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"Soviet Belorussia" presents the programme of President Alexander Lukashenko,
who is running for a fourth term.

BELARUS : INSTITUTIONALIZED HARASSMENT OF THE NEWS MEDIA

The Belarusian news media have never been subject to so much harassment as now, three days before the 19 March presidential election. First elected president in 1994 and now running for a fourth term, Alexander Lukashenko has concentrated all power in himself and controls this former Soviet republic, and its nearly 10 million inhabitants, with an iron hand. Notorious for once commenting that “not everything was so bad in the famous Adolf Hitler’s Germany,” Lukashenko is quick to get rid of opponents. If they are lucky, he forces them into exile. If they are not, he allegedly has them eliminated physically.

He has not spared journalists in his quest for power. Dimitri Zavadski, a cameraman who worked for the Russian TV station *ORT*, is the best-known case. He disappeared in 2000 without his body ever being found. To hold on to the top job, Lukashenko sidestepped the constitution by holding a referendum in October 2004 in which he asked Belarusians to let him have another term. Originally scheduled for July 2006, the election was brought forward to 19 March at the behest of Lukashenko, who rules by “ukaz” (presidential decree) and does not have to give any explanations.

By advancing the date of the elections, Lukashenko caught everyone unprepared – his political opponents, the news media and the international observers deployed throughout the country by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to monitor the elections. Now the man who once said “my dream is to continue fighting with a weapon in my hand until the end” is on the point of winning another election whose outcome is known in advance. Called “Europe’s last dictator” by Washington, he has swept all obstacles from his path, doing everything possible to reduce the independent media to silence and gaining complete control of the news circulating inside his country. Only the Internet is not yet under his control.

Free press on the brink of extinction

Advanced gradually, using an arsenal of finely tuned bureaucratic weapons, the Belarusian authorities have virtually wiped out the country’s

independent press in the past two years. Thanks to state-owned monopolies, the government controls the entire network of newspaper production and distribution. It is easy to eliminate a newspaper in this centrally-controlled economy. You terminate its printing contracts, you terminate its contracts for distribution to news stands and by subscription, you prevent it from selling advertising space by putting pressure on all the advertisers, and you bring lawsuits in order to throttle it with heavy fines and damages awards.

At the end of 2005, 13 independent newspapers suddenly found that the state-owned postal service, Belpochta, had dropped them from the list of publications whose subscriptions it would continue to deliver in 2006. There used to be privately-owned distribution companies in Belarus, but their licences were withdrawn. Around this time, the same independent newspapers found their printing contracts had been terminated by the state-owned press, *Krasnaya Zvezda*. In order to keep their print versions going, several newspapers turned to a Russian printer in Smolensk, 320 km west of the Belarusian capital, Minsk. But this is expensive. It forced the independent newspapers *Narodnaya Volya* and *BG Delovaya Gazeta (BDG)* to reduce their print runs considerably and to publish weekly instead of two or three times a week.

The state-owned company Belsoyuzdruk, which has the press distribution monopoly, began barring independent newspapers from sale on news stands at the start of last winter. *Narodnaya Volya*, which was the country’s only independent daily, was withdrawn from the news stands in October, like many others. Opposition newspapers have completely disappeared from the news stands. The latest to disappear is, *Zhoda*, the social-democratic movement’s newspaper, which was raided by the secret services and then suspended at the end of February. Foreign publications also cannot be found, except for the Russian dailies *Izvestia* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, which rarely write about Belarus. The provincial press has not been spared either. Such reputable newspapers as *Birzha Informaciji*, *Novaja Gazeta Smorgoni* and *Kurier iz Borisova* have been closed down or suspended. At the end of 2005, the authorities also banned *Glos znad*

Niemna, the newspaper of Belarus's Polish minority, which is subject to government harassment.

Today, only two independent newspapers, *BelGazeta* and *Belorusy I Rynok*, have permission to be sold on news stands in the capital. With print runs of 20,000 and 11,000, these two weeklies cannot compete with the big-circulation state newspapers. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), the newspaper published by the president's office, *Sovietskaya Bielorusia*, increased its daily print run from 200,000 to 500,000 last spring.

BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS (BAJ)

A non-governmental organisation founded in 1995, the BAJ defends free speech, the right of access to independent information, and professional standards of journalism. It has more than 1,000 members from every kind of news media, both state and privately-owned, and has representatives in the provinces. It has been affiliated to the International Federation of Journalists since 1997 and to Reporters Without Borders since 2003.

