



International Federation of Journalists



BELARUS: The Struggle for Press Freedom

1. A Brief Introduction to Belarus

Widely regarded as the last true dictatorship in Europe, Belarus has been run by President Alexander Lukashenka since 1994.

Belarus is bordered to the north by Latvia and Lithuania, to the east by Russia, to the south by Ukraine, and to the west by Poland. A declining population of less than 10 million inhabits its 207,595 square kilometres.

Absorbed into the Russian Empire in the middle of the 19th century, Belarus declared itself a republic in 1918 before becoming part of the Soviet Union in 1922. Its current borders were established after World War II when Belarus was occupied by the Nazis from 1941-44 and over 2 million of its people, including most of the Jewish population, perished.

Belarus achieved independence from the Soviet Union on 25 August 1991. However it retained closer political and economic ties to Russia than any of the other former Soviet republics.

Having enjoyed steady growth during the post-war period it faced economic collapse following the break up of the Soviet Union. After a brief period of economic liberalization, Lukashenka, standing on an anti-corruption platform, became President in 1994. His election was to signal a return to authoritarian rule.

Today, freedom of speech and the press is heavily restricted, opponents of the regime face harsh penalties, and the State Security Committee (KGB) exerts a stranglehold over all aspects of society.

Lukashenka modified the Constitution to extend his first term until 2001, and again in

2004 to allow him to stand for a third term. International observers have consistently raised doubts about the validity of Belarus elections, and many opposition candidates were disbarred from standing in the flawed Presidential elections of March 2006.

Widespread protests about the outcome, including the creation of a 'tent city' in the capital Minsk, were crushed.

Under the policy of 'market socialism' Lukashenka has reversed privatisation and imposed controls on prices and currency rates. Although the economy has grown and trade with European countries has increased, there is minimal foreign investment and the private sector is virtually non-existent. In 2005 unemployment was officially listed at only 1.6% of a workforce of 4.3 million.

Agricultural land has suffered from soil pollution, from pesticide pollution, and southern Belarus was contaminated with fallout from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986.

A considerable proportion of Russian oil and gas exports to Europe pass through Belarus which remains heavily dependent on Russia to meet its own energy needs. Tensions between the countries rose in 2006 when Moscow threatened to cut gas supply until Lukashenka agreed to a deal more than doubling the price. Relations deteriorated further when Russia again flexed its economic muscle by temporarily cutting supply along the pipeline in a row over oil exports and related tax rates.

2. Journalism Under Lukashenka

During the 1994 Presidential election campaign Lukashenka promised journalists that he intended to¹:

- abolish the state monopoly of the media;
- end political censorship and the persecution of journalists;
- ensure decent working conditions for all, and
- encourage creative work, the free flow of information and protection from political pressure

After his victory journalists did not have to wait long to discover his true intentions.

In December 1994 three newspapers ran blank pages when an article critical of the regime, by MP Siarhei Antonchyk was censored. Lukashenko responded by dismissing the three editors in chief² and closing down the independent 'Channel 8' TV.

Between April and July 1995 five popular TV programmes, dealing with social and political

issues, produced by the "Politics" studio, were also closed.

Meanwhile Lukashenka's statements about the media changed dramatically: *"If a newspaper commits a tiny indiscretion, it will be closed,"* he announced during his speech at a Plenary Session of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus (the Parliament) on 21 March 1995. Within a year of his election, Alexander Lukashenka declared in a TV speech³ that *"the time limit"* for independent mass communication media *"has (been) exhausted."*

Newspapers considered the tribunes of free speech in the first years of Belarusian independence were shut by the state authorities - *Svaboda* (1997), *Naviny* (1999), and *Pahonia* (2001). In 2002 *Nasha Svaboda* was fined US\$ 56,000 and forced to cease publication, and journalists Pavel Mazhejka, Mikalaj Markevich and Viktor Ivashkevich were jailed for libeling the President.

Since January 2006 almost all non-state newspapers have been excluded from the state monopoly distribution system. Surviving titles have had to risk breaching the law by establishing their own distribution networks made more difficult when retail outlets are regularly checked for signing contracts with independent newspapers.

Pressure from the authorities has persuaded both state-owned and private printing houses to refuse contracts with independent publications. Since 2005, seven of the leading independent newspapers have had to be printed across the Russian border in Smolensk, adding to the cost of production. Delivery lorries have been detained and editions confiscated.

