

## THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

### Mass Media Week in Belarus

*Info-posting March 24 –30, 2014*

**Within the period monitored, most violations were reported from the regions of the country: denied access to information (including information related to the local elections), administrative prosecution for contribution to foreign media without accreditation, distribution of low-circulation outlets etc.**

**March 24**, an independent journalist from Hrodna and BAJ member **Ales' Dzianisau** was **summoned** to the **police** where he was **charged with illegal production and distribution of mass media** (art. 22.9, part 2). The journalist got a report and was informed that the case would be passed over to **court**. According to testimonies of Aleh Zhuhzhda, director of the Hrodna Regional Puppets Theater, **on March 6** the journalist made a report about a new play of the theater "Faust.Sny". The report was shown on *Belsat*. The journalist faced a fine of 20 to 50 basic amounts. Earlier, Ales' Dzianisau had received prosecutorial warnings for journalistic work without accreditation.

**On March 24** coordinators of the **election observation** campaign reported about a big number of law **violations** in the agitation period, some of them related to mass media issues.

Since the law does not oblige newspapers to provide place for candidates at local elections, many oppositional candidates were denied an opportunity to publish their programs on pages of state-run newspapers. Also, there were facts of censoring candidates' speeches on the radio.

"In this regard the absolute majority of voters were deprived of the possibility to get full and precise information about all candidates," claimed the observers.

As became known **on March 24**, the chairperson of the Brest regional organization of the Belarusian Socio-Democratic Party (Hramada) **Ihar Maslouski** filed **complaints** on behalf of 37 party candidates to the Central Electoral Committees, city and regional electoral commission, the prosecutor's office in Brest region. The complaint dealt with an article in the regional **state-run newspaper Zarya** dated 20.03.2014 in issue No31, authored by journalist **Yauhen Litvinovich**.

Ihar Maslouski finds that the article has obvious agitation character; it gives negative assessment of the party electoral program as well as of the candidates' activities. By publishing the article, the claimant thinks, the newspaper violated several articles in the Electoral Code.

**On March 25** an activist and journalist in Hrodna **Ales' Kirkevich** was **summoned to the police** for a prophylactic talk. From the department, the policemen went to the journalist's flat and **searched** it. They were looking for sticky posters of **Putin** that allegedly started to appear in the district, but found nothing.

Ales' Kirkevich had to give his fingerprints and saliva samples. He also got an **official warning**. He says there were no grounds for that because no violations on his behalf had been registered.

Ales' Kirkevich is a former political prisoner: he was arrested for participation in street protests after electoral elections in 2010, sentenced to 4 years imprisonment, was pardoned and released in 2011.

**On March 25**, during a sanctioned mass event on Liberty Day, police employees interfered with journalistic work. Before the action started, policemen tried to detain **Alena Yakzhyk**, a correspondent of the online newspaper *Solidarity*, because she was taking photos of police vans that parked near the venue of the manifestation.

**Aliaksandr Barazenska**, cameraman of *Belsat*, met people in plain clothes when he wanted to go up to the terrace of the Kastychnik cinema to get a better view of the demonstration. They did not allow him to go there, but refused to introduce themselves, behaved in a rude way and threatened with detention.

**On March 25**, the **website** of *Nasha Niva* newspaper nn.by was **blocked** from 7.15 pm till 11.30 pm while a demonstration proceeded in Minsk on the occasion of the national holiday Liberty Day.

The website was supposed to make live coverage of the procession and demonstration organized by opposition leaders and sanctioned by Minsk authorities. “We did not have access to the website from anywhere, except for the data-center. It is likely due to some intentional blockade by Beltelecom” wrote NN. The newspaper offered to follow the events via social nets.

The website of the *Radio Svaboda* also informed that the signal of live broadcasting was blocked for Belarusian territory.

