under which members of the independent election monitoring group Partnerstvo have recently been convicted, and the outlawing of “the training of citizens to participate in group activity” directed against the state, or the financing of group activity directed against the state. Toporashev said: “These laws are directed primarily against journalists but also against ordinary citizens. Recently a mother of young children was sentenced to three years after distributing leaflets critical of president Lukashenko.”

c. Tighter control of broadcasting and state-owned newspapers

The news and current affairs output of the state-owned broadcasting media has since 1997 been closely censored, monitored and used increasingly for propaganda. Leonid Mindlin, a TV journalist who left BT in 1996, after having programmes critical of the government repeatedly taken off the air, said: “The changes in television came at the same time as the sharp change in the political situation in the country. A blacklist was drawn up and I am sure that myself and a number of others are on it.” In 1997 the remaining substantial resistance to the use of TV for propaganda and the censorship of stories critical of the government was crushed. An important turning-point was the detention of leading TV journalist Pavel Sheremet on charges of illegally crossing the border with Lithuania; his three-month incarceration, widely assumed to be politically motivated, ended when then Russian president Boris Yeltsin intervened on his behalf with president Lukashenko.

Since that time, the state-owned media have been used routinely to propagandise the president’s views, while no opposition politician has received any coverage, except in pre-election items casting them in an exclusively negative light. Even economic analysis that differs radically from the government’s has almost never been aired. Bands that have played at concerts sponsored by the opposition, e.g. NRM, Dmitrii Voitiushkevich, Palac, Krama and Drum Exstasy, have been dropped from the playlists of music radio stations.

In 2003, Mindlin investigated the working conditions at BT and published an article about them in the now-closed investigative newspaper *Dlia sluzhebnogo ispolzovaniya (For Office Use)*. This showed how the duties of BT’s security department were extended to spying on employees and investigating political dissent, with the use of a network of 67 video cameras, workplace searches, electronic clocking-in cards, etc. The 70 security staff worked as a police force surveilling the company’s 2000 or so employees, Mindlin said. As far as we can ascertain, conditions remain unchanged since then.

⁸ Pastukhov and Toporashev, *Belarus: Journalists Tried on Criminal Charges* (Minsk, 2003)

We interviewed a young journalist working at a state media outlet, who belongs to the BAJ. He said: "I know very well what I can say on air, and what I can't." Asked, "how?" he said: "From my bosses, and from the example of broadcasts made previously. There are very clear criteria about names that may not be mentioned, and people who have opposition views who may not go on air." He said that, while there were other members of the BAJ at his workplace, he would not associate with them on the premises.

Asked whether people could voice opposition political views or criticise the government in personal conversations, e.g. in the canteen, he said: "No. You wouldn't do that. You can read what news you like on your own computer, in your own office, or talk to people you are close to about those things. But not in the canteen." This, he said, is because the canteen is an open space where other people could overhear your conversation. "People are scared." We asked this journalist whether, given his critical approach, he would rather work in the privately-owned sector. He replied: "In the non-state sector there are some very fine journalists. But there is also a hierarchy there: the VIPs who are visible, who travel, who are well off, and those who simply become victims, who go to jail or lose their jobs. And then they have to look after themselves."

The case of Vladimir Dovzhenko, a sports journalist, is indicative of the situation in the state-controlled media. Dovzhenko, whose TV career began in 1977, had by the mid-1990s risen from working as a sports reporter to fronting his own show, *Silach* (Strongman). At the time it was one of the most popular on Belarussian TV, featuring interviews with sportsmen, military officers and other personalities. In 1996 he was elected to the Minsk city council, where he became chairman of the commission on openness and relations with civil society. That "wasn't the authorities' favourite commission", he said in an interview. He made more enemies by protesting openly against the jailing of Pavel Sheremet and, after approaches by colleagues in independent media, sponsoring a resolution in the city council giving journalists a large measure of legal immunity, which remains in force to this day, at least on paper. In September 1998 Dovzhenko stood unopposed for re-election to the city council, but the electoral commission claimed that the turnout failed to reach the 50 percent minimum barrier by a margin of less than 1 percent. Dovzhenko maintains that the results were tampered with; nevertheless, he lost his council seat.

The very next day, the then head of BT, Grigorii Kisel', junked Dovzhenko's show, which was in its 11th year with high and rising ratings. Dovzhenko was given notice; for contractual reasons he could not be sacked, but was given no work to do for a year, until he left the TV station. Since then he has worked in non-state newspapers and currently edits three trade newspapers. He said: "I just wouldn't bow my head. And so I am on a blacklist. After I left BT there have been times when I attended press conferences at sports events, as I have since the 1970s, and was denied access. It's been a personal tragedy for me and my family."

d. Privately-owned newspapers

The spread of censorship on the state media has been accompanied by a war of attrition on the privately-owned newspapers, which has drastically reduced their number and circulation. The repressive "technology" developed by the state over the past decade works as follows:

- Most printing houses are state-owned and charge independent newspapers 2-3 times more than state publications. Printing over the border in Smolensk is more expensive in terms of transport and customs duties.
- The network of independent kiosks that used to sell newspapers parallel to the state network was squeezed out of business by constant inspections and harassment. Under analogous pressure from the authorities, supermarkets and other major retail outlets gradually discontinued sales of the independent press.

- In November 2005 the state postal monopoly Belpochta and the state network of newspaper kiosks Belsoyuzpechat' abruptly terminated contracts with almost all non-state newspapers. This meant there was no legal way in which newspapers could sell reader subscriptions (a license is required), and newspapers had to rely on amateur methods of getting their product to the reader.
- The half-a-dozen or so private firms involved in collecting subscription revenue were forced out of business in the early 2000s, placing additional obstacles in the way of readers' taking out subscriptions.
- State-run companies are effectively banned from advertising in independent publications, while the private sector is under enormous pressure from the state and therefore has very small advertising budgets. Conversely, state-run media and advertising outlets won't take advertising from the independent press.
- Commercial and media laws are extremely contradictory, so there is always a good chance that publications can be found to be in breach of the law in some respect. Frequent inspections by fire, tax or sanitary regulators are a weapon used to harass the press, impose fines and close offices.
- Independent journalists face obstructions from state officials at all levels, from physical attacks to refusal to give them information.
- The journalists that we spoke to were all convinced that the courts are not independent of the state; as Amnesty International noted in 2004 that in Belarus the independence of the judiciary "has been repeatedly called into question by the international community".⁹ Courts have awarded crippling fines on the basis of egregious libel suits. Asked about the best means of combating these suits, representatives of the Law Centre for Media Protection acknowledged that the low level of professional training of many Belarussian journalists has led to the publication of needless libels – and the centre has published a popular guide to the law for journalists, *Zhurnalistika: opasnaya professiya (Journalism: A Dangerous Profession)* which has gone through three print runs – but they added that the political character of many prosecutions, and the scale of fines, is beyond doubt. They showed us records of cases to bear this out.

To understand the difficulties currently faced by those few privately-owned newspapers that attempt to maintain high editorial standards, including the right to criticise government policy, it is worth looking at the history of some of the most prominent titles.

Belarusskaia delovaia gazeta (BDG). This political and financial newspaper was founded in 1992 as a weekly; it addressed itself to the republic's elite and circulated in business and political circles. In 1994 it relaunched, still focusing on business and politics but addressed to a wider audience. Its owners launched three more titles: a popular entertainment-focused weekly, *Imya (Name)*; an investigations-centred title, *Dlia sluzhebnogo polzovaniya*, and a motoring magazine. In 1996 *BDG* became a daily and its influence grew further. Petr Martsev, editor, said: "At that time, the president himself said several times that he started his day by reading our newspaper. But then the system of rule changed. There was political struggle and political assassinations. We investigated these very thoroughly. The economy changed – there were attacks on private businesses – and we wrote about that too. A campaign started against our newspaper." This culminated in 1999 with a criminal case being launched against Irina Khalip, editor of *Imia*, and physical threats to other journalists. In April 2003 president Lukashenko announced publicly that *BDG* was to be closed. It was restarted shortly afterwards under an amended name, being printed in Smolensk and imported. Circulation has fallen from 27,000 to 5000. Immediately after the elections, Martsev announced that the printed edition would cease publication and the newspaper would appear on the internet only.

⁹ Belarus: stifling the promotion of human rights, web.amnesty.org/library/index/engneur490042004

Belorusy i Rynok (BiR) (Belarussians and the Market). Established in 1991, this weekly was one of the first non-state newspapers in Belarus. It is one of just three independently-owned papers that still enjoys access to the state subscription and distribution. In interviews, journalists speculated that it has survived because of its political moderation, its usefulness to the authorities as a source of economic information, and its editor's well-placed connections. Nevertheless, circulation has dropped by two-thirds, to 11,000, over the past five years, and advertising revenue has fallen by two-thirds since 2001, mainly because of harassment of state-owned companies that take out advertising. The closure of private firms involved in collecting subscription revenue cut *BiR's* subscriptions by 20 percent. Out of 20 retail outlets in supermarkets, only four now remain for BiR. "When we ask why, the managers point a finger upwards, indicating the powers that be," said Vyacheslav Khodosovsky, editor of *BiR*. In 2003, *BiR* was fined \$1,000 after an inspection of its premises. The inspectors insisted *BiR* had for several years been paying too little rent and had to make up the difference. The paper was forced to move and introduce wage cuts. Then the fire service declared that some doors in the new offices were 2 cm lower than specified by law, and they had to move again. "If someone decides they don't like us they can always create major problems for us with an inspection," Khodosovsky said. In May 2005, president Lukashenko signed a decree that banned non-state media from using the words *Belarussky* (Belarussian) and *natsional'nyi* (national) in their titles, and ordering them to reregister within three months. This meant more upheaval and expense for *BiR*, which had to drop its former title *Belarussky rynok (The Belarussian Market)* and relaunch.

