

E-NEWSLETTER



THE BELARUSIAN  
ASSOCIATION  
OF JOURNALISTS

# MASS MEDIA in Belarus

JULY-SEPTEMBER 2012

## Special Issue:



photo.bymedia.net

[www.baj.by](http://www.baj.by)

**"The Belarusian authorities are keeping up the pressure on independent and pro-opposition journalists and news outlets in the run-up to the parliamentary elections scheduled for 23 September. The judicial harassment of journalists and Internet users critical of the government has just one aim – to keep them under pressure and make them feel permanently threatened... It is illusory to talk of free elections in such a media environment."**

**Reporters without Borders**

## DEVELOPMENT OF SITUATION IN THE MASS MEDIA FIELD



**E**lections to the House of Representatives at the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus exerted significant influence on the media environment in the country in July – September 2012. (The elections were held on September 23, 2012.) “...Many OSCE commitments on citizens' democratic rights to associate, to stand as candidates and to express themselves freely were not respected in the September 18-23 parliamentary elections in Belarus”, said the observers, who represented the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, **in a preliminary report**, issued on September 24, 2012.

(Also, see **the Final report** of “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections” on observation of the election to the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus on September 23, 2012 and **the election coverage content analysis**, conducted by the Belarusian Association of Journalists)

The following worrying events and trends were observed in the Belarusian media field within the reporting period:

- criminal prosecution of journalists, connected with their professional activity;
- arbitrary detentions of journalists and active social networkers;
- prevention of foreign media workers from carrying out their professional activity during the election campaign.

## CRIMINAL PROSECUTION OF JOURNALISTS

Three criminal cases were filed against journalists for their professional activity in the summer of 2012.

Andrzej Paczobut (Hrodna) was charged with casting aspersions on the President of Belarus. Mikalay Paczobut (Vitsiebsk) was accused of offending a public officer. Anton Surapin (Slutsk) was charged with assisting a group of people to trespass the Belarusian state border.



Anton Surapin, 20, a student of Journalism at the Belarusian State University was the first to publish photos of teddy bears with slogans in support of freedom of speech, allegedly, dropped from a small airplane that crossed illegally the Belarusian-Lithuanian state border on July 4, 2012.

The photos appeared on the student's Web-site – <http://bnp.by/>. Currently, public access to the photos in Belarus is disabled. A Swedish PR-company Studio Total took responsibility for the action “in support of democratic values in Belarus”. A KGB search was conducted at A. Surapin's rented apartment on July 13, 2012. The photo journalist was detained and placed behind the bars in the KGB jail in Minsk afterwards. His



photo camera and personal computer were seized.

A. Surapin spent more than a month in custody. His attorney wasn't permitted to inform the press and the journalist's relatives about the legal investigation procedures and even about the detainee's judicial status. It was only on August 7, 2012 that **the KGB of Belarus informed** the public about presentation of criminal charges to A. Surapin for assisting a group of people to trespass illegally the Belarusian state border.

The young journalist was released from the KGB pre-trial jail on August 17, 2012, following **a wave of appeals** on the part of Belarusian and international civil society structures. However, he was forced to sign a recognizance not to leave the place of his residence.

Legal investigation on the criminal case is still in progress.

**"I am surprised and alarmed that Anton Surapin has been indicted for uploading teddy bear photos. I hope that he will soon be set free and cleared of all charges brought against him. I further hope that the 'teddy bear case' is not the latest attempt to suppress freedom of expression in Belarus using dubious criminal charges."**

**Dunja Mijatović,**  
the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

**M. Petrushenka's publication in the personal blog section on "Nash Dom" Web-site led to filing a criminal case**



against him. Currently, a linguistic expertise is conducted on M. Petrushenka's case.

A. Paczobut's fate arouses anxiety most of all. A criminal case has been filed against the Belarusian correspondent of "Gazeta Wyborcza", following a mass examination of articles, contributed by the journalists to a number of informational on-line resources within the recent six months.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that A. Paczobut was sentenced to three years of jail with deferment of execution for two years for casting aspersions on the President of Belarus in the summer of 2011. (Independent observers regard the court verdict as politically motivated.)

If any guilty verdict is pronounced again, the journalist will be sent to jail to serve the initial term of imprisonment and the new sentence.

Legal investigation on A. Paczobut's case has been prolonged till November 21, 2012.



