

THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

Mass Media Week in Belarus

Info-posting May 12 – 25, 2014

No matter how hard the authorities tried to create a beautiful picture for the Ice Hockey World Championship in Minsk, around a dozen incidents were registered when journalists were prevented from work. The violations included detentions, creating obstacles during reporting, denied accreditation, warnings etc.

On May 12 the Information Ministry issued a **warning** to the independent newspaper *Svobodnye Novosti Plus*. The paper was accused of misleading the public, “inflicting harm to public interests and forming negative attitude to the Ice Hockey World Championship”. The warning relates to an article in issue No17 dated May 6. The newspaper wrote that the Russian Federation had not sent any hockey players from the Olympic Games in Sochi to take part in the championship in Minsk.

Vasil Zdaniuk, chief editor of *SNPlus*, explained to the press service of BAJ that the information was totally correct on May 5 when the newspaper was sent for printing (at 2 pm, to be more precise - the time of delivering a newspaper to the printing house is always indicated in the publishing information), and the newspaper would never provide incorrect facts.

According to the editor, the situation changed on May 6, when the newspaper already went to distributors: the Russian team unexpectedly changed its application for the championship by adding two hockey players who had played at the Olympics in Sochi.

On May 13 the Hrodna Regional Court (Judge Anatol Zayats) **dismissed the appeal** of an independent journalist **Ales' Dzianisau** who had been **fined** for 30 basic amounts for “unlawful production of mass media products” under article **22.9** of the Administrative Code. The journalist was accused of preparing a report about a theatrical play *Faust. Sny* in the Hrodna Puppets Theatre. The report was broadcast on Belsat, the satellite channel who has been denied accreditation in Belarus for several times.

On 13 May, political prisoner **Ales Bialiatski** was awarded the **Ales Adamovich Award** for the book “Enlightened by Belarus”. Natallia Pinchuk received the award on behalf of her husband.

"Previously, books were burned, and today a new form of censorship emerged – a ban on the import of the books," – Natallia Adamovich said emphasizing importance of the book.

On 3 July 2013, at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border, the customs officers confiscated 40 copies of Ales Bialiatski's book “Enlightened by Belarus” from human rights defender Tatsiana Raviaka. The books were printed in Lithuania. Tatsiana Raviaka carried the copies of the book for the friends of Ales Bialiatski. Later, on the basis of expert opinion, the court concluded that the book contains material which may cause damage to the economic and political interests of the country, and decided to take the book back to Lithuania.

On May 15 the Homel branch of BAJ honored the independent correspondent **Aliaksandr Barazhenka** with a **diploma “For devotion to profession”**. The journalist was nominated for the prize by his colleagues who underlined that Aliaksandr Barazhenka revealed his professional skills while doing reporting in Ukraine, at some times at the risk of his life.

The award was established in 2009 in the memory of the journalist and publisher Uladzimir

Verbavikou. The award is aimed to mark outstanding media workers who despite all difficulties do their work to their best.

On May 15 a police officer of the Kastychnitski district department (Hrodna) visited the independent journalist **Andrei Mialeshka**; he wanted to get a ready-made questioning report signed which in fact had never been held. The journalist refused to sign the paper and tried to record the talk, but the officer left.

On May 17 the journalist received a copy of the report by post which informed that an administrative case had been opened against him under administrative article 22.9 (unlawful production and distribution of mass media products). The journalist was accused of contributing to the *Belarusian Radio Racyja* without accreditation. The administrative protocol said that the case was based on testimonies of local doctors: they staged an action “For healthy heart”, and Andrei Mialeshka was covering the event, with the report later published on the website of the radio.

On May 17 Yauhen Skrabets, a member of BAJ, journalist for the *Belarusian Radio Racyja* and activist of the Young Front movement, was **detained** not far from his home in Brest under the pretext he reminded some criminal; he was taken to the Leninski district police department and accused of minor hooliganism (article 17.1 of the Administrative Code).

