

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/belarus-imminent-closure-threat-lifted-for-15-07-2011,40135.html>

Europe & ex-USSR - Belarus

Brief respite?

Imminent closure threat lifted for two newspapers but harassment continues

15 July 2011

Reporters Without Borders hails the information ministry's withdrawal of two complaints against the independent dailies *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaya Volya* under which they had been threatened with closure since 25 April (see release below). The complaints were withdrawn during hearings before the Supreme Economic Court on 12 and 13 July.

The move was a "rare example of good sense," *Nasha Niva* editor **Andrei Skurko** said. "The pressure of public opinion on the authorities and the many letters of support from readers undoubtedly had a lot to do with this surprising decision by the Belarusian authorities."

The two newspapers nonetheless continue to be the target of harassment. *Narodnaya Volya* editor **Iosif Syaredzich** said his newspaper could be fined soon for alleged "technical violations" of the media law and both newspapers have received new warnings.

Nasha Niva has received a warning for not showing its registration number in one of its latest issues, and *Narodnaya Volya* has received a warning for getting a date wrong in a recent issue. Both received visits from officials at the start of this week in which they were warned of possible prosecutions leading to fines. Reporters Without Borders will follow these cases closely.

Under article 51 § 2.2 of the media law, the authorities can close a news media that gets more than two warnings from the information ministry in one year. As *Nasha Niva* had received three warnings and *Narodnaya Volya* had received four, the ministry had requested their closure.

28.04.2011 - Two leading independent newspapers threatened with closure

Reporters Without Borders condemns the Information ministry's 25 April request to the Supreme Economic Court to shut down two prominent weekly newspapers, [Nasha Niva](#) and [Narodnaya Volya](#), under article 51, subsection 2.2, of the mass media law. This article says that any media organization can be closed after receiving two warnings from the information ministry in a single year.

"The closure of *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaya Volya* would be an extremely grave decision," Reporters Without Borders said. "The loss of these two major weeklies, representing nearly half the independent national media circulation, would be a fatal blow to the already extremely limited pluralism of the Belarusian press."

The press freedom organization has on several occasions condemned this appalling law, which is used as a major weapon for intimidating the independent media.

The warnings issued under the law are for the most part politically motivated and, as the sanction is not automatic, its application is totally arbitrary. The law was already used to force an independent radio station, *Avtoradio*, [to close in January](#).

This latest request from the information ministry is the logical consequence of the [avalanche of warnings](#) that the independent media have received since the Minsk metro bombing on 11 April.

Before being reprimanded for a third time in April, both newspapers had already received two

warnings in the past year. *Nasha Niva* was targeted for referring to a highly critical documentary about President Alexander Lukashenko by Russia's *NTV*, which was censored in Belarus.

Narodnaya Volya was [criticized](#) over a story about an opposition campaign for Lukashenko's resignation and for "discrediting the Red Army" by publishing an account of childhood experiences during World War II.

Both newspapers have been singled out in a [wider campaign](#) against all independent media in Belarus. *Narodnaya Volya* editor **Iosif Syaredzich** described the warnings as "absurd and far-fetched." He told Reporters Without Borders: "Our newspaper has never called for violence or for any illegal actions."

Nasha Niva editor **Andrey Skurko** said the attacks were proof of "an effort by the authorities to control the flow of information amid growing public concern about social and economic problems." The authorities "want the official view to hold sway in society," he added.

"We call on the judges at the Supreme Economic Court to throw out this iniquitous request, which shows the determination of those in power to finish off the few remaining havens of freedom in the country," Reporters Without Borders said.

However, experts have told the press freedom organization that the two newspapers have little chance of winning their appeal against the information ministry. The vice-president of the [Belarus Association of Journalists \(BAJ\)](#), lawyer **Andrey Bastunets**, said that, since 2004, all warnings received by independent media organizations have been upheld on appeal.

The only exception was *Avtoradio*, which initially won an annulment of the warning only to see it confirmed on a second appeal. Bastunets also pointed out that the verdict would not concern the substance of the issue. "To order the closure of the newspapers, the court simply has to establish that they received at least two warnings in a single year," he said. "Its decision will therefore be purely technical."

This threat of closure of these two leading publications is therefore very serious and opens the way for similar proceedings against other media. *Narodnaya Volya* is the biggest independent newspaper in terms of circulation (50,000 per week). Founded in 1906 and one of the oldest weeklies, *Nasha Niva* has a smaller circulation (between 7,000 and 8,000 per week), but it is seen an authority in the country. Between them, these two publications represent nearly half the circulation of the national independent press (130,000 copies per week).

From the end of 2005 to the end of 2008, the two newspapers were [dropped from official distribution](#) by Belposhta, which handles all newspaper subscription and newsstand sales and is entirely controlled by the authorities.

Small pockets of supervised freedom survived within this post-Soviet autocratic dictatorship for two decades. But since [President Lukashenko's disputed reelection](#) last December, the country seems to have completely cut itself off from its European and Russian neighbours and is sinking into indiscriminate repression.