Since 2006 publications have been forced to re-register their official addresses allowing local authorities to turn down the applications for 'technical' reasons. The oldest independent

¹ Ref.: Vieranika Charkasava "People Never Lie As Often As Before Elections", 20.10.2006. http://www.gazetaby.com/index.php?sn_nid=3255&sn_cat=46

² Ihar Asinski (*Sovietskaya Belorussiya*), Josif Syaredzich (*Narodnaya Gazeta*), and Mikhail Katyushenka (*Znamy Yunosti*)

³ (Ref.: Vieranika Charkasava "People Never Lie As Often As Before Elections", 20.10.2006





“Mass media is a means of propaganda and ideological struggle. Privatising ideology will not be permitted.”

– President Lukashenka, March 2005, addressing heads of the executive

Belarusian-language newspaper *Nasha Niva* was refused a legal address during its centenary year because its Editor had been arrested during the Presidential election campaign.

Closure of independent media often takes place on the eve of important political campaigns, notably the 2004 Parliamentary and 2006 Presidential election campaigns.

No more than two dozen registered non-state social and political periodicals exist in Belarus today. The majority are regional newspapers. Lack of resources has prevented the appearance of many registered publications, and those that do appear must censor themselves to avoid problems with the authorities.

The situation for electronic media is no better. Lukashenka has declared variously:

“TV is a serious force. It will be always controlled by the state” (10.10.2001);

“An information war has been unleashed against our state...” (30.09.2005);

“...taking into account the current conditions, it is necessary to increase the efficiency of actions, directed at ensuring security in the information field first of all.” (30.09.2005) etc.

⁴ See www.mininform.gov.by

⁵ Eg. Radio Liberty, European Radio for Belarus, Radio Racyja.

In September 1994, Presidential Ordinance 128 put the Belarusian State TV and Radio Company under direct Presidential control enabling Lukashenka to appoint the directors of the four national TV channels.

State media dominate with 157 state broadcasters compared to only 51 non-state broadcasters according to Ministry of Information statistics.

Most commercial FM-stations are co-founded by the state including, Alpha-Radio (Ministry of Information); Radius-FM (National State TV & Radio Company); Unistar (Belarusian State University). Even those formally outside the state system are heavily controlled. Every FM broadcaster submits news bulletins to the Ministry of Information for approval. The Ministry issued 18 warnings to TV and radio companies for failures to stick to their brief during 2005.⁴

Music broadcasts are also restricted. Belarusian groups that performed at a street concert with opposition politicians during the 2004 parliamentary elections have effectively been banned ever since.

Access to non-censored radio stations from abroad⁵ is limited to those who can pick up broadcasts on short or long-wave.

The only easy access to uncensored information is through the Internet, but as the only Internet service provider, Beltelecom, is state owned, it is relatively easy for the authorities to block access, as has happened during all major political campaigns of recent years. Internet cafes have to register the domain names of sites visited by their clients and submit them to the KGB upon request.

State media outlets are propagandist. News programmes ignore ethical standards, presenters routinely insult anyone associated with opposition movements; they defame foreign diplomats and public complaints are ignored.

The Executive is able to mould public opinion and control access to information, a process co-ordinated by the Presidential Administration and the Security Council. This media policy is well resourced. In 2005, US\$40.81 million of the state budget went to the print sector alone.

3. The Belarussian Association of Journalists: History and Mission

The Belarussian Association of Journalists (BAJ) was founded in 1995, one year after Lukashenka came to power, to defend journalists' professional rights and the public's constitutional right to receive objective and accurate information.

The first BAJ Constitution declared that the organization's energies would be directed primarily at defending the legal, political, social and economic rights, freedoms and interests of journalists and editorial teams.

The BAJ central office is in Minsk, supported by six regional branches. It has more than 1,100 members working for a wide variety of mostly private media, however it also has a significant number of members in the state media.

BAJ has been affiliated with the International Federation of Journalists since 1997. In 2003 when it was awarded the Golden Pen of Freedom prize by the World Association of Newspapers and in 2004 the European Parliament honoured BAJ with the prestigious Andrei Sakharov Prize, awarded annually since 1988 for "achievements in the defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in safeguarding the rights of minorities, respect for international law and development of democracy and implementation of the rule of law."