The BAJ has legal centre for the protection of the news media that represents its members in court and in their dealings with other state entities. The centre also provides legal advice and analyses press legislation. The BAJ monitors and issues statements about press law violations and conflicts between the authorities and news media. Its representatives are closely watched by the secret services and are searched thoroughly whenever they leave or enter the country.

In 2004, the BAJ was awarded the European parliament's Sakharov Prize for what the parliament's president, Joseph Borrell Fontelles, called its "fight for freedom of information against President Lukashenko's attempts to smother it."

Government aid is substantial. The amount assigned in the budget for governmental newspapers has doubled in the two years from 2004 to 2006, going from around 30 million to 60 million dollars.

An entire section of the press can now do no more than hope to survive. Generally, independent newspapers are neither officially banned

nor definitely closed down. But the government deprives them of all means of subsistence and forces them to use informal distribution networks. Copies of these newspapers are sometimes mailed to their subscribers inside envelopes, directly from the newspaper's office. This is what *BDG* and *Narodnaya Gazeta* do. The *BDG* print runs are less than 5,000 and 30,000 for *Narodnaya Gazeta* and they organise their own distribution. Their most committed readers pass copies from hand to hand as in the good old days of the samizdats circulated by Soviet dissidents. Some newspapers, such as the former weeklies *Nasha Niva* and *Solidarnost*, have ceased to produce a print version and just have an electronic version on the Internet.

In all, there are two independent national newspapers still available at news stands, *BelGazeta* and *Belorusy I Rynok*, two others, *BDG* and *Narodnaya Gazeta*, that are struggling to keep going, and one privately-owned news agency, *BelaPan*, based in the capital. The US government-funded *Radio Svaboda* (called *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* in English), still broadcasts clandestinely in Belarus, as in the Soviet era. The foreign news agencies *AP*, *Reuters* and *Agence France-Presse* and the German public radio station *Deutsche Welle* have Belarusian correspondents but no bureaux registered with the authorities.

"BDG must be closed" - autopsy of an independent newspaper

BG Delovaya Gazeta - usually called *BDG* because its original name was *Beloruskaya Delovaya Gazeta* - used to be one of the best known and most prosperous newspapers in Minsk. Created just after Belarus became independent in 1992, it gradually specialised in political and business news. It built up a large readership and went from being a weekly to a biweekly. After making a fortune, *BDG* owner and editor Piotr Martsev set up his own publishing house and launched three other newspapers: *Imya*, *BDG Dlia Slujebnogo Polzovania* and *Avtomobilnyi*. His group was able to have its own distribution network because at that stage no restrictive law regulated the sector. According to Martsev, the country's best

journalists used to work at *BDG*. Now it is on the verge of bankruptcy and they gone off to work in Russia or Germany.

According to a former journalist who only recently left *BDG*, it was by far the best newspaper in terms of the quality and objectivity of its news coverage. Its reputation was such that people wanted to be interviewed by it. The industry minister, for example, was delighted to be given the chance to answer its questions and the newspaper's journalists needed no special permission to contact him. All of its reporters had the direct number of government ministers, who were always ready to talk.

But things started going downhill in 1999, when it became obligatory to register with the state press distributor. The differences with the president and other government officials accentuated. Libel suits and court summonses became frequent. Journalists were often refused accreditation. Since 2005, every government and state institution requires journalists to be accredited with it before it will make any statement.

BDG investigated corruption and the increasingly-frequent political disappearances – subjects that were likely to cause a great deal of friction with the authorities. At first, the authorities used legal means to punish the newspaper but President Lukashenko said in 2003: “*BDG* must be closed down.” It was suspended for three months. The presidential guard sent vehicles all over Minsk to intercept *BDG* trucks as they were distributing copies. Entire print runs were confiscated.

BDG has had to change its name five times in order to continue publishing. Its subscriber distribution contracts were broken by the state postal service in October 2003, isolating it from many of its readers, especially those in the provinces. At the same time, *BDG* was excluded by the state-owned company that has the news stands distribution monopoly. To cap everything, a press law was passed by the Lukashenko-dominated parliament requiring news media to be registered with the information ministry.

BDG responded by distributing copies to direct to privately-owned retail outlets and taking over distribution to subscribers. But the

president's office forced retail outlets to break their contract with the newspaper. In 2005, *BDG* was besieged with libel suits and was sentenced to pay 150,000 dollars (125,000 euros) in damages to an official and a fine of 50,000 dollars (41,000 euros). Within two months, the newspaper found itself in the red. It received another sentence after a visit by the tax police, although the finance minister acknowledged that *BDG* did not owe any taxes.

