

July 23: AEJ warns of Belarus government attempt to ‘eradicate freedom of expression’

By William Horsley, AEJ Media Freedom Representative

On Thursday the Belarus Justice ministry asked the country’s Supreme Court to close down the Belarusian Association of Journalists. The BAJ has been a mainstay of resistance to the government’s merciless crackdown on independent media and civil society voices in the wake of last year’s rigged presidential election.

Aleksander Lukashenko stayed in office by deploying the powers of a police state, including widespread violence and alleged torture, to suppress a peaceful nationwide uprising.

The Justice Ministry has alleged that the BAJ has ‘repeatedly violated the law’, although reports say that the allegations include technical infringements related to the leases on some of its offices. The BAJ has said it will fight to maintain its legal status. Last week police raided the association’s offices for the second time. Documents and equipment have been seized, and its premises were sealed off and its bank accounts frozen.

This attempt to impose a legal ban on the important activities of the Belarusian Journalists Association, combined with the recent escalation of efforts to silence all forms of political dissent, represents an unprecedented attempt to eradicate freedom of expression in Belarus. The international community must use all available means to stop the desecration of freedom of expression and other basic rights in Belarus, and to make outlaws and pariahs of those responsible for the crimes of the Lukashenko regime.

The European Federation of Journalists condemned the new threat against the BAJ as a pretext to dismantle the only professional journalists body in Belarus defending free and independent journalism

<https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-close-journalist-association-media-/31371191.html> .

On July 5 the UN Special Rapporteur monitoring the situation in Belarus, Anais Marin, issued a report detailing a vast range of human rights violations including torture, enforced disappearances, and the detention of some 35,000 people <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/07/1095302> . She called on the authorities to immediately end their policy of repression and fully respect the legitimate aspirations of their people.

This month has seen what Yuri Dzhibladze, a member of the Civil Solidarity Platform’s Working Group on Belarus, called “actions aimed at eliminating all independent civil society organisations in Belarus”. Dzhibladze told a meeting hosted by the Doughty Street firm of barristers in London that the International Committee Against Torture was among dozens of non-government groups targeted in the most recent police raids.

Closed trials and state persecution of lawyers who defend journalists

Aleh Aheyev, a Belarusian Association of Journalists, told the same meeting that Belarus had reached a condition she described as “a complete absence of law”. The deaths of at least four anti-government protestors in police custody had been confirmed, she said.

The Lukashenko regime’s moves to deprive journalists and others of their rights to legal defence is now a cause of acute concern. As many as twenty lawyers have been disbarred from practising, Mr Dzhibladze said. Many others have been pressured to sign non-disclosure agreements preventing them from speaking publicly on behalf of their clients. Trials are closed to the public without any reason given. And the government orchestrates hostile propaganda campaigns to discredit human rights lawyers.

On June 20, Andrei Aliaksandrau, the editor of the Belarus Journal website and former employee of the London-based organisation Index on Censorship, was charged with treason. If convicted he could face up to 15 years in jail <https://cpj.org/2021/07/imprisoned-belarusian-journalist-andrei-aliaksandrau-charged-with-treason/#:~:text=The%20journalist%20has%20been%20held,group%20the%20Belarusian%20Association%20of>

Andrei Aliaksandrau is a respected journalist and media freedom campaigner who had close relations with the Association of European Journalists when he lived in London. He and his girlfriend Irina Zlobina have been in custody since January for alleged public order offences that have been dismissed by human rights groups as spurious and absurd.

Last week it emerged that his lawyer, Anton Gashinski, was among those who have now been disbarred.

The AEJ joins more than a dozen media freedom organisations in demanding Aliaksandrau's immediate and unconditional release and the dropping of all the charges against him

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/02/joint-statement-journalist-and-human-rights-defender-andrei-aliaksandrau> .