## ARBITRARY DETENTIONS OF JOURNALISTS AND ACTIVE SOCIAL NETWORKERS

**The Belarusian Association of Journalists registered no less than 15 arbitrary detentions of journalists at work by police within the reporting period.**

Thus, photo correspondents Iryna Kozlik and Yuliya Darashkevich were detained during an open-air photo session in support of A. Surapin on August 8, 2012. According to the custody records, I. Kozlik was detained for holding a poster "No pictures - no troubles? Expression of opinion leads to imprisonment in Belarus. Will the President put teddy bears behind the bars?" The journalists had to spend a night in a pre-trial ward in Minsk and had to stand trial on the following day. Each of them was fined 30 base amounts (around EUR 300) for "unsanctioned picketing by means of taking photos" by Savietski City District Court of Minsk. The trial was held behind the closed doors for no good reason at all. The police didn't permit media workers to enter the court room, in order to support the detained colleagues.

An independent cameraman Aliaksandr Barazienka, a BelaPAN correspondent Pavel Padabied as well as the officially accredited foreign photo journalists Siarhei Gryts (Associated Press), Vasil Fiadosenka (Reuters), Tatsiana Ziankovich (EPA), a cameraman Dzmitry Rudakou and a producer Aliaksei Akulau (ZDF) **were detained with the use of force** by men





in plain clothes during a pre-election picket, arranged by “Tell the Truth!” opposition campaign in Minsk on September 18, 2012. S. Gryts’ spectacles were broken. The journalist’s face was badly wounded. He was bleeding. The police deleted all shots from the photo correspondent’s camera. The journalists were kept at Frunzenski City District Department of Internal Affairs nearly for two hours. On release S. Gryts passed medical examination and submitted a claim for damages to the police, all in vain.

**“The fight against the picture has led again to the absurdity with the use of force. Apparently, it will continue until the chief law enforcement officers change their attitude towards journalists... The Belarusian Association of Journalists has been trying to reach mutual understanding with the police top brass and start an open discussion of problems in relations between the police and journalists. However, in spite of taking the efforts, the discussion hasn’t been started yet. The stubborn silence, combined with application of brutal dispersal methods, shows reluctance of law enforcement bodies to start any dialogue and treat the journalistic trade with dignity and respect.”**

**Zhanna Litvina,  
BAJ Chairperson**

**“There exists practice of relations with the media during public events, including unsanctioned political actions. Depending on the situation, representatives of the group on communication with the media provide information, announce commentaries, explain legal norms etc. Consequently, the level of**



**mutual relations between the police and the media during public political events can be regarded as “sufficient”.**

**Aliaksandr Ioskin,  
Head of Public Security Police  
at Minsk City Department of Internal Affairs**

Also, active social networkers and moderators of Internet-communities were arbitrarily detained without any good reason within the reporting period. Thus, Andrei Tkachou, Pavel Yeutykhiyeu, and Raman Pratasievich were detained in Minsk on August 30, 2012. The Web-activists moderated “Lyapis Trubetskoi – A Free Concert in Minsk” and “Feeling Sick and Tired of Lukashenka” virtual communities. The police conducted searches at the Web-activists’ private apartments. The personal computers were seized from them. A. Tkachou was sentenced to seven days of custody. P. Yeutykhiyeu had to spend five days in jail. The under-aged R. Pratasievich was released after a four hours’ interrogation with threats and the use of force. Aleh Shramuk, the moderator of “Feeling Sick and Tired of Lukashenka” Web-community was detained in the native city of Vitsiebsk on the same day. The activist was interrogated and released from custody. Another social networker Siarhei Biaspaly managed to avoid detention and flee Belarus.

## OBSTACLES TO FOREIGN JOURNALISTS DURING THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2012

More than 350 foreign journalists were officially accredited at the recent parliamentary elections in Belarus, Andrei Savinych, the Belarus' MFA spokesman reported to the Belarusian Association of Journalists. According to him, none of media workers were denied press credentials. However, no less than four journalists from Germany and Sweden were banned entrance to Belarus. The Belarusian embassies refused to issue national visas to them for no good reason at all.

Swedish correspondents Erik Von Platen and Gustaff Andresson had to spend approximately 16 hours at the national airport of Minsk on September 22, 2012, waiting for their airport visas and press credentials.

The Belarusian customs officers took all professional technical equipment and information carriers from an Australian journalist Amos Roberts (SBS Broadcasting Corporation) on his way home at the airport of Minsk on September 21, 2012. They didn't explain the grounds for the seizure of technical equipment. The Belarusian customs house informed the Embassy of Australia in Moscow that the technical equipment checks would last at least a month.



The contents of this publication are copyrighted. It is obligatory to refer to the Belarussian Association of Journalists, when using the E-NEWSLETTER: MASS MEDIA IN BELARUS materials.

Publisher: Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ)  
Kamsamolskaya Str., 7-32, 220030 Minsk, BELARUS  
Phone: +375 17 203-63-66, 226-70-98 Fax: +375 17 203-63-66., 226-70-98  
E-mail: [baj@baj.by](mailto:baj@baj.by) Web: [www.baj.by](http://www.baj.by)

Contact: Mr. Andrei Bastunets, BAJ Deputy Chairman