

CHARTER 97 AND THE SHRINKING SPACE FOR FREE MEDIA IN BELARUS

By **Marina Henrikson**

Independent media in Belarus is experiencing continued difficulties due to President Alexandr Lukashenko's repressive policies. To avoid censorship, a number of independent media outlets, such as the most popular news site Charter 97, have chosen to work from abroad. Although this might give them maneuvering space to go on reporting, it also means that many Belarusian citizens do not have access to a sufficient amount of opposition news. They are mostly reached by media that is either controlled by the Belarusian authorities or news geared from Russia.

Natallia Radzina, editor-in-chief of the news site Charter 97, invited *Baltic Worlds* to their editorial offices in Warsaw, Poland, to discuss the situation for independent Belarusian media.

Charter 97 started as a citizen initiative in 1997 and was directly modeled on Charter 77 – the Czechoslovak initiative that was created in order to demand respect for democracy and human rights in the former Czechoslovakia. Today, Charter 97 is the biggest online news site for Belarusians.

The news site has had its editorial base abroad since 2011. In addition to the staff in Warsaw, it works with correspondents in Vilnius and Brussels, and a number of journalists are working underground from within Belarus.

“Our goal is to advance freedom of speech, human rights, and a Belarus that is free from dictatorship”, says Radzina, when we meet on a sunny day in May 2018.

At first the main editorial office was located in Lithuania, because that was the first country Radzina fled to after the Belarusian authorities conducted a series of harsh crackdowns in connection with the presidential elections in December 2010.

On the evening after the election, about 40,000 people took to the streets in order to highlight what was widely seen as a fraudulent election process leading to Lukashenko's landslide

victory. During the protests a number of unknown persons started breaking windows in the center of the Belarusian capital Minsk, and police and security forces consequently reacted using force, beating and arresting hundreds of people, most of whom were peaceful protesters. In the days following the protests, more arrests took place, and police raided the offices of several human rights organizations and media outlets.

In connection with these developments, Radzina was arrested and put into custody, along with other media personalities such as Belarusian journalist and editor Iryna Khalip, who works for the Minsk bureau of *Novaya Gazeta*. Khalip is the wife of the former presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov who was himself arrested in connection with the elections.¹

Radzina consequently fled the country and continued the work of Charter 97 from Lithuania. In 2011 the news outlet moved its main office to Warsaw after having been invited by the Polish government to work from Poland.

Blocking a popular website

According to Radzina, the news site's reader numbers have grown sevenfold since they started operating from abroad.

“It is probably because we work freely and without state censorship or self-censorship. Charter 97 is more popular than all other Belarusian independent media sites, as well as all government sites. In Belarus there are about 9.5 million people, and in the last six months we had 4 million independent users from Belarus”.

The Belarusian authorities have tried to shut down the news site over the years, Radzina states. At the end of January of this year, the authorities blocked internet access for users of the website, thereby limiting the number of readers in Belarus. The site has been blocked for periods in the past as well.



Left: Natalia Radzina believes that the international community must do more for independent media in Belarus.



Right: Julia Bandarenka, director at Charter 97. Her father, Dzmitry Bandarenka, coordinator for the "European Belarus" campaign, was arrested during the government crack-downs in connection with the presidential election in 2010.

"The authorities realize they can't control us and influence our work, and that is also why we are blocked. They have been fighting us for over 20 years now".

The official reason for blocking the site was that it was claimed to pose a threat to Belarusian national security. However, the maneuver appears to have failed in its goal to fend off all readers. A large number of Belarusian Internet users manage to work around the blockade anyway by using different computer programs.

Martin Uggla, chairman of Östgruppen (Swedish Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights), says that it is certainly possible for readers of Charter 97 to work around the Internet blockade – if you are a determined reader/user. Although it is possible, this indicates that the news site only reaches those people who are already convinced of the oppositional message. In that sense, the Belarusian authorities might narrow down the possibilities for a large group of people to be reached by any other media and information than the ones in their control.

A downward spiral for independent media

According to Radzina, Lukashenko destroyed the Belarusian media climate once he assumed the highest office in Belarus. "Lukashenko destroyed independent television when he came to power. Then he destroyed a number of independent newspapers – they had to close. Today there are several independent newspapers in Belarus, but their circulation is very small. Lukashenko also closed independent radio stations. Today it is only possible to find free information on the Internet".

In recent times, independent media in Belarus experienced its greatest difficulties in 2011 in the aftermath of the presidential elections, with a large number of detained and fined journalists. Thereafter the government's repressive media policies seemed to ease to a certain extent, only to increase in force again in 2017.

In 2017, the country was ranked 153rd out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index presented by Reporters Without Borders,

RSF. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), 101 journalists were detained in 2017, most of them during protests that took place in March and April that year.² A large number of freelance journalists were also fined for having cooperated with foreign media without press accreditation.

