



Simon Garnett

Whose rapprochement?

The Belarusian media between Lukashenka and the EU

The continuing repression of the independent media exposes the Belarusian government's concessions to "European standards" for what they are: window dressing on a regime that has no intention of releasing its stranglehold on society any time soon.

The inclusion of Belarus in the EU Eastern Partnership programme, whose participating countries met for the first time in Prague in May 2009, has been the most visible in a recent series of indications of a rapprochement between the EU and the pariah government of Alexander Lukashenka. While reasons for the EU's pragmatic change of heart are to be found in Belarus' refusal to bow to Russian pressure following the Georgia conflict in August 2008, the increasing economic squeeze and deteriorating relations with Russia is forcing the Belarusian government to seek help wherever it can. Nevertheless, the question arises as to who is benefiting from the rapprochement. If the degree of media freedom in Belarus is anything to go by, the concessions that have been made to "European standards" are window dressing on a regime that has no intention of releasing its stranglehold on society any time soon.

Since February 2009 a new "law on the mass media" has been in force in Belarus that has been condemned by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) as "undemocratic at core". The law, says the BAJ, "will create a real threat to media freedom in Belarus until it is brought into line with international standards."¹ This view is seconded by an OSCE report² that notes that despite some improvements over the existing law on freedom of expression in Belarus, namely its reference to international treaties, "the law's shortcomings seriously outweigh any advantages it might have. [...] The majority of its provisions are unnecessary or detrimental to freedom of expression and freedom of the media in Belarus."

Most problematically, the law requires all print media outlets with a print run of over 300 copies to re-register with the authorities. Periodicals must submit information about their subject matter, the language in which they publish, their circulation figures and the area in which they distribute. The precise purpose of the registration requirements remains unclear, however. "If registration, as asserted, is a purely technical statistical procedure, then virtually all that is needed for registration purposes is the full name or company name and contact details," comments the OSCE report. "The demand that detailed information be submitted on content, plus a multitude of bureaucratic barriers, all testify that the registration scheme will be used to exercise supervision over the media."

The law also relieves the journalist accreditation body of obligations towards accountability, now bluntly defining accreditation as the granting to journalists the right "to cover events organized by the state authorities". No specific reasons why a journalist might be denied accreditation are provided and already numerous journalists have been offered spurious reasons for the rejection of their applications. Belarusian correspondents working in Belarus for the foreign media face stricter accreditation requirements and under the new law receive high penalties for distributing information that is "incorrect" or "damaging to the country". Foreign journalists are also banned from operating within Belarus without special permission, which rules out short-notice visits. As the OSCE report points out, the law "relegates fundamental questions of accreditation to the discretion of the accrediting bodies, which emasculates the very meaning of accreditation, that is the unhindered receipt of information about the activities of state authorities and public organizations."

Further features of the law include the weakening of previous guarantees of the confidentiality of sources and new stipulations on "accuracy" that will potentially outlaw the publication of forecasts, comment and satire. Overall, the law simplifies suspension or closure of a media outlet, which can follow two official warnings for any kind of violation, a measure disproportionate to the offence.

Not part of the new law but also highly detrimental to press freedom in Belarus is an increasing tendency to apply a 2007 law on the "counteraction of extremism" to the media. On 25 February 2009, Eurozine partner *Arche* was charged with extremism after copies of the journal were confiscated by guards at the Belarusian-Polish border town of Brest. The district court judged that the issue, which appeared immediately after the 2008 parliamentary elections, contained material "that discredits the activities of the authorities of the Republic of Belarus, fuels political and social tension and incites the organisation of a collective revolt". Needless to say, the offending content at no point supported the use of violence.³ At the request of the KGB, the court ruled that the issue represented "a threat to the country's security" and ordered that the confiscated copies be destroyed.

Thankfully, *Arche's* appeal was upheld on 7 May and the charges were dropped shortly before the case was due to be re-tried at the end of June (a conviction would have meant searches of *Arche's* stocks and possible closure). Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see this as a victory for press freedom. The failure to reimburse *Arche's* legal costs means there has been no admission of error on the part of the KGB and similar charges could be brought against the journal again. The dropping of charges against *Arche* signals not so much a concession to the right to free speech as a reminder to the independent press and its clientele that in Belarus free speech has its limits. Reports of a forthcoming law that will outlaw possession of "extremist" materials and allow the KGB to search the private space of any subscriber to suspect publications adds to the impression of arbitrariness in the official definition of press freedom.

