Belsat TV Struggles to Survive

On 26 November the only independent television channel Belsat broadcasting for Belarusians cut the broadcast and sent a significant number of its employees on leave. Earlier this year Belsat broadcasted for 17 hours a day. Today it is only six and a half hours.

An independent TV channel that broadcasts from Poland to Belarus failed to raise necessary funds to continue its work in the old format. After the economic crisis Western donors are financing Belarusian independent television less and less.

Five years ago when the channel was founded, independent Belarusian community had a very sceptical attitude towards Belsat. In 2008 cultural analyst Maxim Zhbankou, who hosts a TV-program on Belsat, called the channel a propagandistic, provincial and superficial.

However, after a significant improvement in the quality of broadcasts, the criticism significantly decreased, and Belsat became one of the most popular independent media.

Month of Reduced Broadcasting

Belarusian democratic community has long sought to establish an independent television, which would be a response to the official propaganda. After the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus the project was launched in Poland, with the financial help of local authorities. On 10 December 2007, the day of human rights, Belsat began its broadcast.

From a financial point of view Belsat launch timing was off. The global economic crisis has dragged on, being the main reason why western countries designate less funding for the
Most funding comes from Poland. In 2008 Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs directed 20.9 million zloty to Belsat ($8,500,000), in 2009 – 20.7 million zloty ($6,900,000), in 2010 – 16 million zloty ($5,600,000), and in 2011 – 19 million zloty ($6,400,000). In 2012, Polish authorities have allocated 17.6 million zloty ($5,100,000). Each year, the governments of Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and several other countries give several million zloty for Belsat.

This year, the channel has made a good leap forward in quality, but probably did not run their finances properly. For example, since September there was a nearly three-hour block of live studio broadcast, something that no other Belarusian TV-channel has. Leaders of Belsat risked when they started high quality expensive projects, knowing about the poor state of financing. The price of this risk was a month of reduced broadcasting.

Broadcasting reduction may be the reason for the increased financial assistance during the 2013. Especially as the quality of the channel improves. On the other hand, Belarusian audience will have to be watching for a month broadcasts where news blocks do not have a narrator and where most programmes have disappeared.

Is Belsat a Successful Channel?

Since its foundation, Belsat channel has been facing constant criticism, deserved and not. First of all, it is the criticism of colleagues and analysts that has to do with money. According to Alena Rakava, an economist, Belsat has little impact on Belarusian society retaining high costs of production.

Television, unlike other media in Belarus supported by the West, is expensive. At the same time, the channel has no commercial profit, as private companies are afraid to
advertise with Belsat.

TV channel regularly orders sociological surveys of its audience. Last sociological survey by social studies centre Zerkalo-Info was done in May 2012. According to the survey, 22.4 per cent of people in Belarus are watching satellite TV, 55 per cent of which watch Belsat. 31.5 per cent of satellite TV users never heard of Belsat existence and therefore represent the main target field for channel’s marketing team.

If Zerkalo-Info figures are right, the channel’s audience is approximately 970,000. Many are sceptical about such figure, and believe that a few hundred thousand less people actually watch Belsat. Despite the difference in numbers, Belsat remains the most popular independent media in Belarus.

According to Akavita, Belarusian Internet-counter, every day Belsat web-page is visited by just a little over 2000 unique users. Belsat loses in comparison to other Internet media resources. Belarusians visit independent media web-sites more during significant events. For example, the latest wave of rising attendance was during the parliamentary elections in 2012.

Belarusian authorities are attempting to do their best to make fewer citizens watch Belsat. The channel is not on cable TV networks in Belarus, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not give accreditation to its journalists. According to the Belarusian legislation, employees of Belsat are currently working illegally in Belarus.

Alexander Lukashenka personally outlined the channel as "stupid and un congenial project". At the times of the wave of repressions, the Belarusian authorities have no mercy for Belsat employees as well. The courts arrested the channel’s journalists many times, while the KGB officers summoned the journalists “for a talk".
Founders of Belsat wanted to create a full-fledged TV channel with informational and entertainment programmes. And if the first part was successful, the second one was not. Belarusians are primarily watching Belsat for its news programmes. Belsat shows these soap-operas instead of good quality films and shows. The reason is the same – no money to create original material or purchase recent western production.

Moreover, Belsat has a strained relationship with the Polish television, where it is based. In 2009 the Polish TV officials even fired Romaszewska-Guzy from being the head of Belsat. Then several other employees of Belsat declared their resignation in solidarity with the dismissal of Romaszewska-Guzy. Later, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervened and returned the position to Romaszewska-Guzy. The future of the channel, then as much as now, seemed uncertain.

The Future of Belsat

On 10 December Belsat will celebrate its fifth anniversary. At the time of its foundation in 2007 the channel's future did not look promising and the quality of programmes was very low. However over the years Belsat has succeeded in creating new Belarusian television.

Expansion of Belsat audience is taking place mostly only among the users of satellite antennas, so it is very limited. Belsat future will depend upon its strategy to overcome the limitations set by the Belarusian regime. First, Belsat needs to improve significantly its web page and also make its broadcasts available on YouTube and social networks. Second, Belsat needs to pursue a more aggressive marketing strategy.

Belsat today makes a decent media product, but it does not always deliver it effectively to potential audience. And the real measure of the channel's success is its popularity among ordinary Belarusians.

Ryhor Astapenia