

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/belarus-updates-on-media-freedom-07-07-2011,40579.html>

Europe & ex-USSR - Belarus

Journalists hounded

Updates on media freedom violations during protests in Belarus

21 July 2011

Because of the ongoing crisis in Belarus, Reporters Without Borders has decided to provide regular updates on media freedom violations linked to coverage of the peaceful protests that are taking place.

21.07.2011 – Repression continues, but more targeted

A number of journalists were again briefly detained during the “silent protests” that were held in several Belarusian cities for the ninth consecutive Wednesday yesterday.

But the complaints by journalists about police abuses seem to have had some effect. After receiving complaints last week from 30 members of the Belarusian Association of Journalists ([BAJ](#)), attorney-general Ryhor Vasilevich warned the security forces that they could be punished for violating media rights.

As a result, the police were less aggressive, in Minsk at least, and let some journalists do their work, albeit advising them to not to get too close to the demonstrators.

Reporters Without Borders takes note of the relative restraint now being shown by the police, which contrasts with their indiscriminate violence during previous demonstrations. But the repression is continuing, although it is now concentrated on [journalists who lack official accreditation](#) (above all the correspondents of exile media and news websites).

Two journalists were formally arrested while covering the latest protests. One was **Alyaksandra Klimovich** of [Belsat TV](#), an independent station. She was sentenced today in Minsk to 11 days in prison. A colleague, **Mikhas Yanchuk**, told Reporters Without Borders that all the *Belsat* employees covering the protests were briefly detained and some were beaten or their equipment was broken.

The other arrested journalist was **Alyaksandr Zyankou**, a photojournalist working for the [Ex-press.by](#) news website, who was arrested in the Minsk-region town of Barysau. He was sentenced today to 5 days in prison.

The following were also briefly detained:

- ▶ **Alisa Pol**, [Radio Racyja](#)'s correspondent in Brest
- ▶ **Alena Autushka**, an *Ex-press.by* reporter in Barysau
- ▶ **Andrey Lyubenchuk**, a Brest-based freelancer, who was detained after interviewing one of the coordinators of the “Revolution through social networks” campaign. The video tape was seized.

15.07.2011 - Arrests and Internet blocking

Journalists were again targeted by the security forces during the “silent protests” that took place in several Belarusian cities on 13 July. Access to the online social network [Vkontakte](#) was also blocked.

According to the information obtained by Reporters Without Borders and the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), the following 11 media personnel were briefly arrested:

- ▶ **Marya Myalyokhina**, *Yezhednevnik*
- ▶ **Aleh Hruzdzilovich**, *RFE/RL*
- ▶ **Zakhar Shcherbakou**, *BelaPAN*
- ▶ **Pavel Padabed**, *BelaPAN*
- ▶ **Pavel Mitskevich**, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii*
- ▶ **Larissa Chirakova**, a freelancer
- ▶ **Tatsyana Huseva**, *Info-Kuryer*
- ▶ **Alyaksandr Muzhdabalyau**, *Ximix.info*
- ▶ **Alyaksey Trubkin**, *Radio Racya*. He was fined 700,000 roubles (100 euros) by a court in the northern city of Navapolatsk yesterday after being held overnight.
- ▶ **Ales Sushcheuski**, *Babruiski Rehiyanalny Portal*
- ▶ **Zmitser Lupach**, *Prefekt Info*

Grazhyna Shalkevich of *Radio Racya* has meanwhile been fined 1,050,000 roubles (150 euros) for her coverage of the 6 July demonstration in the western city of Hrodna.

The Russian online social network *Vkontakte*, on which groups such as "Revolution via social networks" have been established, was rendered inaccessible for several hours on 13 July by some Belarusian Internet service providers such as *ByFly*.

Attorney general *Ryhor Vasilevich* wrote to interior minister *Anatol Kulyashou* today asking him to prevent the police from interfering in the work of journalists. The letters was the result of a petition that a group of journalists sent to *Vasilevich* at the beginning of the week.

11.07.2011 - Another journalist convicted

RFE/RL Belarusian service reporter **Mikhal Karnevich**, who was arrested while covering a demonstration in Hrodna on 3 July, was fined 1,050,000 roubles (150 euros) today for "participating in an illegal demonstration." As in other trials in recent days, two policemen testified that they had arrested him although *Karnevich* denied that they were the arresting officers.

"One of the officers said I was marching with the demonstrators and clapping my hands, while the other said he did not remember if he had arrested me but my face seemed familiar to him," *Karnevich* told *Reporters Without Borders*. "He was unable to say what I was wearing, where exactly I was or how he came to write the arrest report."

Karnevich is afraid that the foreign ministry will now withdraw his accreditation and that it will be hard for him to cover future opposition protests for fear of being arrested.