Svobodnie novosti plius (SNP). This news weekly was founded, under the name *Svobodnie novosti*, in early 1991. Its editor, Vasilii Zdanyuk, was a former Soviet army journalist who for many years edited the daily newspaper of the Soviet forces based in east Germany. *SNP* has been repeatedly closed down administratively, on what its staff and press freedom campaign groups believe are political grounds: in 1994 it was closed, and reopened as *Svobodnie novosti plius*; in 1997 it was closed down, and reopened as *Svobodnie novosti*; in 2002 it was closed again and reopened as *Svobodnie novosti plius*. Under the winding-up procedure used by the Ministry of Information, *SNP* has lost its capital equipment (computers etc) every time it has been closed. Upon closure, it has run up heavy losses to meet a legal requirement to refund postal subscribers for issues not received, while simultaneously losing advertising revenue and kiosk sales income. For this reason, after the 2002 closure, the paper stopped offering postal subscriptions. After each closure the editor and owner have gone through a lengthy and expensive registration procedure, and then started again to build readership, an advertising base etc, from scratch. Between the 1994 closure and 1997, *SNP's* circulation rose to 103,000; after the 1997 closure, it built circulation from zero to 60,000. Since the 2002 closure, its recovery has been slower: its current circulation is 14,000. In addition to its other problems, the main printer in Minsk, the state-owned *Belarusskii dom pechati*, refused to print *SNP* and it has gone out to a commercial printer. The journalistic staff has fallen from 23 to five, who work in a single room only large enough for three people to work comfortably. Freelance contributors, who include political analysts, writers and poets, are unpaid. *SNP*, like other privately-owned newspapers, has suffered from politically-motivated libel cases.

Narodnaya Volya. This is the largest, and most clearly oppositional, privately-owned weekly. Svetlana Kalinkina, editor, told us that extremely large fines for libel were frequently used to attempt to close the paper. In the autumn of 2005 Sergei Gaidukevich, a senior political ally of president Lukashenko and a candidate in this year's presidential elections, sued *Narodnaya Volya* for libel after it published a story about his involvement in trading Iraqi oil in breach of the UN embargo. The suit was filed over the publication in the 1 March, 2005, edition of a photocopy of a document received by the office of the Liberal-Democratic Party from Iraq on June 16, 2002. The document, addressed to Gaidukevich, said: "We are still waiting for you to fulfill your obligations under the above-mentioned contract. We urge you to return to us the money in an amount of \$996,798.060, which you owe us." The paper

accused the party of cooperation with Saddam Hussein's regime and receiving financial assistance from abroad in violation of Belarussian law.¹⁰

The courts fined the paper \$50,000 (200 times the average monthly wage, \$250). Kalinkina said: "We got out of this situation by publishing an appeal to readers. We collected the money and paid the last instalment on 28 September last year. On the same day that the fine was finally paid off, the paper received faxes from the printers and from the distributors ending our contracts." Since October, 2005, the paper has been printed in Smolensk and relies on its own network of distributors in Belarus.

Salidarnasts (Solidarity). This weekly was founded by the independent trade unions in 1991 and enjoyed a small but stable circulation. In 2003, when *BDG* was closed, as an act of solidarity printed an entire issue of *BDG* in the usual *BDG* format, simply adding *Salidarnasts*'s masthead over the top of the front page. Two days later the authorities made an inspection of the editorial offices. They searched for a long time before finding that a particular detail (volume measured in printers' folios) was missing from the paper's imprint; this was an infringement of regulations and the paper was fined \$2,000. During the inspection, the journalists produced an issue of *Sovetskaya Belarus*, the newspaper of the presidential administration; its imprint also did not include volume measured in printers' folios.

After this, *Salidarnasts*' printers broke the printing contract, and the paper was forced to print in Smolensk, incurring additional transport and customs expenses. It published in this manner for two years, with a print-run of 5300 copies, 95 percent of which were sold at retail outlets in Belarus. But at the end of 2005 *Salidarnasts*, along with 14 other newspapers, had its contract with the state monopoly distributors Belsoyuzpechat' terminated. "We were deprived of all means of making money," said editor Alexander Starikevich. He watched *Narodnaya Volya* lose its court case against the ban and decided it was pointless for his much smaller newspaper to go through the courts itself. Since then the paper has been published on the internet, but is no longer a commercial concern.

"After the paper closed down we received a lot of letters and phone calls from readers. In principle one could consider organising a demonstration by readers of the independent press, but not now, not in these circumstances," Starikevich said.

e. The regional press

In provincial towns, the attacks on non-state newspapers described above have taken even more extreme forms than in Minsk. Journalists interviewed in Grodno, western Belarus, said that over the last 18 months the authorities have been carrying out systematic attacks on the press, "hunting papers one by one" with methods such as those described above. The 2002 closure of *Pohona* (see above) and the internal exile of its editor was an important turning point. This was followed by the harassment of an associated newspaper, *Dyen*, whose print-runs were constantly seized until it was eventually closed. Immediately after the 2004 parliamentary elections, another Grodno newspaper, *Birzha Informatsii*, was convicted of libel, fined \$800 and closed down for three months. Two letters from the Ministry of Information, one issuing the paper with an official warning and another ordering it to close down altogether within three months, arrived in the same envelope. When the three months were up, the paper couldn't find a printer.

"I am stunned," said a leading Grodno journalist. "I even envy journalists in the capital because officials at least talk to them. Here the way they deal with us is unbelievable." For example, the city administration simply won't admit journalists within its walls. There have been several instances in which the police have thrown journalists out of the administration's offices. An important role in co-ordinating attacks on journalists in Grodno is played by the

¹⁰ Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations, weekly bulletin, issue No. 15 (168), April 4 - 10, 2005

ideology department of the local administration. Such departments, abolished in most post-soviet states, including Belarus, in the early 1990s, were reintroduced in 2003. One Grodno journalist said of this department: “They are a disgrace, they organise provocations: on one occasion they called the police and said one of our journalists was drunk and should be arrested.”

In Borisov, a town not far from Minsk, a local newspaper *Kur'er Borisova* (*Borisov Courier*) also faced administrative harassment leading to its closure. Anatoly Udovichenko, the paper's former editor, explained that in 2002 the company that publishes the newspaper was re-registered by the local municipal executive committee. Three years later in 2005, this same body brought a court case against the company alleging that the registration documents that it itself had accepted were invalid because they did not correctly state the nature of the company's business. Udovichenko said the fact that the winding-up commission was chaired not by an official of any authority responsible for business issues, but by Tatyana Dedukh, the head of the municipality's ideology department, shows that the whole affair was politically motivated. Dedukh's deputy on the winding-up commission was an official whose incompetence had been reported in the paper some months previously.

f. The reduction of the journalistic workforce

The attacks on the privately-owned media and changes in the state sector have reduced the journalistic profession to a shadow of its former self. The Belarussian Television and Radio Company sacked large numbers of staff in the period 1997-99; the constant closure of privately-owned newspapers has added to a growing pool of unemployed journalists. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the government's opposition to private business in general (not only in the media) became particularly pronounced, and the small business sector was weakened by administrative pressure. This resulted in the closure of freesheets, trade papers and other advertising-funded media, reducing the number of quasi-journalistic jobs in that sector and further exacerbating unemployment among journalists.

Unemployed journalists from the privately-owned media who haven't left the profession altogether or taken quasi-journalistic jobs have either found jobs in the state-owned media or, in a smaller number of cases, gone to work in Russia and Ukraine. Prominent journalists who lost their jobs as a direct result of censorship (e.g. editors whose newspapers were closed) have in many cases moved to Moscow to work.

Alina Surovets, executive director of the BAJ and former editor of *Novaya Gazeta v Smorgone* (*The Smorgon New Press*), a regional weekly, said that the paper had been closed after having its licence annulled by the information ministry in January 2005; some staff had continued to produce the paper for another six months on an unpaid, voluntary basis. Of the 23 journalists, almost all are now unemployed or working in non-journalistic jobs. An editor of another privately-owned newspaper said: “Unemployment is a very serious problem. If a newspaper closes in a small town, all the journalists lose their jobs and have nowhere else to go.”

Another senior journalist in the non-state sector said: “After recent newspaper closures, some colleagues have gone to the state-owned newspapers and now write about sport or culture. Some leave the profession entirely. Our best journalists are in Moscow – they can't find work here – and I have heard that about 50 Belarussian journalists are working in Ukraine at the moment [on the many newspapers and party political free-sheets that sprung up during the 2006 Ukrainian parliamentary election campaign].” We have not found any statistical information on the changes in the labour market, but it is clear from interviews that the reduction in the labour force has been drastic.

