

# And we think we've got problems...

**MIKE JEMPSON** spent a week in Belarus with the local journalists' union. Members of the Belarus Association of Journalists (BAJ) are facing the worst restrictions and official obstruction in Europe — and that's not all

**FEBRUARY 20:** The 18 passengers on my flight have 34 seats each. A hammer-and-sickle shaped patch of woodland is silhouetted against the snow as we descend on Minsk airport. I learn that Belarus's President Alaksandr Lukashenko recently told journalism students that the media is a weapon of mass destruction that must be kept under state control.

**FEBRUARY 21:** An early start to visit the weekly Slonim Gazette, the last independent regional. No local printer will handle their paper, so copy is taken on disk 150 km to Minsk. Banned from the state-run distribution system, the papers are posted to subscribers who must come to the office to order them. It cannot be sold in shops or kiosks but has a circulation of 7,000.

Success has got it into trouble. Reprimanded for exceeding the official 30 per cent space limit on advertising, it must increase pagination and thus its costs, but not its income. The law forbids changes to the cover price and ad rates set when a paper was first registered.

We reach Hrodna at dusk. All seven local independent papers have been shut down. BAJ members must work abroad or online. "Were it not for the internet we would all have packed in and just gone to bed," says one of them.

**FEBRUARY 22:** Jailed journalist Alaksandr Zdvizhkov has won his appeal against a three-year sentence for reprinting the Danish Mohammed cartoons as deputy editor of Zhoda. The paper was closed down and he left the country but was arrested when he returned for his father's funeral. The sentence was attributed to Lukashenko's desire to win favour with Iran and Arab countries now investing in Belarus, but local Muslim leaders appealed for leniency.

I meet former editor Aliaksej Karol who is worried that their new publication *Novy Chas* (New Times) will close if it cannot raise the damages bill of £15,000 over another article that upset the authorities.

**FEBRUARY 23:** To Vileyka, where all the independent publications are unregistered, which means they can only distribute 299 copies. When plaster fell from the ceiling of a local school



*Aliaksej Karol, former editor of Zhoda: worried about the future of the paper set up to replace it*

Mike Jempson visited Belarus for a project run by the International Federation of Journalists in support of the Belarus Association of Journalists [www.baj.by](http://www.baj.by). The project is funded by the International Media Support Fund. For more on the project go to [www.ifj.org](http://www.ifj.org) and follow "reports"



*Alaksandr Zdvizhkov, who was jailed for three months for publishing the Mohammed cartoons, announces he is leaving the country at a news conference at the BAJ HQ*

it could only be mentioned by publishing an advert for student safety helmets.

Back in Minsk there is news that Iryna Kazulin, wife of the jailed opposition leader Alaksandar Kazulin, has died. Told he could be freed to nurse her if they went into exile, her husband had refused.

**FEBRUARY 24:** Seven hours by car to the grim northern city of Novapolatsk, where BAJ branch members, lacking local print outlets, have instead launched a website campaign around conservation issues. Access to the web is growing, but internet café owners must inform the KGB about the sites their clients visit. Oppositionist web sites are monitored and regularly blocked.

**FEBRUARY 25:** Five of us pack into a small car to reach Homiel, an industrial city on the edge of the Chernobyl exclusion zone near the Ukraine border. Again all the main independent newspapers have been axed. We meet in a building shared by NGOs and an opposition party whose computers are regularly removed by the KGB, which still operates in Belarus under its old Russian title.

While we are there Alaksandr Zdvizhkov announces to a press conference at BAJ HQ in Minsk that he is to quit Belarus. "I know am not safe here, and I will only be able to breathe calmly when I have left," he says.

The same day a reporter on *Komsomolskaya Pravda* is found hanged in a forest near Minsk. Many question the official announcement that it is suicide. The body of TV cameraman Dzmitry Zavadski who disappeared in 2000 has yet to be recovered, though his kidnappers were jailed. In 2002 Ukrainian journalist Mikhail Kolomiets was also found hanged in a Belarussian forest. The killer of BAJ activist Veronika Cherkasova, stabbed to death in her Minsk flat four years ago, has never been found, nor has there been a satisfactory explanation for the violent death of freelancer Vasilij Gorodnikov in 2005.

Back at my hotel staff say there has been a murder in the bar. "Nothing to worry about. Just some local businessmen who knew each other."

**FEBRUARY 26:** Alaksandar Kazulin has been granted a three-day release from jail for his wife's funeral. I join the crowds at the Catholic Church where he and his family are greeting friends and supporters beside Iryna's open coffin. There is tension and sadness and mournful music. Plain-clothes KGB men keep a watchful eye.

**FEBRUARY 27:** Back at Gatwick I devour all the newspapers I can buy. We just do not appreciate how lucky we are.