These developments come on top of a crushing state monopoly over the print and electronic media. In Belarus, unlike in other post-Soviet nations, there has been no thoroughgoing privatization of the media. State subsidization of the media is massive, in the 2009 budget amounting to approximately 90 million US dollars (that is according to official accounts, the real total may be higher) — a sum that has tripled over the last five years. Over three-quarters of this

budget was allocated to television and radio.⁴ According to counts made at the beginning of January 2009, there are 227 radio and TV channels registered in Belarus, 165 of which are state-owned. BelSat, the most-viewed independent television channel, is broadcast from Poland with Polish funding and on 6 July was, for the umpteenth time, refused authorization to operate from within Belarus.

In the print sector, government control of printing and distribution structures cements the competitive advantage of state-owned media: the circulation of the largest officially backed Russian-language daily, *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, is 500 000; that of *Narodnaya Volya*, the largest independent daily, just 55 000. Out of 1307 registered periodicals in the country, fewer than 30 are both independent and what could broadly be described as political. Advertising is subject to strict regulation; investors that do place advertising in disobedient periodicals are "invited" to KGB departments and to ministries, where it is explained to them that they are jeopardizing their business.

Zhanna Litvina, chairperson of the BAJ, regrets that journalists working in the state-owned media frequently understand their role as to cater to the needs of the state and to the concerns of the Communist Party and its voters. As a result, an imbalance has been created between the expectations of the public and the image of these expectations by the state media. "It is here that we can find clues as to the problem of Belarusian society in general, why it appears to be frozen and why it is so easily ruled", Litvina says.

This relation between a compliant population and a one-sided media is never more pronounced than during elections. According to the BAJ, the media failed to inform the electorate of its political options during the 2008 parliamentary elections, instead "depoliticizing" coverage by focusing heavily on the procedural aspects of the electoral process. Activities and events designed to put the government in a positive light — celebratory events, factory openings and so on — were featured heavily, while coverage of opposition candidates, such that it existed, was overwhelmingly negative (albeit with slight improvements on the 2004 elections). No televised debates between candidates were organized prior to the elections and campaign slots on national TV were shown outside prime time (although re-broadcasted during prime time on a private channel with lower ratings). Particularly controversial was the refusal of the state media to publish pre-election programmes of opposition candidates. The small circulation of the independent media meant it had very little impact in addressing this informational imbalance.

Bearing in mind this situation, along with the physical and psychological harassment of journalists that takes place on a more or less daily basis, journalists in Belarus have little cause for optimism about the "liberalization" of the media sector. The improvements that *have* been made — notably an increase in the influence of non-state media, the increase in print runs of non-state periodicals, and the rapid development of web-based media and citizens' journalism — are, says the BAJ, "neither systematic nor irreversible". And while two important and high-profile periodicals — *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaya Vola* — were returned to the state distribution system in November 2008, around a dozen independent publications, mostly regional, are still denied state distribution.

Online and digital media: An island of freedom?

Statistics on Internet–use in Belarus vary, the organization e–belarus.org putting it at 3.1 million people and the BAJ⁵ at 22 per cent of the population (lower than in neighbouring countries). The same BAJ survey finds that only 7.3 per cent of Internet users access social and political information via the Web. Nevertheless, it is a medium whose importance has not escaped the notice of the ministry of communications, which has announced ambitious targets for increasing broadband and wireless access in the private and state sectors by 2015.