At its heyday, *BDG* had 140 employees. Today just 22 are left. One after another, most of the journalists have left to try their luck and seek better salaries elsewhere. *BDG* is no longer able to cope with the financial problems resulting from the severance of contracts by the state-owned monopolies and the court sentences. Printing was moved to the Russian city of Smolensk but the Russian printer announced on 13 March, just six days before that presidential elections, that it would no longer print the newspaper.

Operating out of a discreet office with no sign outside to indicate that it is *BDG*'s headquarters, Martsev is continuing to edit the latest issue but it could be for the last time. Despite tempting offers, he has refused financial help from any political parties as well as the president's proposals to buy the newspaper. With a print run of barely 5,000, *BDG* today sells all its copies from premises that could easily be mistaken for a clandestine outlet for illegal products.

Many independent newspapers have suffered a similar fate to *BDG*'s in the past two years. The government does everything possible to ensure that it is the newspapers themselves who throw in the towel so that it cannot be accused of closing them down. The death of a newspaper is slow and painful in Belarus.

No place for the opposition in the media

Belarusian journalists censor themselves a great deal for fear of sanctions. The authorities have on several occasions issued clear messages by punishing or firing editors for tarnishing the president's image.



An empty display case reserved for presidential candidate.

One of the editors at Belarus's sole remaining independent news agency, *BelaPan*, said: "Journalists have to walk through a minefield. They have to ask themselves all the time whether writing this or that will be seen as a criticism of one government official or another." According to recent information ministry directives, a news media can now be closed after two warnings.

The list of subjects that are off-limits constantly grows. No state-owned news media dares to interview opposition leaders in the run-up to the elections and their names are not even mentioned. Journalists in Minsk say that the population in some parts of the country do not even know that anyone is running against Lukashenko in the 19 March election.

The state media take particular care not to upset Lukashenko and carry absolutely no criticism except that voiced by Lukashenko himself. A *Sovietskaya Belorussia* journalist who asked not to be identified said he and his colleagues are allowed to criticise the housing minister because Lukashenko himself singled the minister out over a problem of faulty heating in apartment buildings. No subject is officially banned inside newspapers but journalists have no trouble in identifying the most sensitive one themselves: the political opposition. No state-owned news media have mentioned the 2 March crackdown in which several journalists were arrested and beaten by police for following opposition candidate Alexander Kazulin when he tried to register as a participant in a congress for civil servants.

Since 2000, article 367 punishes "defaming the president" and article 368 punishes "insulting the president." Lukashenko reinforced his legislative arsenal against the media and opposition last December by getting parliament to vote an amendment adding the offence of "discrediting the president" (article 369). It is punishable by up to six months in preventive detention and a prison term of two years.

At the same time, the government views

humanitarian organisations and independent political groups and movements as undesirable and refuses to register them. Since the end of last year, civil society representatives who lack official accreditation can be fined or even imprisoned for up to two years. Many civil society organisations have been forced to go underground and the media are banned from naming them or their members under threat of criminal action. Some journalists use paraphrases to allude to their work.

Another subject that irks the authorities is Belarus's past before it became a Soviet republic in the early 1920s. The presenter of "Puteshestvie diletantov," a programme about Belarusian history on the leading terrestrial TV channel *BT*, was fired in February 2005 because the government did not like his reference to the pre-Soviet era, in particular, Belarus's links with the former kingdom of Lithuania. The station also severed its contract with the privately-owned production company that was making the series. Another programme made by the same company about the history of the Belarusian diaspora was also dropped at the behest of the government, which views the 3.5 million Belarusians living abroad as its potential opponents.

A *BelGazeta* journalist who requested anonymity mentioned the disappearances of opposition members and journalists as one of the taboo subjects. No one in the press dares to talk about them as the Belarusian authorities are implicated. As well as journalist Dimitri Zavadski, who has been missing since 2000, former parliamentary deputy speaker Viktor Gonchar, businessman Anatoly Krasovski and former interior minister Yuri Zakharenko have been missing since 1999. And the October 2005 murder of investigative journalist Veronika Cherkasova of the now banned daily *Solidarnost* has not been solved. The case was closed without any significant clues ever being identified.

Media under the president's thumb

The Belarusian authorities divide the media into two categories: the "honest media," those that work for the government, and the "dishonest

media," those that are independent. It is in this climate of extreme tension that journalists have to work today.