Despite the problem of unemployment, so-called “chernyi nal” – under-the-counter payments to journalists for writing political or other advertisements in the form of genuine copy, which are a major problem in Ukraine – appears to be rare because private businesses simply

won't have anything to do with the independent media, while in the state sector wages are far higher anyway. In the dwindling independent sector, however, journalists need two or three jobs to make ends meet. In contrast to Ukraine there is no private "mafia" to speak of because of the maintenance of state control over the economy, and so there are fewer threats to journalists from private business interests. As one journalist told us: "It's the political reporters who are at far greater risk of physical intimidation. But the fact remains that the most effective method of controlling the media is economic suffocation."

g. Attacks on journalists

There are some instances of opposition journalists being killed or disappearing. The lack of any serious investigation of these crimes acts as a deterrent to other independent journalists, who are reminded that should anyone attack them physically, they will do so with a high level of impunity.

On July 7, 2000, the cameraman Dmitry Zavadsky, who worked for Channel One of Russia, went missing after driving to a Minsk airport to meet a colleague, Pavel Sheremet. Two former state officials were later convicted of his abduction and murder. However, considerable concern remains regarding the alleged involvement of senior state officials in Zavadsky's disappearance and in that of three opposition leaders in 1999. Amnesty International has said it is "deeply concerned" that all four disappearances were followed by an apparent unwillingness on the part of the Belarussian authorities to promptly, thoroughly and impartially investigate the fate of the disappeared. Instead the authorities accused Belarus' opposition of staging the disappearances to attract international attention; the state-owned news media claimed that the individuals concerned had been sighted abroad. The apparent failure of the Belarussian authorities to investigate the whereabouts of the missing men has drawn sustained international criticism, including from the EU, the UN and the OSCE.¹¹

The families of the disappeared allege that senior state officials operated a death squad, made up of current and former elite police officers, which eliminated opposition figures. Information purporting to support such claims began to emerge from November 2000 onwards. The allegations culminated in the trial behind closed doors of four men, two of whom were former members of the *Almaz* special police unit, resulting in their conviction in March 2002 of Zavadsky's disappearance. The main piece of evidence incriminating the accused was a spade found in a car which allegedly had traces of Zavadsky's blood on it. The accused professed their innocence. The Committee to Protect Journalists concluded that state prosecutors failed to investigate allegations that high-level government figures were involved in the Zavadsky affair. Critics of the trial point to the following:

- In November 2000 the heads of the Prosecutor's Office and Committee for State Security (KGB) were unexpectedly dismissed; the opposition maintained that the dismissed personnel came too close to discovering what had happened to the missing men, locating their corpses and establishing the murder weapon.
- The dismissals occurred shortly after an anonymous letter, alleged to have been written by a former KGB officer, appeared in the media, according to which several present and past serving members of elite police units had been arrested by the KGB on suspicion of having murdered Zavadsky and had confessed to having murdered the missing opposition figures.
- On 8 November 2000, Russian Public Television broadcasted a documentary produced by Zavaadsky's colleague Pavel Sheremet which cast doubt on the official investigation into the disappearances; Sheremet said that the prosecutor general and

¹¹ Amnesty International, *Without trace: uncovering the fate of Belarus' disappeared* (2002), <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engneur490132002>

KGB chairman had been dismissed after they arrested and questioned a senior officer of the Ministry of the Interior's Combined Rapid Reaction Force in connection with the disappearances.

- In June 2001 two investigators involved in the inquiry into the fate of the missing men fled to the USA after they had publicly alleged that officials in Lukashenko's immediate circle had employed an elite group to eliminate members of the opposition.
- In 2001 the presidential candidate Viktor Goncharik distributed a hand-written document, said to be from a police chief, regarding a gun used to execute the missing men.¹²

The prosecution concluded that Zavadsky's disappearance was a "revenge killing" after Zavadsky had visited Chechnya and learned that former members of *Almaz* had trained Chechens to fight against Russian government forces; Zavadsky's abductors were supposedly extreme Belarussian nationalists. Human rights monitors doubt this explanation, believing that Zavadsky's disappearance may have been related to his journalist activities, either in Chechnya linking Belarussian state officials with the export of arms and expertise to the Chechens, or in Belarus where he had reported on the deteriorating political situation in the country. Both Dmitry Zavadsky and Sheremet had previously fallen foul of the Belarussian authorities and were given suspended prison sentences in January 1998 for their journalist activities the previous year.

The Zavadsky affair is not the only case in which there are suspicions that a Belarussian journalist has paid the highest price for their work. In October 2004 Veronika Cherkasova was stabbed to death in her Minsk apartment. Cherkasova was an outspoken journalist who wrote for independent newspapers including *BDG*, *Belgazeta* and *Salidarnasts*. Her 2002 article "Man in black", which analysed Lukashenko's dress sense, became very popular; the article ends by comparing Lukashenko to a clown.¹³ More recently she had been working on the possibility of Belarussian arms sales to Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

The murder has not been solved. On the contrary, Cherkasova's son Anton Filimonov, aged 15 at the time of her death, has been repeatedly harassed in connection with the murder. Initially the investigating authorities announced that both Filimonov, and Cherkasova's stepfather, were suspects. Anton was repeatedly interrogated. On February 2, 2005, the investigator of the city prosecutor's office and two policemen arrived at his school to take him to a psychiatric hospital for examination. His family managed to have the boy released and took him to Moscow to his father, who appealed to the Russian Human Rights Commission. Russian television broadcast a list of violations of the criminal legal procedure made in relation to Cherkasova's son.

In April 2005 the authorities announced that suspicions concerning the son and stepfather of the murdered journalist were unfounded, and Anton returned to Minsk. At a press conference the deputy general prosecutor of Belarus emphasised that Anton "had never been directly regarded as a suspect in the murder of Veronika Cherkasova". However, Anton clearly remained under surveillance and on December 27, 2005, he was arrested together with a group of youths for paying for cigarettes with banknotes that the boys had made on a computer. Two days later all the detainees except Anton were released; Anton was once again pressured to confess to Cherkasova's killing. Despite fears for his health he was finally released only on March 15, 2006.

On October 17, 2005, Vasily Grodnikov, a freelancer for *Narodnaya Volya*, was found dead with a head wound in his apartment outside Minsk. The case was closed on December 14 on

¹² Details are given in Amnesty's report, *ibid*.

¹³ Colleagues have collected Cherkassova's recent articles and published them as *Krasnym po Belomu: Stat'i, Ocherki, Esse* (Moscow, 2005)

the theory his death was accidental because of the absence of any signs of a break-in at the victim's apartment. According to journalists and journalists' organisations, it is not clear whether this death was related to Grodnikov's professional activity.

III. The 2006 presidential elections

a. General

The presidential elections on March 19, 2006, resulted in a landslide victory for president Lukashenko, who will now serve a third term. According to the Central Election Commission, Lukashenko won 82.6 percent of the votes, Aleksandr Milinkevich (the candidate of the joint opposition bloc) 6.1 percent, Sergei Gaidukevich (a pro-Lukashenko politician) 3.5 percent and Aleksandr Kozulin (a second opposition candidate) 2.3 percent.¹⁴ The Belarussian opposition and various international bodies had argued that the election was unconstitutional, as it was held on the basis of the unconstitutional referendum of 2004 permitting president Lukashenko to stand for a third term. The opposition claimed the voting was not free and fair, because of limitations on opposition political activity and the non-state media; because of the large number of votes (more than 30 percent, according to the Central Electoral Commission) cast in advance, at workplaces and by soldiers and students; and because of the counting procedures, which place great limitations on observers.

During the run-up to the election, increased pro-presidential propaganda was evident in the state media; police attacks on, and confiscations of, privately-owned newspapers increased and most of them failed to reach their readers in the immediate pre-election period; in the week prior to the election another privately-owned newspaper was closed by the courts on spurious grounds; the threatening atmosphere for independent journalists covering the election was epitomised by the public beating of a journalist who was covering the arrest of an opposition candidate. Below we present a general picture of the campaign; a full list of incidents of attacks on press freedom, reported by the BAJ and by other monitoring organisations and NGOs, is provided in the appendix.

b. Coverage and propaganda in the pre-election period

The coverage of the election campaign in the state media was notable for the large volume of propaganda in support of president Lukashenko and exclusively negative coverage of opposition candidates. In the week leading up to the elections, news bulletins each evening on ONT and BT painted an extreme picture of a country about to be pitched into violence and chaos by foreign forces, with terrifying consequences for ordinary Belarussians, justifying the most extreme methods in combating opposition to president Lukashenko. These broadcasts proceeded from facts with which few would disagree – i.e., that the leaders of the EU and USA have professed their distaste for the Belarussian state, are involved in a geopolitical struggle for influence in the former Soviet Union and have funded opposition forces that have organised mass protests against rigged election results in Eastern Europe – but they added to these facts unsubstantiated accusations of a criminal conspiracy to overthrow the state, involving leaders of the opposition and terrorists from Georgia, substantiated by taped confessions with unidentified “arrestees”.