BAJ is a unique and leading source of information for journalists around the world on the state of Belarussian media. Campaigns, electronic bulletins, alerts and publications are all stored on the BAJ website (www.baj.by) and distributed electronically to an extensive network of individuals and partners in Belarus and abroad.⁶

BAJ STANDS FOR:

- The defence of journalists' rights;
- The public's right to receive and impart information free of interference and censorship;
- Solidarity between journalists in defence of their professional rights;
- Equal economic, legal and social conditions for state and non-state media outlets;
- High journalistic standards;
- Capacity building and training through conferences, workshops and study-visits; and
- International solidarity with media colleagues.



⁶ In 2005 Google recorded 24,000 references to BAJ, while Rambler (www.rambler.ru) recorded over 27000 documents referencing BAJ in the same year. There were around 334,000 'hits' on documents related to BAJ in 2006.

A network of BAJ correspondents has been monitoring violations of freedom of expression and media since 1998.

... This is a key campaigning tool for activists for generating support nationally and abroad.

ABAJOUR

Since 2000 BAJ has been publishing a professional magazine *Abajour*, with articles about the role and purpose of mass media in society, professional duties and responsibilities, journalistic ethics, and the problems faced in the collection and distribution of information.

BAJ also published the Belarusian-Russian *Media-expert* magazine for several years, in cooperation with the Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations (Russia). It promoted international standards of journalistic activity and offered an independent overview of the situation of media in Belarus and Russia.



Legal Defence of Journalists Rights

BAJ provides legal services to members through its **Law Centre for Media Protection**. The team of media law specialists provides daily advice to members and takes up key legal cases with a success rate of more than 50% — often reducing punishments imposed by the courts.

The Centre organises regular workshops on legal issues and drafts alternative media bills that, if implemented, would bring Belarusian law in line with international standards.

Monitoring Violations of Freedom of Expression

A network of BAJ correspondents has been monitoring violations of freedom of expression and media since 1998. The **BAJ Monitoring Service** distributes the results. This is a key campaigning tool for activists for generating support nationally and abroad.

Election coverage

In 2004, 2006 and 2007 journalists from across Belarus conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses of election coverage in the state and non-state media, measuring the amount of time devoted to topics and the manner of presentation. Analysis of this data was published at fortnightly press-conferences and posted on the BAJ site in three languages.

Training

BAJ places great importance on the delivery of professional training for journalists, and has organised extensive training programmes for BAJ members in partnership with a range of international partners.

BAJ was founded by Zhanna Litvina, a leading journalist, who more than a decade later remains at the helm of BAJ and the struggle for journalistic freedoms in Belarus.

Zhanna Litvina, BAJ Chairperson

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Zhanna Litvina began her journalistic career at the Belarusian State TV and Radio in 1976. She was Editor-in-chief of the *Belaruskaya Maladziozhnaya* radio station from 1985 until 1994, when it was closed by the authorities on the pretext of “structural reorganization.” She worked as Minsk Bureau Chief of Radio Liberty’s Belarusian Service for several years (1994 – 1999), and was a founder of 101.2 FM, the only independent Belarusian-language FM radio station. It was permitted to broadcast its programs for only one year (1995-1996). She later founded and led Radio Racyja, a station that transmitted to Belarus from abroad for several years.

“A journalist can be deprived of access to information, official accreditation, fined or even left without work through the administrative closure of a media outlet. **However, a journalist cannot be deprived of their profession, by keeping to the truth.**”

– Zhanna Litvina

4. Campaigns in Support of Journalists

Assassinations

BAJ is part of the global campaign to end impunity for the murderers of journalists. In Belarus they are committed to discovering the truth about two colleagues murdered since 2000 — Dmitry Zavadsk and Vieranika Charkasava.

Dzmitry Zavadski, a camera operator for ORT TV (Russia), disappeared without trace on 7 July 2000. He had gone to the Minsk-2 airport to meet his colleague Pavel Sheremiet. His empty car was found by Sheremiet in the airport car park.

A group of 4 men, including Valery Ignatovich (a former head of Almaz special police group), Maksim Malik (a former riot police officer), Alaksei Huz and Siarjei Saushkin (former cadets of the Belarus' Police Academy at the Ministry of Interior) were later found guilty by Minsk Regional Court of *kidnapping* Dzmitry Zavadski. Two were sentenced to life imprisonment, while others received lesser jail sentences. The court believed Zavadski was kidnapped in revenge for having accused Ignatovich of fighting in partisan troops during the Chechen War.