08.07.2011 – Nine journalists sentenced

Nine journalists were convicted yesterday following their arrests during the "silent protests" held on 3 and 6 July.

"We condemn these latest arbitrary convictions and the botched trials that are often based on false testimony by the police," *Reporters Without Borders* said.

- **Yauhen Shapchyts**, *Belsat* (sentenced to 12 days in prison)
- **Ales Asiptsou**, *BelaPAN* (10 days in prison)
- **Syarhey Kavalyou**, freelance cameraman (10 days in prison)
- **Vital Zablotski**, *Talaka* photographer (1,050,000 roubles - 145 euros)
- **Volha Rudnitskaya**, *Belsat* (350,000 roubles - 50 euros)
- **Viktar Maslovich**, *Bobruisky Kuryer*, **Viktar Kashan**, *Bobruisky Kuryer*, **Syarhey Latsinski**, *Babruiski Rehiyanalny Portal* and **Alyaksandr Sushcheuski**, *Babruiski Rehiyanalny Portal* (175,000 roubles - 25 euros)

Mikhal Karnevich's trial has been postponed again, this time until 11 July.

07.07.2011 - Desperate government resorts to unbridled repression

Reporters Without Borders roundly condemns the arrest of at least 25 journalists during the "silent protests" that were held yesterday in Minsk and several other Belarusian cities.

"The almost daily mass arrests of journalists must stop at once," Reporters Without Borders said. "The Lukashenko regime is showing its true face as its political isolation and the country's economic decline accelerate. But the solution is not unbridled repression, which will just exacerbate the tension. The government must heed the international community's attempts to make it see reason."

The detained journalists, most of whom were released after a few hours, work for a wide range of media including *Belgazeta*, *Vecherny Grodno*, *Intex-Press*, *Nasha Niva*, *Bretskaya Gazeta*, *RFE/RL's* Belarusian service, *Tok FM*, *Radio Racyja*, *Evrorado*, the *Tut.by*, *Salidarnasts*, *Yezhednevnik* and *Ximik.info* news websites, the *Interfaks* news agency and Russia's *NTV*.

The journalists who continue to be held are mostly freelancers or reporters working for news websites that the government does not register as news media.

As far as Reporters Without Borders knows, at least five journalists arrested during yesterday's demonstration are still being held by the police pending trial. They are:

- **Syarhey Kavalyu**, freelance cameraman
- **Viktar Maslovich**, *Bobruisky Kuryer*
- **Viktar Kachan**, *Bobruisky Kuryer*
- **Syarhey Latsinski**, *Babruiski Rehiyanalny Portal*
- **Alyksandr Sushcheuski**, *Babruiski Rehiyanalny Portal*

Palina Zhuraulyova of *Vecherny Grodno* was injured at the time of her arrest. She has filed a complaint about the incident.

Reporters Without Borders has been unable to establish the whereabouts of *Belsat*TV reporter **Volha Rudnitskaya**. It is believed she may also be in police custody.

No date has so far been set for the trial of **Ales Asiptsou**, who has detained since 3 July. The trial of *RFE/RL* reporter **Mikhal Karnevich** is scheduled to take place later today.

06.07.2011 - Journalists get prison sentences terms for covering peaceful protests

At least five journalists have been given sentences ranging from three to 12 days in prison for covering the "silent protests" that were staged in many Belarusian cities on 3 July.

"The sole purpose of these jail sentences is to obstruct news coverage of the protests and to intimidate journalists who might be tempted to cover the next demonstrations," Reporters Without Borders said. "Journalists have been systematically targeted since the start of the revolution via online social networks in June.

"Previously, detained journalists were released after a few hours. These sentences show that the authorities are now cracking down more severely on the media. We urge the Belarusian government to allow journalists to work without risk of being beaten or thrown in prison."

The following four journalists who had been present at the demonstration in Hrodna were given jail sentences on 4 July:

- *Belsat* cameraman **Alyksandr Dzyanisau** (10 days)
- **Yury Gumenyuk**, the correspondent of *Polskie Radio's* Belarusian service (12 days)
- *Belsat* journalists **Andrey Fralu** and **Mikalay Dzychenya** (10 days each).

Hanna Ilyina of the local news website *Gorad* (www.gorad.by) was sentenced to six days in prison on 4 July in Mahilyow. Two other Mahilyow-based journalists – **Mikhail Karnevich**, the correspondent of *RFE/RL's* Belarusian service and *BelaPAN* correspondent **Ales Asiptsu** – have yet to be tried and will probably also get jail terms.

In Homyel, journalists working for the *Silnye Novosti* news website (www.odsgomel.org) reported that the local police were pressuring for its closure. A police officer went to its office on 2 July and attacked editor **Yauhan Suvorau** verbally and physically, accusing him of relaying protest calls.

Reporters Without Borders also deplores a Supreme court decision upholding [an information ministry warning to the independent newspaper *Narodnaya Volya*](#), which paves the way for its closure.