Each evening, the broadcasts repeated the same tale with minor variations:

- The EU and the USA are supporting groups of foreign agents in Belarus in an attempt at a violent seizure of power along the lines of the Georgian “rose revolution” of 2003. (Shots of violent clashes in the Georgian parliament were shown, with no explanation of why the events took place or their context);

¹⁴ *Sovetskaya Belarus*, 21 March 2006.

- The KGB has seized the agents involved, together with documents, weapons and explosives (accompanied by confessions to camera by unidentified individuals supposedly involved in this plot, and pictures of weapons, large amounts of cash, etc);
- The EU and the USA are conducting a “psychological war” on Belarus using “Goebbels-style propaganda”;
- The opposition candidates in the presidential elections are accomplices (the candidates were given no right of reply to this assertion);
- Opposition calls for people to come to a mass meeting in the centre of Minsk on the evening of polling day (19 March) are effectively invitations for innocent citizens to become involved in arson, explosions, murder and terrorism;
- Opposition candidates’ election promises are full of lies (no right of reply);
- Western Europe and the USA are violent societies dominated by war, poverty and social unrest; democracy there is a hypocritical sham, any countries that do not agree with the USA are bombed (shots of the Iraq war, police attacking demonstrations in the USA and France, etc);
- President Lukashenko is the only obstacle to the victory of these forces, he is personally responsible for an extraordinary increase in the prosperity and wellbeing of the Belarussian people, and if the opposition causes any trouble on polling day he will “wring their necks like chickens”. The stories about alleged conspiracies to overthrow the state were on each evening that we monitored the news followed by extended coverage of Lukashenko visiting factories and research centres, awarding prizes, making speeches, etc.

These news bulletins were little more than extended political broadcasts in support of president Lukashenko’s re-election campaign, creating a climate of fear in the run-up to the elections. In particular, the state TV channels broadcast extensive coverage of a press conference by the interior minister, the head of the KGB and other security service chiefs on the Thursday evening before the election, at which it was explained that participants in the opposition demonstration could be charged with terrorist offences, and be liable to punishments of between eight years in prison and the death penalty. (In the event, the demonstration went ahead, the police kept a low profile and there were no reported arrests, although harassment of opposition political figures continued.)

Eduard Melnikov of the BAJ says that recent research shows that the impact of state propaganda on the television might not be as great as expected. More than 55 percent of those surveyed said they agreed with statements critical of the state channels, such as “Belarussian television does not give the full picture”, it is “an instrument of the government” and that state TV authorities “interfere with Russian broadcasts to exclude the most informative programmes”.¹⁵ But in any case, this propaganda was intensified considerably in the run-up to the election.

In an interview with the *Financial Times*,¹⁶ Alexandr Martynenko, vice-chairman of Belarus TV and Radio Company, justified the station’s election coverage as follows: “The opposition is demanding that the West blockade the country. They travel around Europe demanding an end to investment in Belarus. Is that not aimed against the people? Kozulin and Milinkevich openly talk about the need to spill blood, otherwise nothing will ever change. They are preparing mass clashes in the streets. They want to bring strong drink and drugs [to these events]. They have even brought vodka to their meetings with voters. ... The opposition candidates spend most of their time in Berlin, Washington and so on, and then complain that the TV doesn’t let them reach the electorate.”

¹⁵ Mel’nikov, *Teleprogramma na Zavtra*, pp.17-19.

¹⁶ FT journalist David Crouch kindly provided this information.

In an interview with the *Financial Times*,¹⁷ Nikolai Lozovik, secretary of the Central Electoral Commission, said: "The opposition candidates' calls to bring people onto the streets on Sunday, which are published throughout the opposition media, are a provocation aimed at destabilising society. We view such calls as the immoral acts of politicians who have no thought for the people's safety ... and are concerned only with doing the bidding of their sponsors."

The BAJ has, as in the case of previous elections, conducted comprehensive monitoring of media coverage of the candidates' campaigns on all the main broadcasting news outlets and national newspapers.¹⁸ The preliminary findings included:

- By law, candidates' programmes may only be presented in the state-owned media. The presentations of the programmes on TV and radio were scheduled by the Central Election Commission at a time inconvenient for many voters and not advertised in advance. Speeches recorded by two of the candidates were edited without their agreement. (On 13 March, Aleksandr Kozulin lodged a formal protest to the CEC about the cutting of portions of his speech.)
- President Lukashenko did not make an address to voters at the scheduled time; instead, propaganda materials praising the president and attacking the opposition were broadcast. But a few days later all the state-owned media broadcast, either in full or edited highlights, the president's three-hour speech to the Third Pan-Belarusian People's Congress. This broadcast replaced news programmes and was rebroadcast at prime time.
- In the state-owned newspapers monitored by the BAJ, Lukashenko's programme was published on page 1, while other candidates' programmes were published on pages 3, 14 and 15. In the period 21 February to 5 March, the largest-circulation newspaper, *Sovetskaya Belarus*, devoted 63.1 percent of its election coverage to Lukashenko's campaign, 0.4 percent to Gaidukevich, 1.1 percent to Kazulin and 1.1 percent to Milinkevich. On 15 March, four days before the election, a special edition of *Sovetskaya Belarus* was published. The print run was 830,000, i.e. 300,000 more than normal, with the extra copies being delivered free to non-subscribers by the state-owned distribution network. (This forms a contrast, e.g., with the non-state newspaper *SNP*, whose application for an increase of circulation from 14,000 was rejected).
- Many of the privately-owned newspapers monitored by the BAJ were not printed, or did not reach their readers, in the pre-election period, see below. But, for example, in the period 21 February to 5 March, *KPvB* allocated 19.2 percent of its election coverage to Lukashenko; 4.6 percent to Gaidukevich; 25.6 percent to Kazulin and 14.5 percent to Milinkevich; the 2 March issue of *Belarusy in rynok* devoted 33.4 percent to Lukashenko, 2.8 percent to Gaidukevich, 20.1 percent to Kazulin and 33.6 percent to Milinkevich. *BiR*, along with *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva*, portrayed Lukashenko negatively, and *Narodnaya Volya* did not mention Gaidukevich.
- In its last pre-election bulletin, the BAJ concluded that "the state-owned electronic and print media allocated more attention to A. Lukashenko, giving to the alternative candidates less space and time or excluding them from the coverage". The monitoring showed that "two different semantic series" were built up by the state media: the first related "the state for the people", "peace and stability", "well being",

¹⁷ FT journalist David Crouch kindly provided this information.

¹⁸ Media Monitoring: "Presidential Election 2006 Coverage in the Belarusian Mass-Media". The candidates' representation and their election campaigns' coverage. Bulletins 1-5 (January-March 2006). We understand that it is planned to publish the results of the monitoring in book form.

etc, to Lukashenko; the second related “plundered country”, “chaos”, “state for the few” and “joblessness and poverty” to the “scoundrels” Milinkevich or Kazulin. The state media “violated the principle of equal opportunities” in election coverage, and although the independent press “strived to give a balanced picture ... due to its limited circulation it could not withstand the tendentious coverage ... by the state-owned media.”

c. Increased pressure on the privately-owned newspapers

During the run-up to the election, the pressure on the privately-owned newspapers increased significantly and many of them failed to reach their readers. The main target of this pressure was *Narodnaya Volya*, the largest-circulation independent paper. The police have obstructed distribution on a number of occasions this year, and this culminated in the seizure of two of the paper’s last three issues prior to the election.

On 3 January, an entire print run of *Narodnaya Volya*, which is printed in Smolensk, was seized at the border and held on the grounds that the dispatch documents were incorrectly drawn up; it was released a day later after the documents were amended. On 9 January, the entire print run of the next issue, a double issue, was seized by customs officers at the border, at Rudnia, and delivered to the Dubrovenski district police station; police gave no reason for this action. On 30 January copies of *Narodnaya Volya* and *Tovarishch* were confiscated by police in Zhlobin from a volunteer activist who was distributing them; this was the third such incident in the town since the start of the election campaign. In Minsk, on 31 January, activists distributing *Narodnaya Volya* in a pedestrian subway were moved on by police.¹⁹

On Friday 3 March *Narodnaya Volya* printed a greatly increased run (250,000 instead of the usual 27,000) of a special issue (no. 39) that featured two important pre-election events, i.e. the beating-up by police of presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin and a meeting held by candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich. The paper was printed as usual in Smolensk, and at about 10.0 pm, customs officers and police seized the entire print run at the Russo-Belarussian border. Police told the newspaper’s managers that they suspected it violated articles 45 and 48 of the election code, which stipulate giving equal opportunities for all candidates (although this has not been used at any time to address the state-owned media’s refusal to cover the campaigns of any opposition candidate, except negatively). This issue was still being held by police after the election.