However nobody has yet been found guilty of the murder of the missing journalist despite being legally acknowledged as dead on 27 November 2003. The Public Prosecutor has resumed and suspended investigations several times, with no results.

BAJ commemorates Dzmitry Zavadski, by continuing to pressure the authorities and by helping to organise demonstrations and symbolic events such as a gathering in Kurapaty forest — the site of mass executions during the Stalinist era — near Minsk in 2005. Every October BAJ helps to organise a 'Chain of Concerned People' in Minsk which repeatedly ends with the forced dispersal of participants.

In co-operation with the First TV Channel (Russia) BAJ presents annual Dmitry Zavadski Memorial Awards "For Courage and Professionalism" to the outstandingly brave Belarusian journalists.

Vieranika Charkasava, a journalist from the independent newspaper *Salidarnasc* was murdered in her private apartment in Minsk on 20 October 2004. Her body, covered in dozens of knife wounds, was found by her 15-year-old son Anton Filimonau and stepfather Uladzimir Mialeshka. In November 2004 both the stepfather and son were declared suspects and investigated before the case against them was dropped due to lack of evidence. This failure to prosecute the son did not prevent the authorities from convicting him of forgery in 2006 on what many believe to have been trumped up charges.

No other suspects have since emerged. At the end of December 2005 the preliminary investigation was suspended, resumed and suspended again in March 2006.

An independent investigation by volunteers from the Journalist Investigations Agency (JIA), created by BAJ in 2003, produced quite different findings. The JIA report *Fear as a Good Reason or Who Murdered Vieranika Charkasava?* concluded that there was plenty of evidence to suggest she was murdered by a professional killer and probably for her journalism. She had, for example, been investigating alleged links between Belarus Infobank and illegal military exports to Iraq, in the months prior to her murder.

BAJ has made repeated demands for the Public Prosecutor to publish information about the investigation, and continues to monitor the case. BAJ has held several press-conferences with her relatives and helped in the production of *Red on White* collection



From left: V. Charkasava; Dmitry Zavadski's family; and Honorary Diploma Award Ceremony, Hrodna, May 2005. All images ©BAJ.

of Vieranika Charkasava's best articles, published on 8 September 2005, International Solidarity Day of Journalists.

Campaigns in Support of Independent Journalists

BAJ regularly organizes demonstrations, celebrations and a wide variety of solidarity actions to draw attention to attacks on media. Events are organized around key dates such as International Solidarity Day for Journalists (8 September) or World Press Freedom Day (3 May). Here are some examples from recent years:

Non-Governmental Press Festivals: In 2000 and 2001, when quite a large number of officially registered non-state publications still existed, BAJ organized press festivals for hundreds of its members, attracting representatives of NGOs and political parties. The festivals included special exhibitions and the awarding of BAJ honorary diplomas *For Fidelity to the Trade*. Journalists who had contributed biased articles to their publications were awarded a special 'anti-diploma' — 'The Honour of the Black Kite'.

On 19 September 2003 BAJ held 'The Day of Closed Newspapers' as a gesture of solidarity with persecuted journalists and media outlets. BAJ produced posters and articles under *The Open Newspaper* logo on the media crisis and lists of media under pressure for publishing. This 'universal' publication symbolized the readiness of Belarusian journalists to fight for their

professional rights. Articles appeared in more than a dozen nation-wide and regional publications and several media outlets published short announcements on the eve of the action. A photo exhibition was also prepared for the event.

More than 100 Belarusian non-governmental media representatives, politicians, civil activists, human rights defenders, heads of Minsk-located diplomatic missions, and foreign journalists took part, ensuring the 'Day of Closed Newspapers' was covered by dozens of Belarusian and foreign media.

On 3 May 2005, under the banner *Hrodna zone: A Territory of Risk for Independent Journalists*, BAJ organized support to journalists around the city of Hrodna. A BAJ delegation toured local media presenting Hrodna journalists with the BAJ diploma 'For Fidelity to the Trade'. Alena Raubietskaya, Editor-in-chief of *Birzha Informacyi* was presented with the Ihar Hermianchuk honorary diploma 'For Adherence to the Freedom of Speech Principles', an award founded by the Norwegian PEN Centre and the Human Rights House in honour of the celebrated Belarusian journalist and Editor-in-chief of *Svaboda*.