**On March 25** police officers **questioned Ales’ Dzerhachou**, editor of the **low-circulation bulletin *Smarhonski Grak***, and **Uladzimir Shulzhytski**, distributor of the bulletin. The questions were about how the outlets function and if they send the obligatory issues to state bodies and archives. No reports were drawn up.

The lawyer of BAJ Andrei Bastunets says the police misinterpret the law about compulsory issues to be sent to archives. The bulletin is not registered as a mass medium (below 299 copies) and the editorial office is not registered as a legal entity, so they are not obliged by the law to provide the obligatory free copies for archives.

**On March 26, Aliaksei Zhalnou**, son of the famous blogger **Aleh Zhalnou from Babruysk**, was forcefully taken to Minsk by investigator’s warrant to **undergo a psychiatric examination**. The 24-year old man appeared at the police department of the Babruysk City Executive Committee by an investigator’s summons within a criminal case; the investigator called two special forces officers, and they accompanied Aliaksei Zhalnou straight to Minsk in a car of the traffic police. The man was released after the psycho examination.

The blogger Aleh Zhalnou says that this is pressure on him and his family. We remind that on September 4 the blogger and his son reported to the traffic police about wrong parking, but instead of reacting to the violation, the police detained them treating in a rude way. In January a criminal case was initiated against Aliaksei Zhalnou under art. 364 (violence of threat of violence against an employee of law enforcement agencies): he allegedly hit a traffic police officer Aliaksandr Butouski on the head during the detention. Aleh Zhalnou runs a blog with major topic of power abuse by law enforcement agencies.

**On March 28** the editorial office of Baranavichy newspaper *Intex-Press* prepared a **complaint** to the **Central Electoral Committee** regarding violations of journalists rights at the local elections.

On the first day of early vote members of the electoral commissions at polling station No47 demanded a journalist to have a “permit signed by the chair of CEC”. The conflict was settled without Lidziya Yarmoshyna’s help, but the correspondent’s work was disrupted on that day.

At polling station No23 the chair of the electoral commission Yury Kryshanovich forbid a IP correspondent to take photos while the votes were counted. Only after some consultations on the phone he admitted his mistake.

At polling stations No27 and 26 chairs of the electoral commissions did not announce separately the results of early vote, distant vote, and voting on the day of elections.

On March 24 the chair of Baranavichy City Territory Commission Tamara Shukala refused to provide Intex-Press with results on each voting district in the city. She gave only the number of “for” votes for each of the elected candidate, and addressed the reporters to see the rest of the results in the state-run newspaper *Nash Kray*.

**On March 28, BelaPAN** correspondents in Brest **Ales’ Liauchuk** and **Milana Kharytonava** faced with obstacles while covering the city commission on the local elections. At first, the chairperson of the commission closed the doors on them and refused to let them in. Later they managed to get into the meeting, but here the commission members forbid them to take any photo, video or audio records.

Ales’ Liauchuk said a member of the commission claimed he would file a report to the police that journalists insulted him. The correspondents disagree, saying the officials wanted to create obstacles for journalists.

**On March 28** the editor of *Bobruyski Courier* **Anatol' Sanatsienka** got a reply to his **request** that he had filed to the **public oversight commission** of the Chief Justice Department of the Mahilou City Executive Committee. The request dealt with the **imprisonment conditions** for former journalist of the newspaper **Yauhen Vaskovich**. According to the reply, the chair of the commission and one its representative visited Mahilou prison No4, where the prisoner is jailed; they talked to the prison administration to the prisoner in person.

The results of the visit revealed that since October 2011 up till December 2013 Yauhen Vaskovich got 43 penalties for disciplinary violations, including 27 cases of placement to solitary cell.

The check-up of arrest in a solitary cell revealed violations of the Standard Minimum Rules adopted by the First UN Congress in 1955. The cell is in the basement, does not have windows with daylight. In the editor's opinion, this fact only proves suspicions that Vaskovich is subject to persecution and monthly repressions. We remind that Yauhen Vaskovich was sentenced to 7 years in prison for setting fire to Babruysk KGB doors.