

# **Independent Regional Newspapers in Belarus: Surviving despite the Odds**

On 24 June, Belarusian authorities once again refused to include Intex Press, a regional newspaper, into the state distribution system. A few other Belarusian regional publications face the same problem, and almost all of them have reduced their circulation and earn less money than in 2015.

Although they flourished in the 1990s, independent regional publications have since suffered due to repression and the poor economic conditions of recent years. Nearly all of them currently lack funds, forcing talented journalists out of regional publications.

The West have done much to support the regional press, but could do more to train media managers and put pressure on the Belarusian government to include independent newspapers into public distribution network.

## **Regional publications in Belarus: why they still matter**

The regional press flourished in Belarus in the '90s, as did other media. At that time, a politicised society ensured high circulation and a growing advertising market brought money. However, over time the authorities began to undermine the regional press.

Hanna Yahorava, Executive Director of the Association of Regional Press Publishers, told Belarus Digest that the greatest changes occurred in 2006-2009. At this time the government pushed a significant part of the regional media out of public distribution system, resulting in bankruptcy for many publications. Around 20 regional publications closed as a result of a dilemma: to write about politics, lose advertising money, and drop out of the state distribution system, or to stop writing on political topics completely.

Today the Association of Regional Press Publishers comprises 14 regional publications, all of which have survived the difficult times. These newspapers mainly operate in the west of the country and write to varying degrees about social problems.

Five of them lack access to the public distribution system, so people can neither subscribe to them in the traditional way nor purchase them at kiosks which sell the majority of Belarusian print media. This year, newspapers such as *Intex Press* or *Borisovskije novosti* were told that authorities would require more documents in order to consider returning these newspapers to the distribution system. Although the newspapers took this as a sign of possible policy change, the authorities once again declined their petition.

Several reasons explain why regional newspapers seem to be  more resilient and often popular compared to their national counterparts. They remain much more relevant to readers, maintain a higher level of trust among the people and somehow manage to sell advertising places.

The newspaper *Intex-press* in Baranavichy is full of private advertising, despite the fact that authorities dropped it from the distribution system and continue to issue vague warnings.

In 2015 the Ministry of Information gave the newspaper a warning for use of "RB" instead of "the Republic of Belarus"

on output data. According to Belarusian legislation, the authorities can close a newspaper after two warnings in a year.

At the same time, regional publications use tools that major independent media do not. For example, ok.ru remains the second most popular social network in Belarus, but many independent newspapers do not even have a public page there. Meanwhile, the small *Rehijnalnaja hazeta* has more than four thousand subscribers on ok.ru.

## Current problems of the regional press

However, Lukashenka's regime is not solely to blame for the decline of regional publications. As in many other countries, newspapers are losing circulation because of the Internet and changes in the advertising market. The economic challenge to local publications in Belarus is even more difficult, as the advertising market shrank greatly during the crisis. In 2015, advertising revenues of regional publications were nearly halved.

Under such conditions, regional publications are constantly in need of money and lose talented journalists who go to work for the national media. According to data from the Association of Regional Press Publishers, salaries in regional publications are just one third of the average salary in the country. This means that such journalists earn about \$200 a month.

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Create bar charts

Weak financial conditions mean that independent publications appear more expensive than state-run ones receiving state subsidies. At the same time, private newspapers often lack access to information. In 2015, an official refused to respond

to a correspondent from *Babruisk Courier*, saying: "I just did not want to talk to your media".

## Help the newspapers need

Western donors have already done much for regional publications. For political reasons, neither the donor nor the media can disclose the amount of financial and organisational support from donors. But many media experts in Belarus say that a large portion of the media remains afloat thanks to Western assistance.

Currently, donors are reducing the amount of aid they send, resulting in a need for a different approach. Instead of offering grants to fund publications, the West should help create conditions conducive to the development of regional publications.

First of all, the absence of regional publications in the state distribution system should become a highly-politicised issue, as was the case for the newspapers *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaja Volia*. A combination of pressure and dialogue with the West in 2008-2010 forced the Belarusian government to return them to the system – the same should happen with the regional media.

If this basic requirement is not met, newspapers will be afraid to write about politics, as this leads to problems finding advertisers and the regional press being incapable of competing with state-run media as they are unable to sell everywhere.

A programme of regional media support should be developed together with stakeholders in the country. According to Hanna Yahorava, this is not necessarily the case today.

In addition to seminars for journalists, there is still a need for training programmes for media managers, teaching them not

only to cope with developing a newspaper in very adverse conditions, but more importantly, to find ways to persuade advertisers to invest in the newspaper despite the many problems with authorities.

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## **Dealing with Slavery and Human Trafficking in Belarus**

On 6 February a Belarusian businessman received 5 years in prison for enslaving a group of Vietnamese whom he had earlier agreed to deliver to the European Union. Meanwhile, the Belarusian government has defined fighting human trafficking as one of its priorities both domestically and internationally, where it feels it has been successful.

