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Freedom Of The Press - Belarus (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 29
Political Environment: 36
Economic Environment: 28
Total Score: 93

Belarus's level of press freedom remained extremely restricted in 2010. The global economic crisis and deteriorating relations with neighboring Russia forced President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to briefly reach out to the European Union. The government continued to repress independent voices but, in an effort to gain Western financial support, temporarily relaxed some restrictions ahead of the fraud-marred December 19 presidential election. When election officials announced that Lukashenka had allegedly received 79 percent of the votes against 9 opposition candidates, securing a fourth presidential term, security forces violently dispersed 10,000 protesters and arrested over 600 protestors as well as 26 journalists. In addition, Lukashenka verbally threatened independent journalists during a press conference the day after the presidential election.

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of the press, criticism of the president and government is considered a criminal offense, and libel convictions can result in prison sentences or high fines. Judges, prosecutors, police officers, and tax officials regularly used politicized court rulings and obscure regulations to harass independent newspapers and websites during the year. On March 16, authorities launched a spurious criminal defamation investigation on behalf of a former regional officer of the KGB security service, Ivan Korzh, against the independent human rights news website Charter 97, the independent newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* and Irina Khalip, the Belarusian correspondent for the Moscow-based independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, using the case to conduct police raids, confiscate computers, and summon journalists for questioning during the rest of the year. Belarusian authorities also revoked the citizenship of Moscow-based Belarusian journalist Pavel Sheremet in March in retaliation for his articles on the independent news website *BelarusPartizan*.

A draconian new media law took effect in 2009, forcing all media to register with the Information Ministry. This made it easier for the government to deny required accreditation and to shutter outlets for coverage that does not "correspond to reality" or that "threatens the interests of the state." The law also allows for penalties against outlets that merely report statements (for example, by political parties or nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]) that "discredit the Republic of Belarus." The Justice Ministry in January and the Supreme Court in March instructed the Belarusian Association of Journalists to stop providing legal assistance to journalists and stop issuing membership cards, the Moscow-based Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations (CJES) reported. Prior to the election, the Foreign Ministry refused to accredit foreign correspondents who had previously criticized Lukashenka—including the Sweden-

based photojournalist Dean Cox; Yevgeny Ogurtsov, a journalist for the Russian state radio station Golos Rossii; and two journalists from the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Throughout the year and particularly during the presidential election campaign, authorities censored criticism of Lukashenka in Russian news programs on Channel One, RTR, and NTV, which were broadcast in retaliation for Lukashenka not joining a Russian customs union and not recognizing two Kremlin-backed secessionist regions in Georgia.

The government subjected both independent and foreign media as well as press freedom activists to systematic political intimidation for reporting on human rights abuses and unauthorized demonstrations. In September 2010, the founder and director of Charter 97, Aleh Byabenin, was found dead in his summer house outside Minsk, and authorities quickly ruled the death a suicide after conducting an incomplete investigation. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a friend of Byabenin's saw unexplained bruises on several parts of the body. On the insistence of friends and relatives, local prosecutors reopened the investigation, but in December they announced that they had found no signs of foul play. Several journalists who wrote articles raising questions about the lack of a credible investigation in the case received death threats that authorities failed to investigate.

During the government's violent post-election crackdown in Minsk's Independence Square, some 20 journalists were beaten and another 26 were arrested, the Belarusian Association of Journalists reported. Ten of those detained journalists received 10 to 15 day prison sentences while 2 others—Natalya Radina, editor of Charter 97, and Irina Khalip, of *Novaya Gazeta*—remained in detention at year's end for suspicion of organizing and participating in public disorder, and faced up to 15 years in prison. In the week after the election, police and security officers raided and confiscated equipment from independent and opposition newspapers such as *Nasha Niva*, as well as foreign media bureaus, including Western-funded, Belarusian-language Belsat television, Radio Racyja, and European Radio for Belarus. Most local independent outlets regularly practice self-censorship, which intensified following the presidential election.

The state maintains a virtual monopoly on domestic broadcast media, which consistently glorifies Lukashenka and vilifies the opposition. Only state media broadcast nationwide, and the content of smaller television and radio stations is tightly restricted. Two weeks before the December 19 presidential election, state television allowed opposition candidates to speak once on state television, while 85 percent of the prime time news coverage was devoted to glorifying Lukashenka, monitors for the Vienna-based Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe reported. Tax exemptions for state media give them a considerable advantage over private outlets. In the print sector, the government has banned most independent and opposition newspapers from being distributed by the state-owned postal and kiosk systems, from being printed by the state printer, and from any access to state advertising contracts or media subsidies. Independent papers are forced to sell directly from their newsrooms and use volunteers to deliver copies, but regional authorities sometimes harass and arrest the private distributors. Some of these restrictions

were partly and briefly relaxed prior to the presidential election—allowing activists to distribute opposition newspapers somewhat freely—but reintroduced during the post-election crackdown.

Although internet access continued to grow, reaching about 31.7 percent in 2010, the government restricted and monitored internet use. A media law that took effect in 2009 requires domestic and international websites to register with the Information Ministry or be blocked, forcing many independent print publications to switch to foreign domain names based in neighboring countries. The state-owned telecommunications company Beltelekom, which is the sole internet service provider (ISP), already controls all international data transfers and blocks some critical websites, while the KGB reportedly monitors internet communications. Charter 97 was hacked throughout the year, which interrupted access to its content, according to local and international press reports. Journalists accused Beltelekom of increasing internet restrictions during the presidential election campaign and the post-election crackdown. Websites like Charter 97, *BelarusPartizan*, *Gazetaby.com*, European Radio of Belarus, and the Belarusian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty sustained multiple denial of service attacks and were blocked on election day; access to social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, as well as Google and Yahoo e-mail services, was also blocked on election day; and readers of independent news websites were redirected to mirror sites that contained progovernment disinformation intended to send protestors to incorrect locations. Since 2007, internet cafe owners have been required to keep records of their customers' identities and the websites they visited, facilitating inspection by the security services. Lukashenka strengthened these provisions with a presidential decree signed in February 2010 that required ISPs to retain data on individuals' internet use for a year and allowed police and security officers to access this information, as well as requiring ISPs to be able to block access to websites within 24 hours when requested by state media regulators.