When the state monopoly distributors Belposhta and Belsayuzdruk terminated contracts with independent publications at the end of 2005, BAJ mobilised international protests and hosted a meeting with editors of the excluded papers to develop alternative publishing and distribution systems.

5. Campaigns for Legislative Reform

The Media Law

A new Belarusian Media Law has been under preparation since 2001 when the government initially agreed to present it to experts at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. This however never happened, and the drafting has gone on behind closed doors ever since.

In October 2003, Lukashenka told at a closed meeting of state officials and state media representatives that *“the new law has to ensure freedom of speech instead of ensuring freedom of libel.”* It was *“to guard the interests of the society and the personality instead of serving interests of some narrow professional corporation.”*

BAJ obtained a copy and prepared an alternative version with the assistance of international experts. This was sent to the Parliament in autumn 2003, but the revised draft law was not discussed by the Chamber of Representatives during the next four years. Meanwhile BAJ organized a public debate on the draft media bill and is ready to resubmit its proposals if the new media law is returned to parliament.

BAJ Petition for repeal of Defamation from the Criminal Code

Following prosecutions brought against Mikalaj Markevich and Pavel Mazhejka, journalists with *Pahonia* (Hrodna) and Viktor Ivashkevich, editor-in-chief of *Rabochy* (Minsk) in 2002, BAJ launched a campaign to remove Articles 367-9 of the Criminal Code which make it a criminal offence to defame the President and state officials.

More than two dozen national and regional independent newspapers published BAJ's public appeal inviting readers to sign a petition. Further support was received from the Advisory Board of Oppositional Political Parties in Belarus, several members of the European parliament, and the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* that gathered over 1.500 signatures handed them over to the Embassy of Belarus in Poland.

BAJ finally collected more than 7,000 signatures during its campaign, but failed in its bid to get the Parliament to debate the issue.

BAJ did however succeed in getting the Constitutional Court to write to the Parliament asking for more precise definition of the articles. BAJ understands that it also recommended that critical comments about state officials, unconnected to false or potentially defamatory statements, should not be considered a crime.

BAJ Campaign for Repeal of Amendments to the Criminal Code

On 23 November 2005, the President submitted to Parliament an urgent proposal for changes in the Criminal and the Criminal Procedure Codes.

On 2 December 2005, only 4 MPs voted against the amendments which made it a crime to act on behalf of an unregistered NGO or foundations, and to train people to take part in mass riots or provide funds for such actions. Appeals to foreign states, foreign or international organizations to implement



Territory of Belarusian Independent Press, October Square, March 2006.

action that might harm national security, sovereignty or territorial integrity, as well as distribution of materials that contain such appeals, were made punishable by up to three years' imprisonment. This would increase to five years if the appeals were disseminated through mass media.

A new crime was also introduced, making it an offence punishable by up to two years' imprisonment to knowingly present "false information about the political, economic, social, military or international situation in the

Republic of Belarus as well as the legal status of citizens of the Republic of Belarus and its authorities to a foreign state or a foreign / international organization."

In December 2005 BAJ appealed to the Soviet of the Republic of the National Assembly, (upper chamber of Parliament), asking them to reject the draft law, and urged the Constitutional Court to consider whether this new Article complied with the Constitution and the international legal obligations of the Republic.

6. The 2006 Election

Campaigns in support of detained journalists

There were numerous violations of journalists' rights during the presidential election campaign of 2006. A number of Belarusian and foreign journalists were detained and arrested while covering mass street actions after the election. More than 50 journalists were detained or beaten by the police. Many were sentenced to 15 days in custody.

Those prosecuted included representatives of American, Belarusian, Canadian, French, Georgian, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian media outlets.

BAJ published a constantly updated list of detained journalists, details of arrests, court decisions and the places of detention, making them available to independent Belarusian and foreign media. BAJ also arranged for food to reach the detained correspondents.

BAJ made appeals for their release to the Prosecutor General of Belarus and the Minister of Internal Affairs, urging them to prosecute those who beat journalists and prevented them from carrying out their professional duties, ensure that such behaviour would be banned in future events, and called on the authorities to train police and the special internal troops on Belarusian laws that give journalists the right to be present at and report from socially important events.

