

## House approves new version of Media Law

On June 24, the House of Representatives passed the government-sponsored new version of Belarus' Media Law, after being approved in the first reading on June 17. The opposition politicians accuse the government of rushing the bill through the legislature in an attempt to have a tool to restrict freedom of information and block critical websites ahead of the elections for the House of Representatives, scheduled for September 28, 2008. Natalya Pyatkevich, deputy chairwoman of the Presidential Administration, rejected the criticism.

The bill has also been severely criticized by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) according to which, the draft law defines the Internet as a form of the distribution of information online, which means that online media outlets become subject to procedures applied to print and broadcasting media outlets and thereby allow the government to require them to be officially registered. Thus, all online news media will have to be re-registered within a year. The non-registered online media might be regulated or even blocked by the government, which poses a serious threat to many online independent news sources.

The bill also gives the possibility to close a media outlet after two warnings within a year, without any limitation for the motives under which a warning can be issued. Thanks to the new law, media might be held accountable for damage to the state or society's interests if it is perceived to be caused by the information they distribute. The bill also bans professional activities of non-accredited journalists working for foreign media outlets, whilst prohibiting Belarusian media outlets from receiving financial and technical support from foreign private persons and organisations unless they are co-founders. The new law also allows the head of state to use the media without their prior consent to talk to the population.

On June 25, dozens of Belarusian websites and bloggers joined a one-day protest against the new version of Belarus' Media Law, which was organised by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ)

Source: [naviny.by](http://naviny.by)

## Medvedev – Lukashenka meeting in Brest

On June 22, a meeting between Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev took place in Brest. Following the talks, a joint declaration was issued, in which they reaffirmed their adherence to the Treaty on the Formation of the Belarusian-Russian Union.

They expressed their satisfaction with recent developments concerning mutual relations and called for further Belarusian-Russian integration cooperation which should include stronger military and humanitarian ties, further development of trade and economic cooperation based on the principles of market economy, equal rights, mutual benefit and due regard for each other's interests. However, the bilateral negotiations have brought no progress in the issue most important to Belarus; the price of gas. According to the contract of gas supplies signed in 2006 Belarus, now paying the lowest price among CIS countries must purchase gas at European prices by 2011. Belarusians currently pay 128USD/1000m<sup>3</sup>, which are to be further increased next year. Belarus is trying to re-negotiate the agreement to maintain the current low prices.

Sources: [naviny.by](http://naviny.by), [charter97](http://charter97.org), [Kommersant](http://kommersant.ru)

## **European Union's "Eastern Partnership" project approved**

On June 19, the European Union's Eastern Partnership project based on the EU's European Neighborhood Policy was approved by the leaders of the 27 EU member-states. It creates a new multilateral forum between EU and the countries of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus, aiming at increasing cooperation, strengthening economic and political ties which would lead to visa-free travel regime, establishment of a free trade zone and aims to prepare these countries for future potential EU membership.

Since Belarus does not fully participate in the European Neighborhood Policy, it will gain a special status and is thus required to fulfill the EU's 12 conditions regarding democratisation before it can join the action plan for involvement in the EU's European Neighborhood Policy.

Source: [naviny.by](http://naviny.by)