04.07.2011 - Journalists and netizens harassed during peaceful protests

At least 15 journalists were briefly detained during peaceful Independence Day protests throughout Belarus yesterday. In all, 300 to 400 people were arrested. A great deal of force was used by members of the security forces, many of them in plain clothes, to disperse protesters, who clapped and sang songs to express their discontent.



Tear gas was used in Minsk against journalists who filmed and photographed what was happening. Following the same strategy adopted since the start of the anti-government demonstrations, the authorities staged concerts in several cities in order to occupy the main squares and deny access to the protesters.

"Realizing the threat posed by use of the Internet to organize demonstrations, President Lukashenko's regime is waging an all-out information war. More and more journalists covering protests are being arrested and the authorities are now directly targeting online social networks. The international community should keep reminding the government that journalists must be allowed to work and the [Internet must be free](#) for everyone to use."

A police officer snatched reporter **Halina Abakunchyk**'s camera but Abakunchyk, who works for the Belarusian service of *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, was able to recover it. Journalists arrested in Minsk, Hrodna, Homyel and Mahilyow included the correspondents of *Evrorado*, *BelSat*, *Belorusy i Rynok*, *BelaPAN*, *Nasha Niva*, the Polish radio station *TOK FM* and the local newspaper *Motsnyia Naviny*.

Most of them were released within a few hours but some were due to be tried today, including **Yury Gumenyuk** and *RFE/RL* correspondent **Mikhail Karnevich** in Hrodna, *BelaPAN* journalist **Ales Asipsou** in Mahilyow.

Alyaksandr Dzyanisau was sentenced to 10 days in prison in Hrodna today, as was **Ihar Bantsar** for organizing an illegal protest against the trial of *Gazeta Wyborcza* correspondent **Andrey Pachobut**. *Belsat* cameraman **Syarhey Kavalyou** was arrested inside a courthouse today while covering the trial of colleagues arrested yesterday. It is not yet known whether he will be released or whether he will be detained and brought to trial.

The authorities took care to restrict the number of foreign reporters likely to cover the protests. A *BBC TV* crew that was supposed to go to Minsk to cover the Independence Day festivities had its visas cancelled at the last moment. The visas had already been issued and the journalists had obtained the necessary accreditation.

Reporters **Nick Sturdee** and **Lucy Ash** were notified of the withdrawal of their visas when they contacted the president's office for permission to film the 3 July military parade. "I can only imagine why the decision was taken to prevent us from entering the country," Sturdee told Reporters Without Borders. "But inasmuch as there was no (...) complaint about our previous reports, the logical explanation is that they want to restrict coverage of the current situation."



"Revolution via the social networks," relayed on Twitter and the Russian-language equivalent of Facebook, V Kontakte, has been spreading fast in the past few weeks. "Silent protests" without slogans and banners were held in about 30 cities yesterday, following those held on 15, 22 and 29 June.

At least nine journalists were arrested during the 22 June demonstrations. Two of them, Minsk based **Aleh Hruzdilovich** (*RFE/RL*) and Lida-based **Syarhey Karpenka** (*BelSat*), were beaten. At least 13 journalists were arrested on 29 June, two were beaten and at least two cameramen had equipment smashed.

The authorities have gone on the offensive on the Internet. The "Revolution via the social networks" group, which had 216,000 members, was closed by V Kontakte on 3 July, and re-opened today. In the meanwhile, the group re-formed at a [new address](#) but it only had 11,000

participants. The website of *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty's* Belarusian service was yesterday the target of a Distributed Denial of Service attack that rendered it inaccessible for several hours.

The hashtag [#2206v1900](#), launched for the 22 June demonstrations, meanwhile continues to be widely used for posting information about the protests.

Along the lines of the Chinese government's invitations to dissidents to "take some tea," some Belarusian Internet users have been invited to "preventive conversations" with the police in an attempt to persuade them not to take part in the protests. And the online activist Yevgeny Kutsko was fined 700,000 roubles (140 dollars) last week for posting a satirical article about local government politician Andrei Khudyk.



Many bloggers and online media such as [Euroradio.by](#) have nonetheless covered the protests and a lot of videos of the protests have been posted on YouTube.

At the same time as censoring the Internet, the authorities have also tried to use it to intimidate protesters. The interior minister has been using the Twitter account it created in April ([@mvd_by](#)) and the Minsk police department account it subsequently created ([@GUVD_Minsk](#)) to post warnings along the lines of "Anyone going to [...] Square will be held to account."

People trying to connect to Vkontakte have been reportedly redirected by Belarusian Internet service provider BelTelecom to websites containing malware. From early May to early June, at least seven websites were closed at the behest of the police, which was given new prerogatives under a law adopted on 1 March.

(Photo: RFE/RL)
