

Raids on Belarusian Journalists

On March 27 and 28, the Belarusian Security Service (KGB) raided the Minsk offices of the external broadcasters Radio Ratsia and European Radio for Belarus, as well as the apartments of a dozen independent journalists in Minsk, Brest, Vitebsk, Gomel, Grodno, and other smaller cities in Belarus. Most of these journalists were affiliated with Radio Ratsia, European Radio for Belarus, and TV Belsat. Several computers and equipment were also confiscated.

The searches were officially made as a part of criminal procedure against published caricatures of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. Zhanna Litvina, head of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, suggested that most likely it was simply the authorities' revenge for objective coverage by journalists of the events in Minsk on March 25 (mass rally on celebration of the Freedom Day) and for publishing truthful information about the general situation in the country. The organization expressed doubt that there were "adequate and lawful grounds" for the searches.

Most of the companies whose journalists were searched are financed by the European Union and broadcast from Poland, though maintain rather large staff basis in Belarus. The Belarusian foreign ministry explained that the searches had only been conducted for journalists deemed to be working illegally in Belarus. Radio Ratsia, European Radio for Belarus and Belsat had all been denied government accreditation.

Sources:

Kommersant, Charter 97, Office for a Democratic Belarus

Further decrease of U.S. Embassy staff

On the March 31, Minsk announced that it had decided to reduce the number of staff members in its embassy in Washington and recommended the United States to do the same. The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs then claimed on the April 2, that Belarus would reduce the number of its own diplomatic representatives in the USA to 7 and suggested that the USA similarly leave only 7 representatives in Belarus. These steps came after the reduction of the US embassy's staff by half to 17 people, carried out at the previous request of the Belarusian authorities at the beginning of March.

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry explained that the decision was made because the US government had "repeatedly refused to abolish additional restrictive measures of an economic nature" against Belnaftakhim, as well as "considering the US administration's consistent policy aimed at scaling down contacts with the Belarusian side."

A representative of the US Department of State said that Washington considered the Belarusian government's demand to be unlawful and unfounded and that the situation is evidence that Washington's sanctions against the Belnaftakhim petrochemical conglomerate are working.

Source:

Office for a Democratic Belarus