

THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

Mass Media Week in Belarus

Info-posting – December 12 - 18, 2011

The main features of the reported period are: new facts of compulsory subscription to state-run newspapers, correspondence between BAJ members and security forces (with no results yet) and pressure on individual journalists, including psychological pressure and official resignation.

On December 12, BAJ sent a letter to the Ministry of Home Affairs asking to arrange a meeting between law enforcement representatives and journalists to discuss the problem of “relations between journalists and police, the police ‘information group’ activities, the need to single out mass media representatives from the crowd, when covering street protests etc. The agreement to hold the meeting had been made in July 2011.

On December 13, workers from the criminal investigation department together with journalists from state mass media visited the garage of the *Borisovkiye Novosti* Editor-in-Chief **Anatol Bukas**. Before that Bukas had been summoned to the police where he was told that they possessed information that stolen car parts were dealt from the garage.

When Bukas came to the garage together with the policemen, journalists with photo cameras from the local Barysau newspaper *Adzinstva* (Unity) were waiting for them. The journalists were asked why they were taking photos of the garage and they answered that they had such an assignment. “When the policemen made certain that I keep only newspapers there, they wrote some reports and left. The journalists left soon after,” told Anatol Bukas.

On December 13, Ministry of Home Affairs replied to the BAJ statement on impunity of crimes against journalists. According to the answer, the police conduct “operational and search activities” to clarify the circumstances of Dzmitry Zavadski abduction and murder of Veranika Charkasava.

Aleh Piakarski, the acting First Deputy Minister and police colonel, reminds that reopening the cases and additional investigation lies within the competence of the General Prosecutor’s Office.

It is worth reminding that the previous week the General Prosecutor’s Office sent a brief answer that “the two criminal cases, mentioned in the statement, were investigated, and the two cases (of suicide) were checked with the final decision not to initiate criminal cases.”

At the end of November 2011, BAJ had sent a statement to the General Prosecutor’s Office and the Ministry of Home Affairs, demanding to resume the criminal cases on Dzmitry Zavadski abduction and Veranika Charkasava death and to give answers to their relatives, colleagues and the public – who made the crimes and who ordered them; and also demanding to hold a clear additional investigation into deaths of Aleh Biabenin and Vasil Hrodnikau.

On December 13, it became known that heads of state and private organizations in Maladzechna and Maladzechna district, Minsk region received official letters with a demand to organize subscription to a number of state mass media. The document was signed by the Chair of Maladzechna District Executive Committee Ph. Damatsienka.

The list is typical: *Sovietskaya Bielorussiya*, *Minskaya Prauda* and *Maladzechanskaya Hazeta* should reach all structural departments of the organizations, war and labor veterans, ideological department and best workers. Also the main nation-wide mass media are highly desirable, such as *Respublika*, *Zviazda*, *Narodnaya Hazeta*, *Bielorususkaya Niva*, and *Planeta* magazine.

The fulfillment of the plan must be reported to the ideological departments until December 21.

On December 14, it became known that the compulsory subscription is also exercised in Bialynichy district, Mahilou region. In particular, school teachers and kindergarteners complain that officials from the Educational department of Bialynichy District Executive Committee “highly recommend” to subscribe to some newspapers, promising problems otherwise. The responsibility for the fulfillment of the order lies on school headmasters and heads of kindergartens.

Postal workers also complain about strict measures for failing to meet the plans of subscription to state mass media. “If I don’t get a necessary number of subscriptions to *Sovietskaya Bielorussiya*, for instance, I will be deprived of the bonus to my salary for four months. So when we fail, we need to subscribe to several issues of the newspapers ourselves,” says a postman from a post-office in the district.

On December 14, **Anatol Hatouchyts**, Chair of Homiel branch of BAJ, received an answer to his complaint in the book of complaints in Chyhunachny District Police Department regarding his November 12th detention. The official answer (01.12.2011. № 44/1–2) signed by Dzmitry Zurau, regimental commander of the patrol police, says that no violations were found in the police actions.

It is worth mentioning that Anatol Hatouchyts was detained in the broad daylight in Homiel on the day of the People’s Assembly. Nobody explained the reasons for his detention, and his offer to see his ID was ignored.

On December 15, Belarusian human rights defenders launched a special campaign to collect money for paying the “damage, done by the crime” which had been allegedly committed by Ales Bialiatski. According to the court decision, the total sum of the damage is 757,526,717 (about \$90,000). An appropriate bank account in the name of his wife was opened in Belarus within the framework of the campaign. Financial means can be transferred to it only by Belarusian citizens. It is important to transfer the money before the appeal is considered in a higher court.

The fact of the fine being paid might help to commute the sentence or change the measure of detention of Ales Bialiatski.

A statement to express solidarity and support Bialiatski was signed by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Human Rights Center *Viasna*, Belarusian Association of Journalists, the movement *For Freedom!* and the Assembly of NGOs, Human Rights Center, Legal Aid to People (Ukraine), *Salidarnasts*.

Ales Bialiatski was sentenced to 4 and a half year imprisonment in maximum security colony with property confiscation. He pleaded innocent and appealed the court's decision to Minsk city court.

On December 15, it became known that **Siarhey Karpienka**, a journalist from Lida who works for Belsat, kept being persecuted. These days he has received a summons to appear in the local road police department. The cause for the summons was his owning a car Mercedes 190. The journalist does not know the essence of the problem, since he hasn't got such a car. He thinks it is one more method of pressure and intimidation.

We remind that on June 22, during silent protests in Lida, Karpienka was detained and beaten by police officers (these were patrol officer of Lida district interior department A. Lutsevich, patrol officer of the interior department of Hrodna region executive committee V. Alexandrovich, and also head of the interior department of Lida district executive committee Dzmitry Minko).

After forensic examination and complaint filed by Karpienka to Lida prosecutor's office, the policemen brought an action to court against Karpienka, accusing him of using obscene language and disobeying the police. The judge of Lida district court Maxim Filatau acquitted him based on the video recording of the detention.

Then the prosecutor's office appealed against the decision, again accusing the journalist of insulting the policemen. **On December 5**, the judge of Lida district court S. Pipko found the journalist guilty (Art. 23.5 of the Administrative Code, insulting an officer on duty) and fined him to 20 base (700 000 Br).

On December 15, Head of *Zviazda* state daily's Investigative Department **Yauhien Valoshyn** quit his job. According to Yauhen Valoshyn, the new Editor-in-Chief of *Zviazda* **Aliaxandr Karliukevich** raised the question of the journalist resignation after visiting the Ministry of Information where he had been informed about Yauhen's travel abroad during work time.

Yauhien confirms that he really went abroad to visit the Global Conference of Investigative Journalists in Kyiv. "Writing a good article is not the same as working with machines at a factory. I have worked for years following this principle, and fulfilled the soviet-times plan for a number of lines to be written. In the meanwhile I had time for preparing material on burning issues..." wrote Valoshyn in his blog. The Editor-in-Chief felt reluctant to listen to the journalist's arguments and forced him to agree to resignation.

Prepared by BAJ Monitoring Service