In the week prior to the election, the staff of *Narodnaya Volya* prepared two ordinary numbers, with the usual print run of 27,000. But the Smolensk Printing House refused to print these, along with pre-election issues of *BDG* and *Tovarishch*. *Narodnaya Volya* found another printer in Smolensk, and printed the two issues; one reached its readers, but the other was seized by police when it arrived in Belarus, and taken to Vitebsk where it was stored along with the copies of the special issue. *Tovarishch* found another printers, in Moscow, and printed an issue, but when it arrived in Belarus it was seized by the police. The last edition of *BDG* prior to the election did not appear; Petr Maltsev, editor, said he had secured an agreement from the printing house that the first post-election issue would be printed. Journalists from all three newspapers told us that they believed that the short-notice cancellation by the Smolensk Printing House resulted from political pressure. S. Vazniak, the editor in chief of *Tovarishch*, told the BAJ in an interview: “I have every grounds for believing that the Belarussian state authorities put pressure on the Printing House management. ... It seems that some influential lobbyists for Lukashenko in Russia have had their say.”²⁰

In addition to the seizure of print runs, those privately-owned media circulated through the state-controlled distribution system have been prevented from increasing their circulation in

¹⁹ From BAJ press releases of 10 January and 1 February.

²⁰ BAJ press release, 6 March; interview with Svatlana Kalinkina; BAJ press conference, 17 March.

the pre-election period. *SNP*, which has a return rate from kiosks of only 2-3 percent (i.e. only damaged or lost copies), had an application to raise its circulation from 14,000 rejected, while the presidential administration's newspaper was able to produce a special edition with 300,000 or more extra copies.

d. Threats to reporters by the authorities

On March 2 at about 8.30 am, one of the four presidential candidates, Aleksander Kozulin, was beaten up and arrested when he tried to take part in the Congress of the Belarussian People, for which he had been refused visitor status. When Oleg Ulevich, political correspondent for *KPvB*, got into work he was immediately despatched to the police station to cover the story. He was standing outside the station with Kozulin's wife, brother, daughter and election agent, together with other journalists and activists from Kozulin's party (30-40 people in all), when men in plain clothes came out of the station. An empty minibus pulled up and they started to drag people into it.

"I was taking photographs," Ulevich said in an interview. "Then they started to push me towards the minibus. I got out my press card and said 'Press, press!' That was when I received a massive blow in the face and several in the kidneys. There was a lot of blood running from my nose and I was only semi-conscious. They tried to take my camera, but I didn't let them." Ulevich was bundled into the minibus with about 12 other people, including a photographer from *Belgazeta*, and was taken to another police station where his belongings were all listed, even the numbers on the banknotes in his wallet. He recognised that he had the symptoms of concussion and asked for an ambulance. When the medics arrived, they insisted on his immediate hospitalisation. He was operated on to straighten his nose and spent the next seven days in hospital, leaving on 9 March.

One of Kozulin's supporters, Yuri Radivilov, had photographed the incident when Ulevich was beaten up and fled from the scene with his camera. When he got into his car to drive away one of the men in plain clothes fired three rounds into the tyres. *KPvB* published photographs of the man holding his pistol.

"There were two reasons for hitting me," Ulevich believes. "They didn't want photographs of them getting into the press, because there is a possibility that the people involved were linked to the disappearance of [journalist] Dmitry Zavadsky and [opposition leaders] Gonchar, Krasovsky and Zakharenko. Secondly, it was a scare tactic so that newspapers would fear being closed down and journalists would self-censor. They hit me on the nose precisely so that it would make a good photograph."

Ulevich received many calls of support from journalist colleagues, but not a single one from a journalist in the state sector. Not a single word about the incident was mentioned in the state media. *KPvB* has requested the police video of the incident and is pursuing justice for Ulevich in the courts. "It is important so that these people see that they can't get away with this behaviour," Ulevich said. He added that he is present at most political meetings in Minsk and has a good relationship with the police. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. But this year has seen a very different attitude from the authorities. His attitude to returning to work is: "Back into battle with renewed vigour! Working in the non-state sector has always been dangerous for political correspondents."

In the light of this incident, the statement by security services chiefs at their press conference of Thursday 16 March (see above), that they could not guarantee the safety of journalists covering opposition demonstrations in Minsk on Sunday 19 March is notable.

A large number of foreign journalists travelled to Minsk to work during the pre-election period. Although the difficulties they faced were insignificant compared to those of our Belarussian colleagues, they are indicative of the problems created by the state's approach to the media. We have heard some reports that visa applications failed, but these are unconfirmed. We are

however sure that the accreditation procedure adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs obstructed journalists. The Ministry promises to process applications for accreditation within 20 days, but there are confirmed reports of its failure to do so; some colleagues were waiting 40 days or more for accreditation. On the other hand, on Wednesday 15 March the Ministry announced that foreign journalists needed additional accreditation from the Central Electoral Commission, and should submit applications for this by Thursday 16 March at 2.0 pm. Journalists working in Minsk, and therefore not checking the Ministry's web site regularly, missed the deadline and were unable to attend the count.

e. Caricature of a free press: the closure of Zgoda

Two days before the elections, a Minsk court ruled that the weekly opposition newspaper *Zgoda* should be closed down. The closure was rushed through after a page editor decided to publish copies of the Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed, giving the authorities an excuse to go in for the kill. Established in 1992, *Zgoda* had a print run of just 5,000, down from 50,000 in 1995. Its founder and editor in chief, Aleksei Korol, was also a founding member of the Social Democratic Party, of which presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin is the leader. Korol's role in the current elections as one of Kozulin's election officials has influenced perception of the paper's political position, although Korol told us the paper is not a party publication, and has included more coverage of Milinkevich than Kozulin.

The decision to publish copies of the Danish cartoons was taken in February by a page editor. When Korol learned of this, he ordered the entire issue to be pulped and sacked the editor. Not a single copy went into circulation. But the page proofs had already been sent to the Ministry of Information, as the law requires. The pages were splashed over the television news the same evening, with the cartoons blurred, and the paper was accused of fomenting religious hatred with the intention of provoking clashes with Muslims and destabilising the political situation before the elections. A court order suspending the paper's publication followed shortly.

"It was a gift to the authorities, the cartoons were only an excuse," Korol said, adding: "I am certain the decision was taken at the highest level." He said that the page editor responsible for placing the cartoons was a "Christian fundamentalist" and had defended his decision in these terms. *Zgoda* prepared an issue with a formal apology to Muslims, but has been unable to publish it.

The paper had already been threatened with closure a year ago, ironically for publishing caricatures of president Lukashenko. In March 2005 the paper was raided by 10 plain clothes police with no search warrant. They took away computers and attempted to begin criminal proceedings for insulting the president's "honour and good name". But there were insufficient grounds for a criminal prosecution, so the case became an administrative prosecution for "disseminating false information". Korol and his acting editor were each fined \$1,200. The paper was also issued with an official warning; after two warnings a newspaper must automatically close.

On February 23, after the incident with the Danish cartoons, *Zgoda* was issued with a second warning. By law the paper had a month in which to prepare its defence. Instead the case went for a preliminary hearing on 15 March, at which the judge proposed having a 15-minute break and then starting the full hearing immediately. Even the prosecution were unprepared and asked for the hearing to take place two days later.

Zgoda first began to experience problems with the authorities in 1995. Sponsors and advertisers began to withdraw their support. The paper received numerous warnings to change its editorial content. "Now if a company advertises in the independent press then it's going to face inspections and pressure from the authorities. Printing presses are obliged by law not to publish anything that undermines the state. The printers who printed the issue with the cartoons were almost forced to close," Korol said. "The independent press has become

unexpectedly dangerous to the regime,” he said, referring to research showing that 25-30 percent of the population get information from independent sources and that there has been growing interest in independent media during the election campaign, “like before the collapse of the USSR”. Korol said the situation around the 2006 presidential elections is unique. “There’s never been anything like it: the preventive arrests, the restrictions on electoral campaigning and the extent of black propaganda on the television are like nothing we’ve seen before.”

f. Targeted arrests of journalists after the elections

More than 30 Belarussian journalists, all members of the BAJ, were arrested across the country in a wave of 300-500 arrests during the week after the March 19 presidential elections. Some 70 percent were accused of “hooliganism” and “using bad language”, and fined or sentenced to between 3 and 15 days in jail. Eight journalists working for foreign media were detained. The large number of journalists among the total number of arrests suggests that journalists were targeted by the authorities, a suspicion borne out by the arrest of Pavel Sheremet, well known for his criticism of the Belarussian government, on Saturday March 25. At about 12.30 pm in central Minsk, Sheremet was talking to his mother, who lives in the city, and colleague Svatlana Kalinkina (editor of *Narodnaya Volya*) when five men sprang on him and bundled him into a car. Sheremet’s mother and colleagues visited him later in hospital: he had been beaten up. At about 9 pm that evening he was taken from hospital to a police cell. He was accused of using bad language and resisting arrest.

Sheremet told Russian Channel One TV, for which he is a correspondent, by telephone on March 26: “I was walking in the centre of Minsk, the street was practically empty, a minibus drove up, five people jumped out of it. One of them stated that he was from the criminal investigation department. I was immediately grabbed, thrown into that minibus, handcuffed with my hands behind my back and was driven for some 20 minutes around Minsk and beaten up.”

A list of journalists detained after the elections is given in Appendix 2.

g. The possibility of sanctions against journalists following the elections

In interviews, editors and journalists in the non-state sector often expressed the fear that after the election, state attacks on the non-state media would intensify. An early indication that their fears could be justified came at a post-election press conference on 20 March, when president Lukashenko was asked by a journalist from ONT, a state TV channel, to comment on rumours that EU countries might refuse visas to editors and managers of state-owned media. In reply, Lukashenko threatened to impose travel restrictions on opposition journalists.