The recent US report on trafficking, however, downgraded Belarus' performance in combating the problem due to its abusive legislation and a lack of open access to information on the issue.

The positive results from the anti-trafficking campaign are visible in Belarus, though some social groups remain vulnerable to trafficking: women from weak families and men from the regions who go to Russia to work. The government needs to develop both employment and professional education policies to boost jobs for these groups.

### **A Slaveholder from Belarus**

Belarus has not seen slavery for almost two centuries, but recently a rare case of it occurred near Lida, a city in Western Belarus. On 6 February businessman Siarhej Stoliarau

was given five years in prison for organising the illegal migration of individuals. Stoliaraŭ and his Russian partners developed a plan to illegally move several Vietnam citizens from Moscow to the European Union. He took 16 of them to a truck and brought them to a village in the Lida district.

But instead of immediately delivering them to Lithuania, he ordered the Vietnamese to work off the services rendered to him. The migrants got accommodation in a shed and had to dig a ditch and do other physical jobs. Stoliaraŭ kept them locked up for eight days, though his neighbours had no idea what was happening in the yard next door. The case was revealed only during a border guard check in the village for other, unrelated reasons.

### **A World Anti-Trafficking Activist**

Belarus has engaged in actively combating human trafficking both at home and internationally since 2005. It became one of its [major foreign policy initiatives](#), enjoying strong international consensus and a firm backing from many Western countries. The authorities claim they brought about a significant drop in trafficking inside Belarus. The following diagram from the Ministry of the Interior review these dynamics over the past decade.

### **The number of human trafficking and related crimes (2002–2014)**



Sexual exploitation's victims are always on the minds of the leadership in Belarus. According to official sources, the number of victims decreased from around 1000 in 2006 to 81 in 2014. In general, this is a very positive trend, especially when compared to other countries in the region, like Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and Moldova, where the trends are less encouraging, according to a 2014 UN report.

Belarusian women are the most likely to be exported to Western

Europe: Germany, the Netherlands, France, but also as Middle East and Russia. Traffickers have become more cautious and do not usually come to Belarus personally, though nine of them were detained inside the country in 2014.

Modern traffickers have changed their ways: if in the 1990s they attempted to deceive the victims by promising them legal highly paid jobs, today these schemes no longer work thanks to the spread of communication technology and educational campaigns. They openly invite women to work as prostitutes, and the women go in for these dirty jobs fully aware – they simply can earn more doing the same job abroad than in Belarus. And many surely hope to find a rich fiancé and start a happier life.

### **Belarusian Migrants Enslaved in Russia**

Labour slavery has also been on the decline over the past decade, but the major reason for it remains the same. Thousands of Belarusians migrate to Russian giant cities of Moscow and Saint Petersburg in search of work. [Unemployed men](#) listen to the stories of neighbours who have been in Russian and made good money in construction, convincing them to pursue a similar journey. But they often find a less optimistic reality awaiting them when they arrive in Russia.



In June 2014 two Belarusians managed to escape from servitude in the Caucasian republic of Dagestan. Strangers knocked them at a Moscow bus station with a spiked drink and brought them to a brick factory. They worked 15 hours a day and were forbidden from leaving the factory's territory under threat of a heavy beating.

The men managed to run away with the help of the Russian NGO Alternative, who received information about their presence in Dagestan. Russian media reported that Dagestan has 600 brick factories, and half of them use slave labour, 10-50 slaves at each factory. And no one knows why the Russian government does

nothing to stop this outrageous crime.

## **US Feels Belarus's Efforts Have Been Weak**

Despite the bright official statistics on trafficking from Belarus, the US Department of State has been placing Belarus in its Tier 2 watch list. This means that the government is making efforts to comply with the western standards of combating human trafficking, but the total number of victims remains significant and shows that the government is failing to resolve the problem.

The US report gives several instances where Belarusians are still vulnerable to being compelled to forced labour. It mentions the functioning of presidential decree No 9, which forbids leaving one's workplace in any mill from the wood industry without the employer's permission. Men who seek jobs abroad remain subject to falling victim to forced labour, as do women via sex trafficking.

The report criticises Belarusian officials, who allegedly understate the real number of victims in order to show the government's successful performance. The government also shows little interest in cooperating with NGOs who deal with trafficking issues.

## **New Policies Needed to Fight Trafficking**

While the positive results in the broader anti-trafficking campaign can indeed be observed in Belarus, the government still has a ways to go in developing its strategy of dealing with the problem. Belarus succeeded in fighting human trafficking at home, but it still proves itself incapable of preventing its citizens from servitude abroad. The authorities should thus focus on problems which do not touch migration directly and stem from social and economic conditions in the country.

Authorities should specifically target the most vulnerable

groups with particular social or regional origin: women from poor or alcoholic families and men from the small towns and villages who seek earnings in Russia. The government should develop policies that help these groups find a decently paid job at home, and encourage their professional and personal development.