There is great deal of solidarity among independent journalists, who swap information and contacts. As they are denied access to public institutions by officials who have orders not to answer their questions, governmental information is the hardest kind for them to obtain. A journalist with *Radio Svaboda* in Minsk who requested anonymity said he has no choice but to be extremely pressing in order to get information from police officers.

On the other hand, contacts between governmental and independent journalists is quite rare. Governmental journalists risk losing their jobs as soon as they put a foot wrong. A *BelGazeta* journalist said one of his former university colleagues who today works for the government and the governmental newspaper *Sovietskaya Belorussia* was reprimanded by his superiors for calling his old friend at *BelGazeta* to wish him happy birthday. The state media no longer work with the independent media. The news agency *BelaPan* lost many of its clients as a result. *Sovietskaya Belorussia*, which used to be one of its subscribers, terminated its contract a few years ago.

Lukashenko has said: "Television is the principal link in ideological work and will not be allowed out of the state's control." Belarusian TV is monopolised by the president and his official speeches. The only political figure with unquestioned authority to speak in public, he is most often seen on the leading national TV station, *BT*, his station. An extraordinary congress convened by Lukashenko to hail the government's achievements opened in Minsk on 2 March, in the middle of the election campaign. Lukashenko's three-hour opening speech was broadcast live in its entirety on *BT*. He used his position as president to get round the electoral law's restrictions on TV time for the candidates.

Although the president election is now just a few days away, it is still very unusual to see any of Lukashenko's three rivals on TV, although the electoral commission said they should each be allowed two half-hour TV appearances during the campaign. The government controls all the Belarusian TV stations: the leading national station *BT*, the cultural station *LAD* and the local

station *STV*, which only reaches the capital.

Two Russian terrestrial TV stations are received in Belarus: *ORT* (now called officially called *ONT*) and *RTR*. On both these stations, the Belarusian authorities replace the news programmes with their own news at will, and without the agreement of their Russian partners. The programmes coming from Russia are vetted and anything that might irritate Lukashenko is suppressed. *RTR* was banned by the authorities during the October 2004 referendum campaign. Another Russian TV station, *NTV*, which used to be very critical of Lukashenko, is available in Belarus but only by cable or satellite dish and very few Belarusians are subscribers. A Polish station that broadcasts in Belarusian, *Radio Racyja*, was closed down by the authorities in 2002 and had to move to Poland.

The authorities recently found another independent news source to suppress – polling companies. They closed down one of the most reputable of these companies, NISIPI, at the end of 2004 for publishing figures that completely contradicted the official results of the October 2004 referendum. NISIPI now operates in exile in Lithuania. Exit polls are now banned because they could cast doubt on the official count and be used as evidence of electoral fraud. A resolution was adopted at a meeting of government ministers on 8 November 2005 that aims to stop all other independent polling by requiring polling companies to register with the government and, more importantly, to give the authorities copies of all polls they carry out, listing the surnames, names, address and phone numbers of each person polled.

Lukashenko has described the media as "the main measuring device of ideology, at the base of the state." And to show the president in his best light, it is forbidden to photograph him from the side, under pain of being blacklisted or fired. A photographer with the state news agency *Belta* was fired for taking a picture of Lukashenko with a mirror behind him. These obscure rules come directly from the presidential guard and do not appear in any official document. In practice, only *Belta* is allowed to photograph Lukashenko and all the other media have to go to *Belta* to get a photo of him.

The regime's showcase is the newspaper *Sovietskaya Belorussia*, whose name says

everything: "Soviet Belorussia." It carries state propaganda and serves as the government gazette, filling pages with the texts of presidential decrees and the laws passed by parliament. The front page often has a photo of Lukashenko, especially during election campaigns. He is usually shown smiling, surrounded by radiant people and against a sunny background although the temperature sometimes falls to -18 centigrade at night in March in Minsk and the country is beneath a blanket of snow. But journalists working for the government media are paid to look after the boss's image. All the editors of the state media are appointed directly by Lukashenko and have to report to him. Journalists are told what to write and rarely propose stories. They are not allowed to attend editorial conferences, where there is no discussion about the subjects to be covered.

Harassment: instructions for use

The pressure is on the independent newspapers. One of the two still on sale in the capital, the weekly *BelGazeta*, has escaped the purge orchestrated by the authorities. Why? According to a senior member of its staff who asked not to be identified, it is because it is protected by foreign capital. A Russian holding company, Interros, owns 30 per cent of the newspaper. Its print run has even increased since 2000 and it has picked up readers from the independent newspapers that have had to close. *BelGazeta* has also been able to continue printing in Minsk because it uses the same company as the Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. But it could have to close at any moment if its foreign investors decide to withdraw their capital, which they might easily do inasmuch as they are getting little return on their investment.