The newspaper of the presidential administration reported his response in vulgar and threatening terms, as follows: “How can restrictions be placed on travel by journalists [from the state media]? That’s nonsense. But if the ‘human rights’ people in Minsk achieve [i.e. by persuading the EU to implement] this discriminatory procedure, then events could develop as follows. Analogous measures could be taken against the editors and managers of the private[ly owned] mass media, the most temperamental representatives of the BAJ, etc. So, watch it, guys, don’t overdo it. Without your whoring trips to Europe you’ll dry up from distress. And drawing up the ‘list’ [of targets] isn’t very complicated. Don’t lay traps for others, you’ll get caught in them yourselves.”²¹

²¹ *Sovetskaya Belarus*, 21 March 2006.

IV. Journalists' organisations and trade unions, and resistance to censorship

a. BAJ and BUJ

The Belarussian Association of Journalists was founded in 1994 during the brief heyday of the non-state media. It has about 1000 members, predominantly in the non-state media, at all levels from recent journalism graduates to chief editors, but also some in the state-owned media. The BAJ's main spheres of activity are legal, research and campaigning: it works closely with the Law Centre for Media Protection, which defends journalists and newspapers in the courts; it campaigns on press freedom issues within Belarus and internationally by means of its web site; and it maintains branches in towns around Belarus at which small groups of local journalists support each other. As is clear from the report, the BAJ was the most active organisation in Belarus in taking up press freedom issues surrounding the elections, and we have relied heavily on its research in some parts of our report, as indicated. Journalists we spoke to in Grodno described the BAJ as their "guardian angel".

The Belarussian Union of Journalists has about 2000 members, and is registered as a civil organisation (*obshestvennaya organizatsiya*). It is not a trade union. It represents journalists on the state-owned media and has membership at all levels of the workforce and of management, and also states that it has a small number of members in privately-owned media. Its president is Anatolii Lemeshonok, editor of the state-owned daily, *Respublika*. In an interview, Lemeshonok stressed that he believed in taking a "constructive approach", to enable his union and other journalists' organisations to work together.

However on the questions which most journalists in the non-state sector regard as the most crucial – the threat to press freedom from state interference, legislation and violence – he gave an opposite view. Above all, journalists in the privately-owned media accuse the BUJ of failing to speak out publicly about the murder of journalists and the low standards of investigations of these murders. Asked about the Zavadsky case, Lemeshonok acknowledged that the union had not made any public statements about it, and pointed out that it took place before he was elected president. On the Cherkasova case, he said: "Logic tells us that this is an ordinary, common crime [*chisto bitovoy vopros*]." He said that he did not believe that Cherkasova's son, Anton, who had been held on charges related to the murder, had been responsible. Asked, given that the killer had not been found, how he could assert that the crime was not related to Cherkasova's work as a journalist, he said: "You would hardly find anyone who would doubt this was a common crime. She [Cherkasova] did not write about serious political issues. She wrote about other themes. So how could it be connected to her work?"

Asked about the fact that three of the five most prominent non-state newspapers had not reached their readers in the pre-election period because of state interference and other issues, Lemeshonok stated: "They themselves consciously sought a provocation. These newspapers appeared with all sorts of breaches of the law. [Asked to specify which laws, he declined.] These newspapers are just seeking to establish reputations as victims." Asked about the adoption of laws threatening free speech, and specifically Articles 367, 368, 369 and 369.1 of the criminal code, Lemeshonok said that the Union supported these changes. "If someone insults you in the street, you hit him on the nose. The state should have the same rights," he said.

There is a trade union of cultural workers operating in the state-owned media sector, along the traditional lines common to post-soviet countries. One state media employee told us that the union's main activities are those that "official" trade unions used to undertake in the late soviet period: provision of holiday vouchers and other discounted items for employees, and new year and International Women's Day presents for members, etc.

b. Division in the profession

The background to the division between the journalists' organisations is the division in the profession itself, deepened by the sharp polarisation between the state and non-state media. Given the comprehensive way in which news is censored in the state media, those who worked in senior news jobs in the main state-owned media are regarded by many journalists as propagandists for the government. On the other hand the BUJ accuses journalists in the non-state sector of having "commercialised" journalism, although the parlous financial state of the non-state newspapers makes that seem doubtful.

We asked the editors and journalists that we met for their view about the division in the profession. The editor of one privately-owned newspaper said: "In twelve years under Lukashenko a group of journalists has formed who spit on all ethical considerations. They are 'ideological'; they are ready to say anything. But most, including those in the state media, are good professionals." Others asserted that the division between journalists in the two sectors should not be overstated. For a start, there is a considerable overlap: following private-sector closures, many journalists have moved from the private sector to the state sector in recent years, including some who have abandoned writing about politics and shifted to covering culture, sport or leisure.

Given the politically repressive conditions in the state media, we found no evidence of journalists there speaking out against censorship, and we were told of instances where journalists on state media have been sacked for openly maintaining contacts with those in the privately-owned media. On the other hand the BAJ, while regarded by journalists as being primarily representative of those in the non-state media, has succeeded in retaining members in the state media, and even recruiting some.

Svatlana Kalinkina, editor of *Narodnaya Volya*, said: "It's dangerous for journalists on the state media to associate with those from the independent media." She gave examples of colleagues who had been dismissed for this reason. Another senior journalist in the privately-owned media said that when his former newspaper had been closed, and forced to make a large number of its journalists redundant, some had gone to work in the state media, and currently work at *Sovetskaya Belarus*. He said: "I don't blame these people for working there. They have to feed their families." But he added that while he maintains friendships with his former colleagues, relations are strained, "probably because they are afraid. When two journalists meet, they naturally talk about work – and people are scared to do that".

Conclusions

Our main conclusion is that during the pre-election period, both the level of propaganda in the state media, and the level of state attacks on the privately-owned media, increased. It is likely that the constant wearing-down of the non-state media that has taken place over the last 10 years will continue in the near future after the elections. More severe attacks may be made on the BAJ, as indicated by president Lukashenko at his post-election press conference.

In these circumstances the International Federation of Journalists is duty bound as a matter of principle to continue to do all it can to publicise the attacks on free speech in Belarus, and to support those of our colleagues there who face judicial repression. We should continue our co-operation with our colleagues from the BAJ in the framework of their associate membership of the IFJ.

Recommendations

The large majority of journalists in Belarus work in circumstances in which they are unable to fulfill their professional obligation to provide the population with clear, accessible information about important events that affect their lives.

The television is a particularly unreliable source of information for the electorate. Access to alternative views and information through the print media is possible in principle, but very difficult in practice: voters can track down different newspapers in Minsk, for example, but this is even harder to do outside the capital. Access to the internet is growing, but ultimate control over this media once again resides firmly in state hands.

Belarussian journalists therefore find carrying out their duties complicated or obstructed, while their work is often exploited to overtly political ends. At the same time, Belarus is a small and young nation in a geopolitically sensitive situation, surrounded by larger, more powerful states that have explicitly stated their interest in influencing Belarussian politics. This circumstance further complicates the work of journalists who want to pursue their profession independently of pressure from any state, whether domestic or foreign.

We therefore recommend that the Belarussian national government and local authorities:

Disengage from media control at national and regional levels;

Cease their campaign of persecution against privately owned media by restoring access for those media to the full services of the state postal and distribution systems, restoring the right for privately-owned newspapers to use Belarussian printing facilities on the same basis as state-controlled media, grant licenses to new privately-owned newspapers and broadcasters to print and broadcast political news, analysis and comment independently of the state;

Move Belteleradiokompania towards becoming a public service broadcaster that exists to fulfill specific, defined obligations to the public, not to the state, and that is overseen by bodies representative of major public interests and institutions.

We recommend that international journalists' and media freedom organisations:

Continue to monitor violations of journalists' rights and physical attacks on journalists. In particular they must reinforce efforts to end the impunity enjoyed by the murderers of all journalists, including Dmitry Zavadsky and Vernoka Cherkassova;

Support the work of the Belarussian Association of Journalists through exchanging advice and information, coordinating joint campaigns and training the organisation's activists;

Support and provide training of journalists in the fundamentals of media ethics.

We recommend that controllers of Belarussian media outlets:

Cease all pressure on journalists who refuse to break codes of professional ethics;

Establish and agree with their journalists and with journalists' organisations codes of ethical conduct and standards of editorial freedom and integrity.

We recommend that Belarussian journalists' organisations:

Continue to closely monitor the media situation, especially on the state-controlled national broadcasters and newspapers, and protest at every identifiable violation of media ethics and

journalists' rights;

Continue to encourage journalists to press the government for locally and nationally agreed codes of ethical conduct and standards of editorial freedom and integrity.

Appendix 1. Chronology of attacks on journalists, newspapers and press freedom in the pre-election and immediate post-election periods

This is a summary of information collected by the BAJ in Minsk and the Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations (CJES) in Moscow.

