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# ***Exiled, but loyal to people: The Belarusian media struggle***

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Almost three years ago, Belarusians protested the rigged presidential election. The protest was noticed by the whole world and led to a strengthening of political competencies and political culture among Belarusians. However, the regime of Aliaksandar Lukashenka was not willing to either organize a free and fair election or to listen to the millions of voices of Belarusian citizens. Instead, the authorities turned to familiar practices of brutal repressions: imprisonments and the forceful deportations of opposition candidates, a crackdown on civil society organizations and independent media, and the violent suppression of any form of activism within the country. While there are many drastic consequences of the repressive course of the Belarusian regime, the media sector, which suffered a serious upheaval, deserves a closer examination.

### **Independent media before the revolution**

The Belarusian political system has rarely been open to freedom of speech and press. Media outlets and the printed press have been censored since the first years of Lukashenka's rule. Journalists were prosecuted, fined, or deprived of accreditation. However, since the digitalization of media, dozens of media outlets have opened across the country, bringing access to quick and qualitative news updates and competition for the state press.

Before 2020, independent media had broad coverage nationwide, access to representatives of political elites, and the opportunity to write about political events. Independent media such as TuT.by, the country's largest and most popular outlet, mostly survived on resources from advertisements. The financial model of an independent media was therefore based on the support of the market. Most of the independent media, with exceptions such as Belsat, which is supported by the Polish government, were officially registered in the country.

Even though the Belarusian regime did not create additional obstacles for the independent media's formal work, some worrying trends were present. For example, there were two Belarusian associations of journalists – one of these belonged to the state and the other was an independent union of journalists. Often, journalists from the independent press were deprived of access to the high-level meetings of the

authorities or were forbidden from ask certain uncomfortable questions. Additionally, state-owned enterprises and businesses were forbidden from purchasing advertisements on the pages or online sites of independent media. Most importantly, none of the independent media was ever allowed to access TV platforms. Therefore, TV broadcasting was free from alternative and unbiased opinions. All the broadcasting was carefully produced with a convenient framing of political events and news nationwide.

Nevertheless, the conditions for independent media before the crackdown in 2020-2021 allowed journalists and media managers to adapt, to find ways to exist, and to continue to cover the news.

### **Exile, re-branding, and new financial models**

With the start of the electoral campaign in Belarus in the summer of 2020, in the context of the media landscape described above, independent media became the only platform for oppositional candidates to voice their proposals and ideas. As a result, the independent media hosted the oppositional campaigns' public content. Following the detention of the oppositional candidates Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Viktar Babaryka, the forceful deportation of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and the active coverage of protest events in August 2020, the independent media sector faced serious challenges from the Belarusian regime. In the first months of the protests, independent media still had a chance to write about the events and physically cover the protests on the streets.

In November 2020, two journalists from Belsat, Katsiaryna Andreeva and Darya Chultsova, were detained while live-streaming from the Square of Change (Ploshcha Peramenau). Both journalists were later charged in criminal cases, and Andreeva still remains in female prison number 4. In May 2021, the Belarusian regime closed the office of TuT.by and detained dozens of the country's largest media employees. This has marked a harsh wave of repression against the Belarusian independent media sector. Searches, detentions, and the closure of media offices nationwide have followed. For now, Belarus occupies 153rd place out of 180 in the Index of Media

Freedom<sup>i</sup>. During 2023 alone, 17 journalists were charged with sentences ranging from 1 year, to 3 years, to 14 years<sup>ii</sup>.

Since the second half of 2021, the Belarusian authorities have adopted a new routine: recognizing unwanted media as extremist. This status has essentially banned the legal operation of these media in the country. In 2022 alone, the authorities recognized over 3,000 online media as extremist<sup>iii</sup>. State repression has had several consequences for the Belarusian independent media in the short term.

Firstly, most media outlets had to relocate to neighboring Poland, Lithuania, or Ukraine. Due to these media outlets and their employees needing to adapt to the legal situation in their new countries, some media outlets temporarily experienced a lack of staff and the rearrangement of the duties and functions. Despite that, many independent media have stood their ground and continued publishing news as usual.

Secondly, the status of “extremists” crystallized a new challenge – preserving their readership. To access the content of “extremist” media from Belarus means facing the physical threat of prosecution or detention. One notorious example is the prosecution of over 200 Belarusians who commented on the murder of Belarusian IT specialist Andrei Zeltser by the secret services<sup>iv</sup>. Hundreds more are prosecuted annually over their comments, likes, and subscriptions to independent media. Fear triggered by the repressions led to a notable decrease in views for independent media content. Independent media continue facing this challenge until today, both due to security concerns among Belarusian residents and presumably to negative news fatigue.