On 24 March 2006, BAJ sent protests to local and city officials in Minsk asking them to stop violations of journalist rights, urgently provide information about the location of detained people, guarantee unhampered receipt of parcels to arrested people and prosecute those who abused the rights of those arrested or detained.

Despite the appeals and a broad media campaign, all the journalists convicted completed their terms behind bars.



A French journalist is detained during protests after the Presidential elections, October Square, Minsk March 2006.



"Posidelki-2006" journalists gathering in a forest near Minsk.

Once released, BAJ arranged an informal gathering, "Posidelki-2006," in a forest near Minsk on 17 April 2006, to demonstrate solidarity and express gratitude to their colleagues. More than two dozen journalists from the Belarusian regions participated and the event was widely covered in the Belarusian media.

Monitoring Election Coverage

BAJ conducts detailed monitoring of media output during the election campaigns to assist journalists to reflect upon the quality of their work based on firm facts and figures.

The results of the 2006 Presidential election revealed the following:

- the state-owned media failed to ensure equal access to all candidates and presented the current President as the only real candidate;
- journalists' objectivity deteriorated in state media as election day approached
- presenting rival candidates in an increasingly negative light;
- state-owned media worked effectively as propagandists for the President;
- while non-state press sought to provide objective coverage, it was unable to significantly counter the bias of the state-owned media.

President Lukashenka claimed victory with 82.6% of votes cast; his nearest opponent, Alexander Milinkevich was received 6% in a turnout of 92.6%.

However the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), responsible for monitoring the election said the result "was severely flawed due to arbitrary use of state power and restrictions of basic rights." It further condemned harassment and detention of opposition activists, biased media coverage and obstruction of independent monitors.

7. International Relations

From its start BAJ has sought to develop co-operation with international partners believing it to be essential for building a global alliance against oppressive regimes.

BAJ has developed partnerships with:

- International Federation of Journalists
- International Media Support
- Danish Union of Journalists,
- Swedish Helsinki Committee,
- Norwegian Helsinki Committee,
- European Journalism Center ,
- “Article 19” Global Campaign for the Freedom of Speech
- Reporters without Borders,
- Committee to Protect Journalists,
- Lithuanian Union of Journalists,
- Russian Union of Journalists,
- Center for Extreme Journalism
- Glasnost Defense Foundation
- European Mass Media Institute
- Ukrainian Independent Center for Political Research etc.

BAJ works with its partners on both campaigns and educational programmes to improve professional journalist standards — a priority of the organisation.

The FOJO Institute (Sweden), dealing with the advanced journalist studies, has partnered with BAJ for several years on training for Belarusian



From left: BAJ members at a FOJO training course; and WAN Golden Pen awarded to BAJ in 2003.



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Sakharov Prize presentation ceremony December 2004.

“This prize is a signal for us that we aren’t alone in our fight for keeping professional principles and the people’s right to receive unbiased information.”

– Zhanna Litvina

journalists and students and professors from the Journalism Department at the Belarusian State University.

BAJ cooperated with the European Journalism Center (Maastricht) on a two-year educational project for journalists and university professors, with seminars held in partnership with the Lithuanian Union of Journalists in Vilnius, as part of a European Commission funded project on Development of Democratic Media in Belarus. More than 60 training courses were held at the editorial offices of regional media outlets during the period 2001-03.

In cooperation with Friedrich Ebert Foundation, BAJ holds regular seminars for journalists on legal issues in cities across the country.

Significant events during 2003-04

In 2003 the Belarusian Association of Journalists was awarded ‘The Golden Pen of Freedom’ prize by the World Association of Newspapers (WAN). It was only the second time that the prize had been presented to an

organization instead of an individual author. The presentation ceremony took place at the World Newspaper Congress and the World Editors Forum in Dublin (Ireland) in June 2003.

The following year the President of the European Parliament Josep Borrell presented BAJ with the Andrei Sakharov Prize ‘For the Freedom of Speech’ to the Belarusian Association of Journalists at a special ceremony in Strasbourg on 14 December 2004.

In his speech Snr Borrell said: *“Awarding the Sakharov Prize 2004 to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, which fights for freedom of information against the attempts by President Lukashenka to smother it, is a very positive event. The results of the latest elections in this country make it clear that those fighting for freedom of information in Belarus and everywhere else in the world deserve our support.”*

In reply BAJ Chairperson Zhanna Litvina expressed sincere gratitude to the European Parliamentarians for their support of the democratic movement in Belarus.

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