

## RWB: Foreign news media still being arbitrarily denied accreditation

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Statement by Reporters Without Borders, 29 September 2009 Four days after a joint international press freedom mission to Belarus, Reporters Without Borders today called on the Belarusian government to stop obstructing the work of journalists working for foreign news media. The press freedom organisation has signed a statement issued by the mission at the end of its five-day visit noting that: "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."

Under a new media law that took effect on 8 February, foreign news media and their correspondents – both foreigners and Belarusians – must obtain accreditation from the foreign ministry before they can begin working. In practice, the authorities reject or ignore most requests, forcing journalists to work illegally. "Despite our repeated calls, the Belarusian authorities continue to demonstrate bad faith by rejecting requests for accreditation by foreign media and their local correspondents," Reporters Without Borders said. "We therefore reiterate our appeal to the foreign ministry to examine all these requests and respond favourably to them." Aleksey Malkov and Yuri Babenko, two journalists working for the Russian television station NTV, were expelled from Belarus on 14 August for working without accreditation. They had been trying to do a story about the disappearances of a journalist, two opposition members and a businessman in 1999 and 2000. Dzmitry Kisel, the local correspondent of the Polish-Dutch radio station Radio Racyja, and Aleh Razhku, a journalist accused of working for Belsat TV without permission, received warnings from the prosecutors of Brest and Homyel on 23 September. If they continue working, they could be fined the equivalent of about 500 euros. Belsat TV originally requested accreditation on 20 December 2008, before the new law was promulgated, but it had to start over in March after the foreign ministry told it that certain documents were missing from its application. Under the new law, the ministry is supposed to respond to requests within a month, but the station is still waiting to be told of its final decision. Radio Racyja journalist Viktor Parfyonenka was refused accreditation on 25 September on the grounds that he had begun to work illegally without waiting for permission. Parfyonenka insists that he followed all the procedure correctly. "Before beginning to work for Radio Racyja, I submitted an application for accreditation to the ministry in May," he told Reporters Without Borders. When I called them, they told me all my papers were in order. But then they took four months to respond. Meanwhile, I had to earn a living. So I began working for the station before getting a reply." Reporters Without Borders added: "Radio Racyja and Belsat TV are among the few independent news outlets in Belarus and the foreign ministry would do well to stop obstructing their work. As Belarusian government says it is determined to pursue an "Eastern Partnership" with the European Union, it should show a real determination to improve the press freedom situation."