Thirdly, some media have re-branded themselves in relation to their relocation and decreasing readership. For example, the news portal TuT.by is now available under the name Zerkalo. Other media have sought new forms of audience outreach, created YouTube channels, and developed news reporting on TikTok. These new formats allow for broadening their outreach to Belarusians inside the country but possess similar security threats to the readership.

Fourthly, relocation and the “extremist” status have required media outlets to reboot their financial model. While the independent media sector previously received its

funding primarily from advertisement, Belarus's legal ban prevented all businesses from buying ads on "extremist" news webpages. As a result, the media turned to two sources of support: development aid and donations from readers. The international donor community willingly supported independent media teams upon their relocation. However, due to this new form of financial support, many outlets have to comply with donors' requirements and commitments and deliver sensible results. This puts additional pressure on independent media. Besides, support from readers is primarily gathered from the platform Patreon and cannot serve as a long-term solution.

Lastly, the traumatic experiences of the detention of colleagues and relocation to other countries, alongside new news aggregation and dissemination practices, have impacted the mental health of media workers. Many former journalists experienced burnout and left the profession for new apolitical projects or other jobs. This leads to a constant search for new media professionals and the education of new journalists and reporters. Despite these circumstances, Belarusian media workers have opened new YouTube news projects and entertainment shows abroad.

Within the country, state media channels dominate the media sphere. At the same time, some of the media have continued their work. However, this came at the cost of the depoliticization of their content. For example, one of the most famous media platforms, Onliner, continues its coverage but completely avoids any political content. Under the new repressive conditions, some new media, for example Tochka.by, have appeared in the media landscape as well. These also operate according to the framework set by the autocratic regime and provide little coverage of political life.

Despite these challenges, most of the independent media that have relocated have been able to maintain their work abroad.

### **Outlook in the future**

Considering the development and challenges of the Belarusian media sector described above, several developmental tracks may await the Belarusian media sphere. With the restructuring of the financial model of the independent media, Belarusian media may seek additional funding sources. For example, this might include donations from

Belarusians abroad and support from the governments of the countries in which the media reside. Most significantly, Belarusian media outlets risk losing their connection with their readership within the country. With no possibility to work as a journalist for independent media inside the country, the media rely on reports from their readers, limited public statements by regime representatives, and internal sources inside the pro-regime sphere of political elites. Seeking secure and efficient ways to maintain a connection with the audience is yet another task for the media community in exile.

There is hope for the independent media sector – with a change of the political regime, media teams may have a chance to relocate and continue their work from Belarus. So far, under the conditions of an uncertain future, media professionals keep seeking new forms of reporting, shifting to social media such as YouTube or TikTok and launching new media projects such as PlanB, which was recently opened by a former TuT.by employee.

The international donor community should continue supporting independent media with long-term aid for two reasons. Firstly, the consumption of independent reporting makes it possible to provide objective information that is otherwise unavailable to Belarusians. Secondly, genuine reporting keeps Belarusians within the country away from the Russian informational sphere, which is essential during a period of Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Considering the scale of the migration of Belarusians to Poland and Lithuania, Belarusian programs and universities, such as EHU, should invest in educating new media professionals, journalists, and media managers. The international donor community should therefore support the education of young Belarusians, which would provide a long-term impact on the sustainability of media teams. Besides this, support for organizations that provide non-formal educational courses should alleviate the short-term hunger for new professionals among the media.

Finally, the Belarusian journalist community requires a functioning and strong association to protect journalists' rights, including abroad. The Belarusian Association of Journalists, which is recognized as extremist and was shut down by authorities within the country, and other platforms such as Press-club should confidently stand

their ground to provide the necessary aid to Belarusian journalists with assistance from the international community.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Reporters Without Borders. "Index." 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/index>

<sup>ii</sup> Беларускай асацыяцыі журналістаў. "СМІ ў Беларусі ў 2022 годзе [Mass media in Belarus in 2022]." January 20, 2023. <https://baj.by/be/analytics/smi-u-belarusi-u-2022-godze>

<sup>iii</sup> Беларускай асацыяцыі журналістаў. «Наблюдается туркменизация». Эксперты о ситуации с независимой журналистикой в Беларуси. Доклад БАЖ и JFJ ["Turkmenization is observed." Experts on the situation with independent journalism in Belarus. Report by BAJ and JFJ]." June 6, 2023. <https://baj.by/be/analytics/nablyudaetsya-turkmenizaciya-eksperty-o-situacii-s-nezavisimoy-zhurnalistikoy-v-belarusi>

<sup>iv</sup> Вясна. "Дело Зельцера": 114 осужденных, 99 из которых — к лишению свободы ["The Seltzer Case: 114 convicted, 99 of whom were sentenced to imprisonment]." February 16, 2023. <https://spring96.org/ru/news/110804>

