

THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

Mass Media Fortnight in Belarus

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11 political prisoners were released from custody on September 14, 2011. All of them had been charged with taking part in “street riots” in Minsk on December 19, 2010. Among other, Alaksandr Atroshchankau, a spokesman for the former presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau, was discharged from jail before term. He confirmed the previously disseminated evidence about tortures in the KGB Investigatory Isolation Ward.

It is worth mentioning that an independent journalist Pavel Seviarynets and the seriously ill media worker Dzmitry Bandarenka continue to serve their terms in colonies.

At the same time, a BAJ member Natallia Radzina was granted asylum by the Lithuanian Migration Department in the country at the beginning of September 2011. The “Charter’97” Editor had been charged with arranging and taking part in the “mass riot” actions on December 19, 2011 as well.

The road police detained Aksana Samuylava, a “Tell the Truth!” civil campaign activist from Mahilou on her way back from Minsk on **September 3, 2011**. The police alleged that the car was “suspected in killing some person in a road accident” and convoyed the civil activist and her car to the Leninski City District Department of Internal Affairs in Mahilou. The activist’s car was searched. Consequently, 38,546 issues of ‘Tell the Truth’ campaign newsletters as well as the campaign leaflets and brochures were seized from A. Samuylava. The activist was notified she would be called to account in court soon.

As reported on **September 5, 2011**, Kastus Shytal, an independent journalist from Hlybokaye (Vitsiebsk region) is persecuted by police. He is suspected in hiding important information from legal prosecution. According to K. Shytal, the police have been trying to make him tell the names of the people, who stained the building of the local Executive Committee twice within a month.

It is worth mentioning that the police detained K. Shytal on taking pictures of the stained Executive Committee on August 26, 2011. The journalist was kept at the local police department for 2.5 hours then. He was forced to delete all photos from his camera and “advised” not to write about the accident.

Pavel Radzivonau, the Head of Department on Supervision over Adherence to Laws and Legality of Legal Acts at the Prosecutor General’s Office delivered a statement on **September 8, 2011**. He stated that the police officers, who prevented Belarusian journalists from reporting from the unauthorized public actions, would be “held disciplinary liable for breaking the media legislation.” He refused to name the guilty police officers. However, he underscored that the people “wouldn’t be the whipping boys”.

It should be mentioned that journalists sent numerous appeals and complaints to the public prosecutor’s office, following severe violations of media workers’ professional rights during the so-called “silent protest” actions in June-July 2011.

The Lithuanian Migration Department decided to grant political asylum to **Natallia Radzina**, Editor of charter97.org Web-site. The Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called upon the Department authorities to approve the journalist's application.

"I am grateful to the authorities of Lithuania for political asylum. I feel safe for the first time in 14 years of being a Belarusian independent journalist. However, I do not consider myself an immigrant and intend to return to Belarus immediately as soon as the situation changes," N. Radzina noted.

It is worth mentioning that the journalist fled Belarus on March 31, 2011 and begged for political asylum in Lithuania on August 4, 2011. She was charged with co-arrangement of unauthorized protest actions in Minsk under article 243 of Belarusian Criminal Code on December 19, 2010. However, the criminal prosecution was terminated at the end of August 2011.

As reported on **September 13, 2011**, Dzmitry Bandarenka, a BAJ member and the "*European Belarus*" civil campaign coordinator was refused the penalty mitigation for formal reasons. It appeared that D. Bandarenka's letter from prison was delayed by censors. Therefore, his wife Volha Bandarenka didn't have enough time to collect all necessary documents for the application.

It's worth mentioning that D. Bandarenka was A. Sannikau's authorized representative at the Presidential election 2010. He was detained after the meeting on December 19, 2010 and thrown to the KGB Legal Investigatory Isolation Ward. The media worker's chronic diseases exacerbated during his stay behind the bars. The court found D. Bandarenka guilty of "arranging group actions that drastically violated public order and taking part in them." Consequently, he was sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment in a general regime penal colony.

On July 25th, D. Bandarenka was sent to the 5th clinical hospital and operated on his spine a day later. On August 17th, he was sent back to the prison hospital. On September 1, 2011, the media worker was transported under guard to the penal colony No. 15 in Mahilou.

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A. Atroshchankau held a press-conference on **September 16, 2011**. Among other, he dwelt upon the living conditions in custody. According to the media worker, three months of his detention in the KGB Legal Investigatory Isolation Ward could be equaled to never-ending torture. "Colonel Arlou, the acting chief of the KGB Legal Investigatory Isolation Ward promised me to arrange the real 'Guantanamo' and make me mix up day and night... It was nearly so. They switched on the light at night and switched it off during the day. The correspondence was banned," underscored the political prisoner.

It is worth mentioning that A. Atroshchankau was charged with active participation in "mass riots" in Minsk on December 19, 2011 and sentenced to 4 years of imprisonment in a reinforced regime penal colony.

As reported on **September 14, 2011**, the Ministry of Information of Belarus proposed the “Autoradio” FM station to apply for new radio frequencies in reply to the banned radio-broadcaster’s claim to get back the seized RFs. The radio-station management completely disagreed to the offer. According to the radio broadcaster’s chief Yury Bazan, there have already been prepared papers that confirm that the seized frequencies were mentioned in the radio-broadcasting license, issued by the Ministry of Communications of Belarus. It is worth mentioning that broadcasting of “Autoradio” programs was suspended by the Ministry of Communications of Belarus on January 12, 2011. The decision was based on the finding of the National Committee on TV and Radio broadcasting of January 12, 2011. In particular, the FM radio broadcaster was accused of “non-compliance with the creative concept” and “dissemination of public calls to extremist activities.” The claim was related to A. Sannikau’s pre-election commercial, where it was underscored that “the fate of the country isn’t decided in the kitchen.”

The judge Alaksandr Fedartsou banned journalists to interview the victims of the blast in “Kastrychnitskaya” metro station in Minsk at the beginning of the trial in the Belarusian capital on **September 15, 2011**. The judge believes that interviews with these people may be regarded as a means of influence on the legal proceedings.

The media representatives have been forbidden to take photo-video records of the trial. Mobile and Wi-Fi connections are purposefully disabled in the courtroom.

Also, the journalists were advised to abstain from providing comments on the high-profile case materials.

However, according to a media lawyer and a former judge of Constitutional Court of Belarus Prof. Mikhail Pastukhou, the judge cannot determine restrictions on communications, apart from the court session.

The AP correspondents **Yuras Karmanau** and **Siarhei Hryts** as well as the *European Pressphoto* correspondent **Tatsiana Ziankovich** weren’t accredited at the Chamber of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus on **September 15, 2011**. The media workers had been planning to cover a meeting of Chinese parliamentarians with their Belarusian colleagues. The AP reporters were told that they couldn’t attend the meeting, since the delegation was too big and the conference hall was too small. However, at the same time, the state-owned media representatives received their press-credentials and covered the event without any problems at all.

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