

Mysterious death of a Belarusian journalist

On 3 September near Minsk, the body of the opposition journalist Alyeh Byabyenin was found. Although it is difficult at the moment to state unequivocally what the actual cause of death was, in the political context, the death of a Belarusian journalist will be another contentious issue in relations between the EU and Belarus. At the same time, the incident will be exploited in the ongoing Russian media campaign directed at President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

36-year-old Byabyenin was the founder and later head of one of the main opposition-run internet portals, Karta '97. According to the Belarusian prosecutor's office, the cause of death was suicide, although Byabyenin's family and colleagues categorically deny this, citing the lack in his behaviour of any signs of mental breakdown. Furthermore, they highlight the cursory way in which his death has been investigated, as well as the regime's repressive policy towards the independent media in Belarus. They also suggest that it could have been a political murder at the government's orders, which in this way wanted to frighten the opposition before the presidential elections. Also, the Russian media have drawn attention to the political context, and have recalled that Byabyenin investigated the question of the abductions of Lukashenka's political opponents towards the end of the 1990s. In turn, the chairman of the European Parliament Jerzy Buzek expressed the hope that the investigation would lead to a full clarification of the matter. However, everything indicates that the death of the Belarusian journalist will on one hand pose another problem for dialogue between Minsk and the EU, and on the other, will be exploited by the Russian media campaign against Lukashenka, which has lasted for several months now. <kam>