Of course, the government's Internet–friendly attitude lasts only as long as the infrastructure remains in its control: at the moment, there are approximately 180 telecommunication operators providing Internet access, which all rent web space from the state–owned telecommunications company BelTelekom; plans for the full privatization of BelTelekom in five years time are not looked upon enthusiastically by the authorities. In May 2008, details of a governmental round table were published in which ministers expressed concerns about "flows of disinformation from foreign websites" and referred positively to "Chinese methods of blocking such information", as well as the use of filtering software by service providers to weed out material "conflicting the current legislation or norms of public morality".⁶ Other sources, meanwhile, casually mention KGB raids on websites encouraging religious extremism, child pornography, and e–fraud.⁷ Laws protecting private Internet users from state surveillance are non–existent: the KGB is entitled to demand traffic logs from service providers without having applied for a warrant. Opposition websites, including Charter 97 and Radio Svaboda, are regularly subject to DDOS (distributed denial of service) attacks, which they suspect originate from the security services.⁸

Nevertheless, online and digital media represent something of a legal loophole. Though the new media law does contain new regulations concerning online media, there are indications⁹ that this applies only to "analogues" of print media, as opposed to web–only publications (with the offshoot that journalists working solely in digital media are unable to gain press accreditation). The BAJ refers to the Internet as "an island of freedom" and encourages print newspapers to develop their own websites as their sole route of survival if faced with closure — the route taken by the independent trades union newspaper *Salidarnast*.¹⁰ This partial censoring of the Internet by the authorities suggests that the government does not want to alienate the younger generation of 15 to 24 year olds who make up the single largest group of users in the country.

The story of the popular *CDMag* illustrates the aptitude of digital media for bypassing state censorship still focused on print and electronic media. Having operated as a samizdat student paper in the late 1980s, *CDMag*'s forerunner *Studenckaya Dumka* became the official newsletter of the Belarusian student association after independence; by 1998 it had evolved into a 40–page colour magazine. When *Studenckaya Dumka* was closed down in December 2003 after the competition–winning slogan ("Don't wait for the moment, create it yourself") was deemed a step too far, the magazine set up an informal distribution network, bringing 300 copies — the maximum legal print run for an unauthorized publication — to each outlet. After a coordinated swoop by the KGB in November 2005, no printer in Minsk would touch the publication; faced with a choice between printing abroad or going digital, *Studenckaya Dumka* opted for the latter and changed its name. Despite a failed attempt to register the magazine and another visit by the KGB in August 2006, *CDMag* continues to distribute anonymously. Conceived in magazine format and

produced on a CD, each issue has a lead story along with interviews, cartoons, and other youth-interest features. *CDmag* is enthusiastically digital, mixing video, flash animation, text, photo and audio, and a new website has just been launched.¹¹

Language and opposition

Like Ukraine, Belarus is a country of two languages. Lukashenka's neo-Soviet regime gains support from the Russian-speaking sector of the population, while the use of the Belarusian language in opposition circles is an expression of the rejection of what are seen as the remnants of Soviet colonialism. As a result, the brunt of the censorship of the independent media is borne by television and radio stations, journals and websites publishing in Belarusian.

After coming to power in 1994, Lukashenka exploited popular resentment of the aggressive promotion of Belarusian that had been underway immediately since independence in 1991. A referendum in 1995 reversed a 1992 language law that had introduced Belarusian as the sole official language, and Russian was reinstated as a second official language. Since then there has been a steady attrition of the Belarusian language in the public sphere; today only five per cent of schools teach classes in Belarusian (compared to 30 per cent in 1993).

"The language divide" is not only between Belarusian and Russian, but also between the Soviet and pre-Soviet Belarusian orthography. The Soviet form of Belarusian, known as *narkamauka* (*narkamat* = ministry), was introduced after a grammatical reform in 1933 that went hand in hand with political repression of "national democrats" and continues to be officially endorsed. The pre-Soviet orthography, called *tarashkevitsa* (after Branislaw Tarashkevich, who compiled the first standardized grammar of the Belarusian language in 1918), is used by independent media outlets, including *Arche*, *Dziejaslou*, and *Radio Svaboda*.

The use of *tarashkevitsa* has an enormous symbolic value that goes to the heart of the political identity of the democratic opposition. *Tarashkevitsa* was itself the fruition of national resistance to Tsarist cultural russification policy which, from 1836 onwards, included banning the use of the Belarusian language in universities and the press. In 1906 *Nasha Niva* became the first legally published Belarusian language newspaper and was synonymous with a Belarusian "national awakening" until being closed by the Tsarist authorities in 1915.