Independent journalists regularly receive warnings and threats from the authorities. A member of the *BelGazeta* staff has received calls from the president's offices voicing displeasure about its coverage of the current election campaign. "Watch out, we are going to take care of you," he was told. This despite the fact that *BelGazeta*, which specializes in political and social analysis, has made an effort not to side with any candidate.

The secret services harass journalists in various ways such as following them, tapping their phones and cutting off their electricity. Many journalists said these are all standard practices. KGB agents even go so far as to occupy offices for several days or even weeks in order to prevent the journalists from working. The staff of the news agency *BelaPan* was forced to move three times in less than six months to escape power cuts and constant monitoring by building security guards. The other privately-owned news agencies were not able to withstand their financial problems. The *BelaPan* office is now so well hidden in the rear courtyard of a building that it is impossible to find for those not in the know.

The deputy editor of the opposition newspaper *Zhoda*, Alexander Sdvizhkov, recently left the newspaper. A staff member said he could not stand the KGB interrogations and the judicial proceedings initiated against him after a prosecutor brought a complaint. He had given the government a gold opportunity to close down the newspaper a few months before the presidential election by publishing the controversial Mohammed caricatures.

Many websites are subject to denial-of-service attacks which journalists and civil society members blame on the authorities. One of the sites most often targeted is that of the citizens movement Charter 97, www.charter.org, which is often blocked by attacks for hours on end. A spokesman for the site said the attacks always happen after a major event such as the arrest of an opposition leader or a crackdown. Discussion forums are the worst hit by these attacks. A journalist said she suspected the KGB has a section that specialises in sabotaging websites. Belarusian law does not treat the Internet as a medium of communication and so websites are not obliged to register with the authorities. But legislators have for several months been thinking of passing a law regulating the Internet.

Another method used to silence journalists is to send them to labour camps in remote parts of the country. Dubbed "khimiya" (the Russian word for chemistry) by journalists, these camps resemble those used in Cuba. The offending journalists are sentenced to work in market-gardens or saw mills. According to the information obtained by Reporters Without Borders, the last time a journalist received such a sentence was

in 2002 when Viktor Ivashkevich, the editor of the weekly *Rabochy*, was sentenced to work for two years in the eastern Baranovichi region and was pardoned after one year.

Meticulous vetting for accreditation

There are blacklists in the Belarusian embassies abroad for journalists wanting to visit Belarus. Several who filed a request to cover the presidential election within the official January deadline are still waiting for their accreditation, although the election is now just a few days away. There are also blacklists for local journalists. Foreign reporters entering Belarus are screened meticulously and those on the blacklists are subjected to body searches by customs officials. They avoid being in possession of articles about the opposition or copies of independent newspapers.

Several foreign reporters have already been banned from Belarus. Pavel Selin, the former Minsk correspondent of the Russian TV station *NTV*, was expelled on 28 June 2003 and banned from returning to Belarus for five years. Mikhail Podoliak, an Ukrainian freelance journalist who wrote for the Belarusian weekly *Vremia*, suffered the same fate. A number of Belarusian journalists have preferred to leave Belarus and go and work with more freedom in such neighbouring countries as Russia, Lithuania and Ukraine.

Lukashenko likes to be called *batka* ("father" in Belarusian), but he fears a Ukrainian-style revolution by his children when the official results of

the presidential election are announced. The Russian news agency *Ria Novosti* quoted him as saying: "I'll mess things up for everybody at the least attempt to destabilize the situation. As for embassies having links with the opposition, if anything like that happens, they will be expelled within 24 hours." Today, Belarus is almost totally isolated and the media are harassed more than ever.

Recommendations

Reporters Without Borders urges the Belarusian authorities to stop harassing independent journalists, to give them accreditation so that they can work legally, and to remove all the constraints on the print and broadcast media that prevent them from operating freely.

Reporters Without Borders asks the authorities responsible for the state-owned news media to guarantee objective news coverage and fair access to these media for all the election candidates.

Reporters Without Borders calls on international organisations to condemn the repression of the news media and civil society in Belarus and to provide support for the few remaining independent news media and journalists' organisations.

Finally, the organisation calls on the presidents of countries in the region to use their influence with the Belarusian government to protect freedom of expression in Belarus, which is seriously threatened.