The protests in 2017 were a result of a widely unpopular tax law targeting anyone who pays taxes for fewer than 183 days of employment per year, with some exceptions. It is popularly known as "the law against social parasites".

In 2018, Belarus has slipped down to place 155 in RSF's World

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Press Freedom Index. Since the start of this year, Belarusian independent journalists have received a large number of fines, at least 48 as of May 17, according to RSF. The absolute majority of fines have been imposed on individuals working for the independent television station Belsat TV, which is also operating from Warsaw.

According to RSF, the situation has become "an orchestrated vicious circle"

because independent media are forced out of the country due to harassment, but a 2008 law concludes that journalists can be fined when they work for media based abroad without foreign ministry accreditation.³

Increasing control by altering the law

Additionally, the authorities plan to implement amendments to the law on mass media. Such amendments mean a higher level of control over media, especially online publications, and increased possibilities for the authorities to monitor the activities of Internet users.

The amendments would result in the requirement that online media would need to register as mass media in order to get a license, otherwise they will not be granted all the rights needed to conduct their work. They would not be able to request information from government departments, for example, and their staff would not be considered journalists by the Belarusian authorities. The latter would cause problems in getting press accreditation for official events and would increase the journalists' risk of



Left: A faded photograph of the late founder of Charter 97, Aleh Byabenin, hangs on the office wall.



Right: At the office of Charter 97, the flags of the European Union, the Belarusian People's Republic and Poland all stand together.

being arrested in connection with demonstrations and the like.

Furthermore, there will be compulsory moderation of comments and identification of commentators online, and the authorities will be able to block social networks if they do not adhere to demands to delete information if so required.

“By identifying the users, the authorities can find out who writes what, and if it is a critical comment against the regime people can get punished”, says Radzina.

However, she concludes that the new media law would have more effect on media operating from within Belarus, and that Charter 97 will not register in the country.

“We will definitely not register in Belarus again. We do not want to be under the control of the government”.

Open door for Russian propaganda

Radzina argues that limiting the role and function of the independent media is leaving the stage open for Russian propaganda to have even more influence in society. Today many Belarusians already watch Russian media regularly, including online media. If Russian influence expands, a greater percentage will more or less solely follow the news in Kremlin-controlled media, and receive information through social networks like VKontakte and Odnoklassniki.

Radzina further indicates that through Russian propaganda certain messages are forwarded to the Belarusian population:

“Russian propaganda delivers messages concerning the possibility of new wars, primarily directed towards post-Soviet countries that want to live independently and in democratic societies – it is propaganda of Russian imperialism. The Russian media spreads the message that there is really no Belarusian nation: That we are really part of Russia, and that we were only separated by force”.

However, she stresses that the main ideologue of the Russian world in Belarus is Lukashenko himself:

“Since he came to power he has been destroying Belarusian self-identification. He has undermined the Belarusian language, culture, education, political opposition and national symbols. However, this situation plays an evil joke with Lukashenko himself. The most popular politician in Belarus nowadays is [Russian

President] Vladimir Putin. People in Belarus do not like Lukashenko, but they do not see any alternative to him inside our country. Because they are following Russian media, they perceive Putin as a better president than Lukashenko”.

The role of international support

When Charter 97 was blocked by the authorities, it received widespread support both from within Belarus as well as internationally. The European Parliament adopted a resolution on Belarus on April 19 this year wherein the Parliament, among other issues, requested the Belarusian authorities to immediately lift the blockade of Charter 97.

However, Radzina believes that the European Union should have done more to support the news site because the question is bigger than only Charter 97:

“The European Union should act more decisively when it comes to the blocking of our website. The situation is quite dangerous and critical, and if they don't act the media landscape in Belarus is left to undemocratic forces to an even greater extent”. ❌

Marina Henrikson is a freelance journalist based in Stockholm.

The interview was conducted, and the article written, in May 2018. On June 14, 2018, Belarus' National Assembly voted on the second and final reading of the draft amendments to the media law discussed in the article, and thus approved the amendments.

Note: All images by the author.

references

- 1 Peter Johnsson, “Belarus: Lukashenka sentences his opponents to jail but faces a deep economic crisis”, *Baltic Worlds*, May 17, 2011, <http://balticworlds.com/lukashenka-sentence-his-opponents-to-jail/?s=belarus>.
- 2 “E-newsletter: Mass media in Belarus, Media Results 2017”, *Buletin 1* (54), Belarusian association of journalists, accessed May 22, 2018, <https://baj.by/en/analytics/e-newsletter-mass-media-belarus-bulletin-154-media-results-2017>.
- 3 “Belarus journalists fined nearly 50 times already this year”, *Reporters Without Borders*, accessed May 22, 2018, <https://rsf.org/en/news/belarus-journalists-fined-nearly-50-times-already-year>.