After the declaration of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic on 1 Jan 1919, Belarusian continued to be promoted as the official language of the BSSR. This policy came to a halt with rise of Stalin at the end of the 1920s: from then on the Belarusian language had a cultural life only among a politically disarmed literary intelligentsia. Yet membership of the Union of Writers of the BSSR by no means guaranteed protection from Stalinist repressions: on the night of the 28 October 1937, more than a hundred writers and intellectuals were executed in the NKVD prison in Minsk. After 1945, Russian was firmly established as the primary means of communication, existing in everyday usage only among the cultural elite and *kolkhozniks* (collective farmers) — a paradoxical situation, remarks *Arche* editor Valer Bulhaku.

From the 1960s, a liberalization took place: socialist realism was at its height and Belarusian-language writers — providing they toed the official line —

could pursue a relatively well-rewarded niche existence. During *perestroika* there was a move back from *narkamauka* to *tarashkevitsa* among union members, who were instrumental in establishing the Belarusian Democratic Front (BNF) in 1988 (the most prominent among them the novelist Vasil Bykau). The direct successor to the writers union continued until 2001, when state funding was withdrawn and its journals turned over to Lukashenka loyalists. The reaction was the founding of an independent writers union, the Belarusian Union of Writers (*Sayuz belaruskikh pismennikau* — SBP) with its own journal, *Dziewaslou*;¹² today the SBP has a membership of under 700 and must compete with an "official" union set up in 2005.

The precarious situation of *Dziewaslou* is typical of that facing independent journals publishing in *tarashkevitsa*. Denied distribution in kiosks and bookshops, *Dziewaslou* is unable to sell enough copies to become self-supporting; to make matters worse, libraries are discouraged from subscribing. Nevertheless, some librarians ignore the blacklist and *Dziewaslou* does make it onto the shelves (editor Barys Piatrovich recalls with satisfaction seeing dog-eared copies alongside pristine copies of officially approved journals). Another means of distribution — readings in schools and local libraries — has also been blocked after a ban on organizing meetings with the SBP.

A "Law on Rules of Belarusian Orthography and Punctuation", due to be implemented in September 2010, will ban the use of *tarashkevitsa* and is widely seen as a further measure to restrict the independent media. Publishers are undecided on how to react, with many advocating the use of *narkamauka* in order to avoid being squeezed out of the public sphere entirely — a step already taken by *Nasha Niva* in 2008, having published in *tarashkevitsa* for the last fifteen years.

Yet there are signs of a resurgence of the Belarusian language. In a recent official poll, 89 per cent of respondents said that they spoke Belarusian in their everyday lives. Experience shows, however, that the actual figure is much lower. Why would people falsely claim to speak Belarusian? Were they acknowledging that they would like to speak the language if only they knew how? Anecdotal evidence seems to bear this out: *Arche* editor Alexandra Makavik recounts sitting in a taxi and talking on her mobile phone in Belarusian when the driver remarked: "How nice it is to hear the Belarusian language. I regret having forgotten how to speak it myself."

The economics of Europeanization

The images¹³ of Alexander Lukashenka in audience with Pope Benedict XVI circulated by international news agencies in April 2009 were somewhat incongruous given the hostility of Belarus' politically subservient Orthodox Church towards the Catholic Church. What was going on here? It was hard not to speculate about the involvement of the British PR company Chime Communications, hired in August 2008 to improve the image of Belarus abroad. Led by the former Margaret Thatcher advisor and life peer Timothy Bell, Chime is also likely to have been behind last year's sympathetic interviews with Lukashenka in *The Financial Times*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Wall Street Journal* and elsewhere.

Bell Pottinger Sans Frontieres, the Chime Communications subsidiary handling the Belarus file, lists under "recent achievements", "supporting the government of Belarus in its programme for economic and democratic

reform"¹⁴ — though if they know about any programme of democratic reform on the part of the Belarusian government, they are keeping it to themselves. Nor should one be fooled by the charitable sounding French addendum: "As our name suggests, Bell Pottinger Sans Frontieres recognizes no boundaries, disciplinary or geographic, when it comes to how or where we support our clients." These ethical boundary-pushers are "agnostic about the tools we use to deliver solutions" operating "in plain sight or below the radar".