3 January. The entire print run of the first new year edition of *Narodnaya Volya* was confiscated by border guards, on the grounds that carriage documents were not in order, and released later the same day (see main text). (CJES.)

5 January. Telman Masliukov, editor of the Svetlogorsk newspaper *Regyianalnyya navyny*, was stopped by the police, who confiscated 297 copies of the legally-published paper and opposition political literature.

9 January. Vladimir Bazan, editor of *Vitebsky Kur'er*, a local Vitebsk newspaper, was called to a meeting with the head of the department of ideology of the Vitebsk district executive, who complained about headlines used that he considered negative. (BAJ.)

9 January. The whole print run of *Narodnaya Volya* was confiscated at the Russian border (see main text).

11 January. Baranavichy district court levied a \$400 fine on Arkadz Blinkouski, a pensioner who receives about \$120 a month, for participating in a picket in defence of the freedom of speech.

17 January. Police at Skidel in Grodnensky region stopped activists of the Polish Union in Belarus and confiscated copies of the Polish magazine *Magazyn Polski v izgnanii*. (BAJ.)

18 January. The Brest regional department of Belpochta, the state-owned monopoly postal service, refused to sign a distribution contract with *Brestskiy Kur'er*. (BAJ.)

19 January. It was reported that the Belarussian customs service would in future be responsible for ensuring that no documents containing information that would “discredit the republic of Belarus”, under recently adopted amendments to the criminal legal code (see main text), enter the country. Officers would not only search baggage but study the content of documents in order to implement this law. (CJES.)

19 January. The city of Brest executive had ordered all newspapers distributed into the locality to submit information about their finances by this deadline.

24 January. The print run of the unregistered newspaper *Volny Horad* was confiscated by customs officers while being brought in to Belarus from Russia. (BAJ.)

24 January. A student from F. Skorina state university, Gomel, who participates in the internet project Studgomel.com, was stopped on the street by an unknown man and told “if you want to keep studying, pack that in”. Vlad Mikhailov, organiser of the project, said this was one of a series of similar incidents in which activists had been threatened. (CJES.)

26 January. President Lukashenko told an awards ceremony for state journalists that the government was “having some problems” with the non-state media. “We know who gives them money and how much they receive”, he said.

26 January. Andrei Pochobuta, editor of *Magazyn Polski v izgnanii*, a Polish magazine, was called to the prosecutor’s office and asked about the authorship of a number of articles. He refused to give any information. (CJES.)

27 January. Belarussian border police confiscated three video cassettes of material on the presidential elections from a news team from the Ukrainian TV station, Inter, claiming they suspected there was “material of an anti-state character” on the tapes. (BAJ/CJES.)

26-27 January. In several suburbs of Minsk reception of Euronews, the international news channel, was blocked. Human rights activists assumed this was because the channel reported the discussion on Belarus at the Council of Europe parliamentary assembly, at which the Lukashenko regime’s human rights record was criticised and a call for sanctions was made. (CJES.)

31 January. Andzhei Piscalnik, editor of *Glos znad Niemna v emigratsii*, a Polish newspaper, met with officials at the Grodno prosecutor’s office who were studying articles in the paper reporting the recent attacks on Polish community and cultural organisations. He refused to discuss the contents with them. (CJES.)

31 January. Activists distributing copies of *Narodnaya Volya* in Pushkinskaya metro station in Minsk were sent away by the militia. Interior ministry officers in Zhlobin confiscated several hundred copies of *Narodnaya Volya* and *Tovarishch*. (BAJ/CJES.)

6 February. The post office informed the non-state regional newspaper *Khimik*, based at Navapolatsk, that it would no longer deliver the paper to subscribers and was cancelling the distribution contract. (BAJ.)

7 February. The Ministry of Information issued a statement warning that the establishment of computer networks in private houses, and use of telephone cables for them, was a “non-sanctioned activity” and ordered the state telephone companies Beltekekom and BelGIE to make checks within two weeks.

17 February. TV camera operators from Associated Press, Reuters, Itar-Tass, Agence France Press and other agencies were barred from a ceremony at which presidential candidates registered. They were told by the press service of the presidential administration that only BTV would be able to record to ceremony. (CJES.)

19 February. Wacław Radziwiłowicz, a correspondent for *Gazeta Wyborcza* who had arrived in Belarus in the hope of interviewing president Lukashenko, was denied entry by border officials based at Grodno, despite having a valid entry visa. (CJES.)

21 February. The Belarussian TV station STV, which uses almost all the output of the Russian station Rossiya, replaced an announcement of a forthcoming series on Rossiya about victims of the holocaust with an announcement of a new series on the achievements of Belarus under president Lukashenko. STV also announced that in future news programmes from Rossiya and Vesti+ would be replaced by a new programme, Politika, made by its own journalists in Minsk.

23 February. The state security committee (KGB) opened a criminal case against the editors of *Zgoda* over the cartoons incident (see main text). (CJES.)

28 February. Anatoly Lebedko, president of the United Civil Party, registered a libel suit with the Minsk procurator in response to a film broadcast on BTV-1 entitled “Conspiracy theory: managed chaos”, which implicated members of the party in an anti-state conspiracy. (CJES.)

1 March. The head of the Central Electoral Commission, Lidiya Ermoshina, said that the publication of Aleksandr Milinkevich’s programme by *Narodnaya Volya* was a breach of election law. *Narodnaya Volya* editor Svetlana Kalinkina said that the paper had checked with its lawyers and that there is nothing in the electoral law that barred publication; Ermoshina was only giving her opinion. (CJES). Ermoshina also claimed that the privately-owned press would treat the election campaign “subjectively”. She stated: “Articles are

published 'to order' [zakaznye, i.e. written according to the wishes of business interests who bribe journalists to take a particular line, a common practice in Russia]. They work in favour of certain candidates."

2 March. Attack by policemen and men in plain clothes on journalists covering the arrest of presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin (see main text also). Oleg Ulevich, a reporter for *KPvB* had his nose broken and received a head wound. A TV cameraman for Reuters, Dmitry Modorsky, went to the Minsk clinic no. 10 with an eye wound. Valery Kalinovskiy, a reporter for Radio Svoboda, and Andrei Maksimov, who works with Kozulin's press team, were also hit. The wheels of a car from which cameramen were filming this incident were fired upon. The head of Kozulin's legal team, Oleg Volchek, said that when the driver, Yuri Radivil, went to report this to the police, he was himself arrested by officers who said he had failed to stop when warned. Radivil denies that he was asked to stop, and says that his car was attacked by men in plain clothes. (CJES).

2 March. A group of journalists from the non-state sector were detained on the border for three hours when returning from Latvia. (CJES).

2 March. President Aleksandr Lukashenko told the Belarussian Popular Assembly that *Zgoda* "will be closed" as a result of the incident with the Danish cartoons (see main text). He added: "A criminal case has been opened, and if there is cause to do so, all those involved will go to prison, because this is a provocation against the state." (CJES).

3 March. An entire print run of *Narodnaya Volya's* special pre-election edition was seized at the border (see main text).

3 March. The independent political analyst Andrei Suzdaltsev, who is regularly quoted in the non-state press, received a letter with a 5.45-calibre bullet from a Kalashnikov rifle inside it, wrapped in a piece of paper bearing the word "the last one". Suzdaltsev said he thought the action could have been directed against two articles he wrote on the elections, but that this was merely surmise. He has reported the threat to the state prosecutors (CJES).

7 March. Anatoli Hatouchyts, a journalist and BAJ activist based in Hrodno, was called in to the prosecutor's office and warned of possible prosecution under a series of laws for reporting the activities of official bodies in the town. (BAJ.)

9 March. Journalists attempting to cover the trial of Vintsuk Vyachorka, an organiser of the oppositionist Aleksandr Milinkevich's election campaign, were pushed away from the defendant by people assumed to be plain clothes police officers. (BAJ.)

13 March. Syarhey Niarouny, editor of *Volnyi Horad*, was fined about \$285 for authorising the publication of surplus editions of the paper, which as an unregistered publication is only permitted to print 299 copies. (BAJ.)

14 March. Note: arrests of journalists after this date are noted in appendix 2 below.

14 March. Internet portal operators were informed that dial-up and broadband services were to be blocked in the Minsk area until 20 March.

14 March. Andrei Zhigulin and Vitalii Doroshenko, a journalist and camera operator from the Ukrainian TV channel Piatyi kanal were refused entry to Belarus by border guards, despite all their documents being in order.

15 March. Officers of the KGB and two other security services broke into the apartment of businessman Vladimir Kudriavtsev in Krichevsk and seized the computers and printing equipment used to produce the unregistered newspaper *Volnyi Gorod*. They claimed they believed the equipment had been stolen from the local hospital. (CJES.)

17 March. The newspaper *Zgoda* was closed by decision of the supreme commercial court (see main text). (CJES.)

17 March. The Belarussian channel Kosmos TV, that usually relays the content of the Russian station RTVi, failed to transmit a programme on the Belarussian elections for “technical reasons”. (CJES.)

19 March. On election day, opposition web sites were blocked completely, and internet users found great difficulty accessing the sites of the central election commission, the Belapan news agency and the Belorusskiye novosti internet newspaper. (BAJ/CJES.)