On Monday, May 19, court started hearing the case. The journalist motioned to invite a lawyer and to postpone the hearing, which the judge upheld: the next hearing was scheduled for May 21 and the journalist was set free. However, the police officers who took him to the court, announced that they were detaining him again.

At 3pm, the journalist was taken to the courtroom again, and the hearing proceeded and ended with a **ten days' imprisonment** under charges of minor hooliganism.

We remind that on March 31 Yauhen Skrabets received a warning for contributing to the Belarusian Radio Racyja – a foreign mass medium without accreditation. On April 26 the journalist was summoned as a witness in an administrative case, as if he saw some fighting, but at the questioning he was again asked about his work for the radio.

On May 20 the publisher of the low-circulation *Kryvinka*, BAJ member Heorhi Stankevich received a court decision by post regarding his appeal against a fine imposed on him by the Beshankovichy district court (Vitebsk region). Judge Natallia Reut decided that the publisher violated rules of press distribution and **fined** him 50 basic amounts (approx. 750USD), which is the maximum fine under article 22.9. The document only says that the Vitsebsk Regional Court **dismissed the appeal**. The decision was issued on May 7, when the publisher was absent, and the judge then refused to announce the verdict for journalists who were present in court.

It has been the third time that Kryvinka newspaper was fined. Earlier, in 2010 Heorhi Stankevich was fined for 20 basic amounts, and in 2012 – for 40 basic amounts.

On May 21 the independent journalist from Mahilow **Aliaksandr Burakou** was informed that investigation of a case he had initiated with a complaint would be extended for one more month. A similar notice he already received in April.

We remind that on March 19 Aliaksandr Burakow filed a complaint to the police department on investigating high-tech crimes of the Mahilow Region Executive Committee regarding articles that were published on March 4 by unknown hackers on the regional website formats.by. These

publications insulted activists of the region; also, all publication earlier than September 9, 2013 were erased. The journalist asked to find the perpetrators.

As reported on **May 22**, **Jonathan Rugman**, a foreign affairs correspondent for the British Channel 4 News, was **denied entry** to Belarus. He wrote it in his Twitter when sharing his report about Belarus Undercover in Europe's Last Dictatorship.

In a comment to the press service of BAJ, the spokesperson of the State Border Committee Aliaksandr Tsishchanka said that Jonathan Rugman tried to enter the country coming from Lithuania, via Gudogai border point, on May 7, but had no documents, visa, or ticket for the hockey.

In his turn, the journalist said he had been **accredited**, but later his journalistic visa was withdrawn.

"I had applied for and been granted a multiple entry working visa to "Europe's last dictatorship" but after my first visit in March I received an email from the Belarus embassy in London telling me the visa had been cancelled.

When the British Embassy in Minsk asked the foreign ministry why, the reply came back that it is "not within our competence to discuss this matter", wrote the journalist.

We remind that during the IHWC in Minsk, the Belarusian state also denied entry to the Swedish human rights defender from Ostgruppen Martin Uggla; to two Norwegian politicians of the Youth Christian Democratic Party; and to the Polish deputy of the European Parliament Marek Migalski.

On May 23 a member of BAJ, correspondent from Hrodna **Viktar Parfionenka** received a **sixth refusal** to his request to grant him accreditation as a *Radio Racyja* correspondent. The journalist is going to apply for accreditation one more time and considers filing a complaint to a court, as his constitutional rights are violated.

On May 23 police officers held another round of **searches** at the flat of the local blogger **Aleh Zhalnou** (Oleg Zhelnov).

The searches were conducted within investigation under article 340 of the Criminal Code "Deliberately false informing about danger". According to the searches warrant, the case was opened on May 5. It is more likely to be linked to the episode when the blogger was visiting the head of the Investigative Committee. «He had to leave his belongings to a storage room and made an ironic commentary about a bomb» told his wife Yauheniya.

The police were searching for video of those events, seized information carriers and equipment – a netbook, a cellphone, a video register, hard drives - in all 12 items. We remind that the blogger's flat was also searched on October 24, 2013 in a case related to online videos which insulted police officers. Then the police also confiscated all devices which still have not returned. officers. Then the