Dark PR arts aside, over the last year there have been some very "within radar" indications of political rapprochement between Belarus and the West. On 23 June, the PACE (Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly) voted to restore to Belarus its "special guest" status, removed since 1997, conditional upon the country's suspension of the death penalty. More prominently still, Belarusian government officials travelled to Prague in May for the first meeting of countries participating in the EU's Eastern Partnership programme. This effectively ended the moratorium on meetings between the EU and the Belarusian government and involved a six-month lifting of the symbolic EU travel ban on high-ranking Belarusian officials. It is worth noting that an EU visa still costs 60 dollars in Belarus, almost twice as much as in other Eastern Partnership countries — something likely to affect the answer ordinary Belarusians give to the question, "Whose rapprochement?"

EU sanctions on Belarus had been in place since 2000, when the OSCE deemed the parliamentary elections that year irregular, and were stepped up after the next election in 2004. The barricades only began to come down in 2007, when a steady trickle of political prisoners began to issue from Belarusian prisons. This came to a politically opportune head with the release of Alexander Kazulin, the leader of the oppositional Social Democratic Party (*Hramada*) and former presidential candidate, shortly before the parliamentary elections in autumn 2008. Prior to the elections, Lukashenka had announced he would be prepared to see opposition politicians in parliament; in the event, not a single one made it that far. Tiny procedural mistakes led to the disqualification of many opposition candidates, while an absurdly low ceiling on campaign expenditure meant that the elections were barely taken notice of by the population. The OSCE, although this time allowed into the polling stations, consequently judged the elections to have been undemocratic. Significant, however, was the official Belarusian reaction to this verdict: whereas in the past, such statements would have been grist to the anti-western propaganda mill, now the Belarusian authorities concentrated on OSCE's few positive comments. The state media, previously so damning of the European Union, did a U-turn and turned on those countries opposed to Belarus' European rapprochement.¹⁵

Needless to say, for Belarus the rapprochement is born of economic necessity. In 2007 Russia raised the price of its oil exports, forcing Belarus to sell a 50 per cent share of Beltransgaz to Gazprom; more recently, Russia has delayed on the final instalment of a 2 billion dollar stabilization loan agreed upon in November 2008. Deterioration of relations with Russia has prompted Belarus to seek help from the West, in January 2009 receiving a 2.5 billion US dollar loan from the IMF, a requirement of which was that the Belarusian rouble was devalued by 20 per cent. Foreign investment is needed to modernize the Belarusian economy — 80 per cent of which remains in state hands — if Lukashenka is to continue to provide the relatively high level of welfare that is among the main reasons why the majority of the population support him.

There are reports that some opposition leaders have begun blaming the rapprochement for the preservation of the regime, possibly an attempt to use the EU as a scapegoat for political ineffectiveness. Certainly, the rapprochement undermines the opposition's attempt to portray Lukashenka as an international pariah, while recent outbursts of contempt for Russia do indeed suggest that Lukashenka believes he has a new source of political legitimacy. Yet is the democratic opposition really so sectarian as to oppose European rapprochement for the sake of internal political jockeying? Not according to Andrej Dynko, editor-in-chief of the politically unaffiliated *Nasha Niva*.¹⁶ Positions among the opposition differ, he says, only insofar as some believe the Lukashenka regime must be engaged with whatever the repressions, others refusing to negotiate before basic democratic values are restored. So how is the westwards shift in Lukashenka's foreign policy viewed by the population at large?

"Only the minority of Belarusians perceive themselves as political citizens", says Dynko. "As long as personal interests aren't affected, the opposition will be limited to small groups, much as was the case in the Czechoslovakia and the GDR. Except that now, this tendency is even more pronounced. People earn less than in western nations but a certain stability exists. Small personal incomes enable the state-controlled economy to accumulate wealth and to develop industry. The situation in Belarus is comparable to that in China, where only a small fraction of the population cares about political rights. Yet while China is self-sufficient, Belarus has been reliant on heavy Russian subsidies in exchange for cultural Russification and political loyalty. Now the country is in danger of sleepwalking into economic chaos."