19 March. Yan Rybarzh, a Czech journalist covering the opposition demonstrations on election day, was attacked and beaten up by a group of unidentified men. Since the incident took place in the city centre, where a large number of law enforcement officers were on duty during the demonstrations, he assumes they were members of the Belarussian security forces rather than criminals. (CJES.)

20 March. The internet sites Khartiya-97 and Solidarnost’ (successor to the newspaper of that name, see main text) were blocked. (CJES.)

23 March. Journalists covering the post-election protests in October Square, Minsk, reported difficulties in working, caused by police action. All internet cafes in the area had been closed. (CJES.)

23 March. It was reported that the Medisont printing house in Minsk, one of the few prepared to publish non-state political literature, had been closed by the authorities. (CJES.)

24 March. Journalists were prevented from filming, and at least four journalists were detained by police, during the break-up of the opposition protest encampment at October square. (BAJ.)

24 March. Police in Hrodna confiscated part of the print run of *Glos znad Niemna*, the Polish newspaper whose editor is in detention. (BAJ.)

25 March. Pavel Sheremet, the Russian journalist who was jailed in 1996 in Belarus, where he had worked as a senior TV journalist (see main text), was detained and beaten up in Minsk. He was later freed. (CJES.)

Appendix 2. Journalists arrested between March 14 and March 28.

Compiled by the Belarussian Association of Journalists. Arrests took place in Minsk unless otherwise stated.

Jailed:

1. Andrej Pachobut (*Magazyn polski in Exile*, Hrodna); sentenced to 10 days in jail on March 14.
2. Ihar Bantsar (*Glos znad Niemna in Exile*, Hrodna); sentenced to 10 days in jail on March 21.
3. Andrzej Piscalnik (*Glos znad Niemna in Exile*, Hrodna); sentenced to 5 days in jail on March 15, then detained once more and sentenced to 12 days in jail on March 21.
4. Aliaksei Rads (Internet-resource forum.grodno.net, Hrodna); sentenced to 10 days in jail on March 21.
5. Andrej Dynko (*Nasha Niva*, Minsk); sentenced to 10 days in jail on March 22.
6. Vadzim Aleksandrovich (*Belorusy i Rynok*, Minsk); sentenced to 10 days in jail on March 22.
7. Aliaksei Shein (A. Milinkevich's Press Group, Minsk); sentenced to 5 days in jail on March 20.
8. Yury Chavusau (a journalist of the Assembly of NGOs Internet Portal, an author of *Palitychnaya sfera* and *ARCHE* magazines); sentenced to 10 days in jail on March 21.
9. Siarhej Salash (an Offside newspaper journalist, Barysau), A. Milinkevich's election team activist); sentenced to 13 days in jail on March 23, 2006.
10. Ivan Roman (*Salidarnasc* freelance correspondent); fined 2 times the minimum wage on March 20 and then sentenced to 13 days in jail on March 23.
11. Viktor Yarashuk (*Miastsovy Chas*, Pinsk); sentenced to 5 days in jail on March 15, and again to 6 days in jail on March 23.
12. Anton Taras (freelance correspondent); sentenced to 11 days in jail on March 23.
13. Vadzim Kaznacheyeu (freelance correspondent); detained in Minsk around 3 am on March 24 and sentenced to 10 days of arrest on March 27.
14. Tatsiana Vanina (BAJ member); detained in Minsk around 3 am on March 24 and sentenced to 10 days in jail on March 27.
15. Artsiom Liava (*Nasha Niva* staff photo correspondent); detained in Minsk around 3 am on March 24 and sentenced to 15 days in jail on the same day.
16. Vital Vasilkou (*Deutsche Welle*, Mahileu); sentenced to 7 days in jail on March 23.
17. Aliaksei Salej (Pahonia Internet Site, Hrodna); detained in Hrodna on March 24, sentenced to 6 days in jail on March 27.
18. Valery Shchukin (*Narodnaya Volya*, Viciebsk); sentenced to 7 days in jail on March 17, released on March 23, detained again on March 24.
19. Sviatlana Stankevich (freelance journalist, Smarhon); sentenced to 8 days in jail on March 27, 2006.
20. Darja Kastenka (freelance, cooperates with the *Asvieta i Adukacyja* magazine); detained in Minsk around 3 am on March 24, sentenced to 10 days in jail on March 27.

Released from jail:

21. Andrej Shantarovich (*Miestnaya Gazieta*, Vaukavysk); sentenced to 3 days in jail on March 18.
22. Siarhej Niarouny (*Volny Horad*, Krychau); sentenced to 3 days in jail on March 18.
23. Mikalaj Gierdziy (*Volny Horad*, Krychau); sentenced to 2 days in jail on March 18.

Fined:

24. Volha Dziemchanka (*Odnako* newspaper, Minsk); fined 20 times the minimum wage (\$290) on March 21.

25. Alena Lukashevich (a freelance correspondent); detained on March 23 and fined twice the minimum wage.
26. Iryna Laurouskaya (*Brestski Courier*); fined twice the minimum wage in Minsk on March 23.
27. Tatsiana Snitko (*Nasha Niva* freelance correspondent); detained in Minsk around 3 am on March 24 and fined 30 times the minimum wage.

Detained foreign journalists working in Belarus:

28. Andrij Lubka (*Karpatski Holos*, Ukraine); sentenced to 15 days in jail on March 22.
29. Dzmitry Hurnevich (Radio Polonia, Poland); sentenced to 10 days in jail on March 21.
30. Frederic Levoi (Canadian freelance journalist for *La Presse*, worked without official accreditation); detained in Kastychnitskaya Square in Minsk around 3 am on March 24 and sentenced to 15 days in jail on March 27.
31. Nino Giorgabiani (Public TV of Georgia); arrested near the Police Prison in Akrescin Street in Minsk on March 24, sentenced to 5 days in jail on March 27, released on March 30.
32. Georg Lagidze (Public TV of Georgia); arrested near the Police Prison in Akrescin Street in Minsk on March 24 and sentenced to 15 days in jail on March 27.
33. Aleksandr Podrabinek (Prima-News Human Rights Information Agency, Russia); arrested in Kastychnitskaya Square in Minsk and sentenced to 15 days in jail on March 27.
34. Loren Milo (*Liberation* newspaper correspondent, France); detained in the evening on March 24 and released some time later.
35. Pavel Sharemet (The First Channel, Russia); detained and beaten up March 25, after being taken to hospital he was urged to leave Belarus within 48 hours.
36. Wieronika Samolinska (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland); detained in Minsk around 3 am on March 24 and sentenced to 10 days in jail.
37. Aleh Kazlouski (*Pravoye Delo* periodical, Russia); sentenced to 15 days in jail on March 27.
38. Eduard Glezin (*Pravoye Delo* periodical, Russia); sentenced to 15 days in jail on March 27.
39. Pavel Salyha (freelance, Ukraine); sentenced to 10 days in jail on March 27.

Released without charge:

40. Siarzhuk Sierabro (*Vitsiebski Courier*, Vitsiebsk); the only case so far in which a judge decided to release a journalist and acknowledged that they had been carrying out professional duties.
41. Iryna Charniuka (www.euramost.org News Internet Site, Hrodna); detained on March 24 but released some time later.

Appendix 3. Circulation of national newspapers

Name	Pub'd	Ownership	Total circulation	Subscribers - via Belsoiuzpechat' -	Kiosk sales
<i>Sovetskaia Belarus</i>	Daily	State (presidential admin.)	410,200	Yes	Yes
<i>Respublika</i>	Daily	State (cab. of ministers)	49,300	Yes	Yes
<i>Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi</i>	Daily	Private (Russian)	47-49,000	Yes	Yes
<i>Argumenty I Fakti v Belarusi</i>	Wkly	Private (Russian)	170,000	Yes	Yes
<i>Trud</i>	Wkly	Private (Russian)	42,000	Yes	Yes
<i>Znamia iunosti</i>	Wkly	State	33,300	Yes	Yes
<i>7 dnei</i>	Wkly	State	31,900	Yes	Yes
<i>Belorusskoi nivy</i>	Wkly	State	30,000	Yes	Yes
<i>Narodnaia volya</i>	Wkly	Private	27,000	NL	NL
<i>Narodnaia gazeta</i>	3x wk	State	25,000	Yes	Yes
<i>BelGazeta</i>	Wkly	Private	20,020	Yes	Yes
<i>Sv. novosti plius</i>	Wkly	Private	14,000	No	Yes
<i>Belorussy i rynok</i>	Wkly	Private	11,000	Yes	Yes
<i>Tovarishch</i>	Wkly	Private	10,000	NL	NL
<i>Ekspress novosti</i>	Wkly	Private	7200	Yes	Yes
<i>Zgoda</i>	Wkly	Private	5050 until closure 3.06	NL	NL
<i>Bel. delov. gazeta</i>	Wkly	Private	5000 until closure 3.06	NL	NL
<i>Nasha nyva</i>	Wkly	Private	2600-3500	NL	NL
<i>Salidarnasts</i>	Wkly	Private	Temporarily suspended its print version in 2005		

NL = not licenced

Source: Ministry of Information (for state-owned newspapers), BAJ (for privately-owned newspapers).

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