

Statement
International Mission to the Republic of Belarus
20-24 September 2009

International Media and Press Freedom Organisations jointly call for reforms and the removal of restrictions on the media in the Republic of Belarus

A group of international media and press freedom organisations today called upon the Belarus authorities to bring the country's media environment into accordance with international standards, following the visit of a joint delegation to Minsk from 20 to 24 September 2009.

The group welcomes recent changes and recognises that pressure on media and journalists has eased. However, this must be translated into a lasting commitment to ensure the rights of journalists and to undertake much needed reforms of the media environment. Such changes need to be far reaching and irreversible.

The delegation met with media organisations and with authorities of Belarus in Minsk to exchange views and assess the current situation of the media, press freedom, freedom of expression and access to information.

The participating organisations and signatories to the present statement will present a full report as a contribution to the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue and share it with other international organisations.

The undersigned organisations, consider that:

- a) Economic conditions for media outlets are not equal for all. *Belsayuzdruk* and *Belposhta* distribution systems limit access and circulation of non-state newspapers. These restrictions hinder the development of an independent and pluralistic media landscape;
- b) Non-transparent and arbitrary allocation of broadcast licences and frequencies hinder the development of independent and pluralistic broadcasting;
- c) Access to information is restricted, in particular because of the adoption and implementation of laws that limit the journalists' right to information, or discriminate between state and non-state media in accessing information of public interest;
- d) Accreditation of journalists working for Belarus or foreign media, as well as the registration of offices of media, are restricted by non-transparent and discriminatory decisions of the authorities;

- e) Belarus legislation on defamation and extremism limits press freedom, leads journalists to self-censorship and is not in line with European and international standards on press freedom;
- f) Although we welcome the new dialogue on ethics and self-regulation, the group highlights the importance that action on this issue should be driven by the media community itself.

Recommendations:

The following recommendations made by the group are aimed at improving and strengthening the media environment in Belarus for state and non-state media, as well as enhance professionalism, pluralism and the role of media in a democratic society.

- 1) Editorial independence of state and non-state media must be respected and they should not be targeted for their professional activities;
- 2) Non-state media should have the right and possibility to operate and develop under fair economic conditions, including the right to be distributed without restriction or discrimination;
- 3) Rules and conditions for accreditation of journalists should be established. They should be transparent, unambiguous and fair, and seek to allow access for all journalists to information of public interest;
- 4) Journalists should not be obstructed from reporting on public events and demonstrations;
- 5) The allocation of broadcasting licenses and frequencies should be defined by a legislation according to international standards and overseen by a fully independent regulator to ensure pluralism in the broadcasting sector;
- 6) The 'Law on the Media', the 'Law On Counteraction to Extremism' and articles of the Criminal Code relating to defamation, should be reformed to bring them into line with international press freedom and freedom of expression standards;
- 7) Authorities should ensure equal treatment of organisations representing journalists;
- 8) Media, authorities and civil society should continue the dialogue on improving media policies and practices.

Organisations signing this statement stand ready to provide expertise and support in assisting the media community and authorities to realise these recommendations.

Minsk, 24 September 2009

The organisations signing up to this statement include:

1. Article 19
2. Civil Rights Defenders
3. Committee to Protect Journalists
4. Danish Union of Journalists
5. Index on Censorship
6. International/European Federation of Journalists
7. International Media Support
8. International Publishers' Association
9. International Pen
10. International Press Institute
11. Open Society Institute
12. PressNow
13. Reporters without Borders
14. World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers

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