Yet are not aspirations for economic freedoms more potent a democratic force than the nationalism of an intellectual elite? Not necessarily, replies Dynko. "It is not such a simple question in authoritarian systems, in which complex clientelist networks exist around the regime, enabling and controlling access to financial and other resources. In Russia, the middle class does not form a democratic vanguard, while in the Ukraine, though the Orange Revolution did indeed gain the broad support of the middle classes, the fundamental driving force was national identity. This is the most important factor for change. The national democratic movement is rooted in the desire to realize national honour, and that is the reason for the current upsurge in national identity. There is a sense that if Belarus is internally different, as the regime claims, why should it be a satellite of Russia? If Belarus is a nation, why Lukashenka and not national values?"

So is there no motor for change that transcends national identity? What about the millions of Russian-speakers in Belarus who also desire a more democratic system? "The European factor will always be the major one since it is accessible to all groups," says Dynko. "However change is not reducible solely to EU integration, but also about forces and relations of production. The state economy has proved to be less effective than the market economy. This will gradually become a motor for change. The global economic crisis will also contribute to political change. Until recently the financial crisis has been denied by the state media. The crisis has revealed to everybody, from the government elite all the way down, that the Belarusian economy is contingent upon the global economy. The financial crisis has acted as cold shower: until now the Lukashists had been in danger of believing their own lies."

According to Andrew Wilson, expert on post-Soviet politics at the European Council on Foreign Relations, Lukashenka has been maintaining a balancing

act between the "welfare populism turned consumerism that is his key to the 'social contract' with the nation while trying to partially accommodate the growing pressures for nomenklatura privatization".¹⁷ This pressure comes from an increasingly influential "technocratic" faction within the regime, led by Lukashenka's son Viktor, who wields much influence in the construction and property sector. The new elite also includes Natalia Petkevich, "the new face and brains of the Lukashenka regime" according to Dynko, and Uladzimir Makiej, whom Wilson calls "the new *eminence gris*".

This political faction, writes Wilson, "want control of key economic assets for themselves; the West is perceived as a useful counterweight to a Russian incursion that comes with too many strings attached. Russian oligarchs like Roman Abramovich are already hovering over the juiciest Belarusian assets. The global economic crisis may force some Russian oligarchs to rein in their ambitions; others are already starting to think they can buy assets on the cheap." Some even look to Viktor Lukashenka with a degree of hope: "With little to show in terms of short term progress, optimistic observers look to the longer term. In time, the 'technocrats' may bring about regime change. Once they become oligarchs, they will develop and interest in the rule of law. But in order to become oligarchs they will abuse the system in the short run. The EU should be pushing for more rule of law in the region, not less."

Media perspectives

How would such a change impact upon the media? Would the effect of liberalization upon the Belarusian media, preserved in Soviet aspic during the Lukashenka period, be similar to that seen in Russia after 1991? The prospect is not exactly rosy: after a brief "golden age" between 1989 and 1996, when journalists were not subject to state control yet still enjoyed state subsidies, the oligarchs moved in. By the end of the 1990s, media pluralism was nothing more than a set of holdings each pursuing its own interest under the guise of various political "brandings".¹⁸ Should such a pattern be repeated in Belarus, the media may find that after liberalization its woes are far from over.

However there are factors that speak against such a scenario. First, the EU or an equivalent body was not politically influential in the Soviet Union prior to the collapse of communism. If the EU succeeds in accompanying Belarus along a process of liberalization, a legal structure into which the ruling elites had already invested would be immediately available. Inherent to a European model of liberalization, as opposed to the Russian model of "sovereign democracy", would be a democratic constitution guaranteeing the political independence of the media.

The second factor is that in Belarus, independent representative and self-regulatory media bodies have evolved within the grey zone of freedom characterizing the Lukashenka regime — much aided by a range of international organizations. This is far from being the case in other post-communist states that, twenty years into a privatized media market, are still developing such structures on the hoof.¹⁹ Should the Belarusian state ever submit the media to market forces, these bodies would be able to draw on existing values and experience to counteract the worst aspects of media privatization — namely plummeting journalistic standards and new forms of subservience.

A third factor is the current shift from print to digital media. Just as the financial crisis has shown that the Belarusian economy is not immune to the

global one, so the Belarusian media will find itself subject to global trends over which it has no direct control. With the emergence of a new "Twitter generation", the notoriously techno-illiterate Belarusian authorities will be no better placed to retain their hold over the media sphere than would-be print and TV monopolists anywhere else — be they state or private. Moreover, while political publishing is easy to identify and hence to censor, the cultural attitudes, practices and subjectivities that web-culture is influencing are far less specific. The web revolution could come as a godsend to Belarusian democracy.

Nevertheless, to speculate about liberalization is to some extent inappropriate when media workers in Belarus hold out very little hope for major changes in the next five to ten years. The potential for mass circulation of *Nasha Niva* and *CDMag* is undoubted, yet will remain an unknown quantity as long as political conditions remain as they are, while the efforts of *Arche* and *Dziewiaslou* to establish themselves as mainstream intellectual journals will be thwarted as long as they are forced to defend themselves from extremism charges, official hostility towards the Belarusian language, and bans from distribution in kiosks and bookshops.

Zhanna Litvina of the BAJ acknowledges that the current situation is not one the independent media can turn around themselves. "The division of the state and the media and the preparation of reforms will take place as soon as the situation changes for the better", she says. "It is of the highest importance to educate a new generation of media workers who will be able to carry out these reforms, who will be prepared to review legal acts and to make concrete proposals on improving the legal situation of the media." Barys Piotrovich of *Dziewiaslou* sums up the frustration felt all round: "Don't support us, just let us publish. If you don't create obstacles, we will survive".

Nevertheless, one thing is for certain: now that Belarus has taken a step towards Europe there is no turning back — for either party. EU guidance and support has played a crucial role in the development of the independent media in central and eastern Europe, and hope in the EU unites an otherwise fractious Belarusian democratic opposition. Hence it is crucial that opposition circles are involved in the negotiations, and not merely invoked, if the rapprochement is to be seen as more than mutual opportunism.

¹ Belarusian Association of Journalists, "Newsletter Jan–Feb 2009", <http://baj.by/index.php?module=p&tid=6>

² OSCE, "Comments on the draft law of the Republic of Belarus on the mass media", 2008, http://www.osce.org/documents/rfm/2008/06/31899_en.pdf

³ For more details on the offending material, see: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-03-04-newsitem-en.html>

⁴ Figures provided by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), "Mass media in Belarus. 2008 Annual Report", available at <http://baj.by/index.php?module=p&tid=6>. All figures quoted are from this report unless otherwise stated.

⁵ See respectively: <http://www.e-belarus.org/news/200904261.html>; Belarusian Association of Journalists, "Mass Media in Belarus", March–April 2009, <http://baj.by/index.php?module=p&tid=6>

⁶ See: Belarusian Association of Journalists, "Mass Media in Belarus. Annual Report 2008". Available at: <http://baj.by/index.php?module=p&tid=6&page=1>

⁷ See: <http://www.e-belarus.org/news/200906191.html>

⁸ The most recent report of a DDOS attack was on the Charter '97 website on 10.06.2009, see: <http://baj.by/m-p-viewpub-tid-1-pid-6988.html>

⁹ See: OSCE, *ibid.*

- ¹⁰ See: <http://gazetaby.com>
- ¹¹ See: <http://www.34mag.net/>
- ¹² See: <http://www.dziejaslou.by/>
- ¹³ See: http://www.rferl.org/content/The_Boy_The_Pope_And_Lukashenka/1617734.html
- ¹⁴ See: <http://www.chime.plc.uk/our-companies/bell-pottinger-sans-fronti%C3%A8res>
- ¹⁵ For more on the "simulated" nature of the liberalizations in particular in relation to the 2008 elections, see: Astrid Sahn, "Simulierte Wandel? Belarus '08", in *Osteuropa* 12/2008
- ¹⁶ See: <http://www.nn.by/>
- ¹⁷ Andrew Wilson, "Belarus after its post-Georgia elections", http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_wilson_on_belarus/
- ¹⁸ See: Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics. Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, Yale 2005, 43.
- ¹⁹ See, for example: Svetoslav Terziev, "Between a rock and a very hard case. The Bulgarian media fends off a criminalized state", in *Eurozine*: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-03-20-terziev-en.html>; or Ioana Avadani, "Hey Jude. Media self-regulation in Romania", in *Eurozine*, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-03-20-avadani-en.html>

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