

THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

Mass Media Week in Belarus

January 26 – February 2, 2015

Within the reporting period, two journalists were found guilty of participating in the street action which they covered; it became known how many informational materials were examined by the commission on extremism; and state agencies kept answering to BAJ what they thought about websites blocking in the last decade of December.

As became known **on January 28**, the journalist from Homel **Larysa Shchyrakova** and cameraman **Kastus Zhukouski** were fined 900 000 rubles each under charges of violating the **procedure of holding mass events (23.34** of the Administrative Code).

The administrative case was heard in absentia by the Svetlahorsk district court. The judicial rulings, dated January 23, were sent to the journalist by post **on January 28**.

The case dealt with a picket staged **on November 25** in Svetlahorsk: **Yury Liashenka**, who moves in a wheel chair, staged a one-man picket in front of the local executive committee, demanding to start capital repair works of his house. Before he managed to unwrap the banner, an ambulance appeared. He was forcefully brought to a hospital, where he was given an injection, and then the police drew up a report for violation of holding the procedure of holding mass events. He was fined for two basic amounts. The journalists reported about the picket in the media.

On January 16, the journalist was questioned. Larysa Shchyrakova confirmed she had known about the picket before and came to Svetlahorsk intentionally to report about the picket. She knew the picket had not been sanctioned by the local authorities. She underlined she did not take part in the picket, but only covered it as a journalist. She only helped the activist to get into the car, because he had troubles with his health. The journalist says that the two-page ruling has been sent only on one page, so she suspects the mistake was made intentionally for the journalists to miss the deadline for appeal.

On January 29, BAJ received **replies from the Ministry of Home Affairs and from the Operative Analytical Center** regarding troubles with access to several websites at the end of December.

We remind that BAJ requested [information](#) from the official agencies on December 22; websites [naviny.by](#), [charter97.org](#), [udf.by](#), [gazetby.com](#) and some others had experienced troubles with access since December 19. BAJ requested to hold an inquiry, restore access and bring trouble-makers to responsibility.

The OAC replied that it did not take any actions to limit access to the websites mentioned. Besides, operators of data communications network said they had not taken any such actions, either. Operators claim that on December 19 a massive attack on data communications was registered, but defensive measures did not influence the websites' accessibility.

The department of investigations of IT crimes of the MFA replied that, according to information provided by *Beltelecom*, there were no restrictions on access to the mentioned websites. The reply says technical resources of the websites are located in foreign states, the USA, Ireland and Russia. The department found it impossible to

establish the reasons for the access troubles. The department informed that information about blocking, grounds for such actions can be obtained from the State inspection on electro communications of the Ministry of Communications and Informatization. The inquiry is over because “the events do not bear public danger and do not contain constituents of administrative violations or criminal offence”.

On February 10, the Supreme Court of Belarus heard **the appeal of Lohvinau** against the decision to fine the bookstore for “illegal entrepreneur’s activities”.

The absence of the registration as a distributor of print products in 2014 ended up with a tax inspection at the end of the year. The tax inspectors sued Lohvinau in Economic Court, which [ruled to fine](#) the bookseller 30 basic amounts (5.4 million rubles) for work without registration and to confiscate profits of the year which was claimed to be 961 million rubles.

Lohvinau pleaded [for public help](#) to raise the funds to compensate the fine and confiscation. The bookseller said the sum of money was not the profit, but the annual turnover, and the bookstore would go bankrupt, and he might face personal criminal liability. The public and literary community are keeping a [marathon of solidarity](#); almost fourth part of the fine has been collected by now. The bookstore keeps work under another legal entity.

Last year Lohvinau applied six times to get registered as a distributor of print products (BAJ note – the obligation to register as such was introduced with the new law on publishers and distributors of print products enacted on January 1, 2014; the registration should have been obtained within a year). The last of the refusals was due to incorrect postal code indicated in the application form. Lohvinau tried to dispute the last refusal of registration of his bookstore as a distributor of print products; however, the Supreme Court supported the standing of the registering body. On January 30, the Judge of the Supreme Court Aliaksandr Pautau supported the Ministry’s point of view.

Earlier, in 2013 the Ministry of Information terminated Lohvinau’s license as a publisher. The pretext for the sanction was decision of Ashmiany district court that the photo album Belarus Press Photo 2011, published by Lohvinau, contained extremist contents. The court decision on the photo album was denounced by reporters’ professional community.

On January 30, the Deputy of Information Minister Uladzimir Matusevich reported that in 2015 another attempt would be made to launch the **single Internet portal for state mass media**. He thinks the portal will be an aggregator for state media on the web. Now the portal is being tested.

The political observer and media expert Aliaksandr Klaskouski thinks this way the Belarusian state wants to expand its influence online.

On February 2, the Supreme Court informed that there would be **no court hearings** into cases of four activists who had staged an action of solidarity *Je Suis Charlie* near the French Embassy in Minsk. According to the [press release](#), the hearing tabled for February 4 was cancelled, and the administrative reports were sent back to the police department for correction of flaws.

We remind that the news about administrative prosecution of some people who had

taken part in the action of solidarity [appeared](#) on January 21. They had been accused of violating the procedure of holding mass events.

A new development occurred on January 29 when Alexander Lukashenka was giving a seven-hour press conference to Belarusian journalists. Tatsiana Melnichuk, BBC correspondent and member of the Board of BAJ, called on the authorities to react adequately and not to detain people with views different from the official ones.

“I totally support this,” said Lukashenka and readdressed the question to Aliaksandr Kosinets, head of the President’s Administration, and the latter promised to settle the issue.

On February 3, the head of the department on ideological work, culture and youth issues of Babruysk city executive committee Halina Charnova **denied information** to ***Bobruyskiy Courier***. A journalist phoned to find out about developments with the Museum of Ales Hlusha, in Babruysk district. The official representative answered she would not give information to this outlet. When the journalist argued it was against the law, the official representative admitted she knew it, but would not talk.

On February 5, journalists from **Brest** Milana Kharytonava and Ales Liauchuk were **not allowed to enter premises** of Warburg Colony, a history and culture heritage site facing destruction. A security guard did not let them go across the fence without the permit of the owner. Then another man came up, he behaved aggressively and threatened with beating.

On February 5, the ministry of Information **Liliya Ananich** informed that the **Republican expert commission** (created on September 27, 2014) had examined more than 100 materials regarding **extremism** contents. 25 of the works had features falling under definitions of extremism, propaganda of Nazi ideas, racial, religious intolerance, or literature that could be used with terroristic aims. “The state has the leverage to follow print flows,” remarked the Minister.

On February 5, the political prisoner, member of BAJ, **Yauhen Vaskovich** was allowed the first in four years long-term **meeting** with his mother. She said he works in sewing factory, reads the press and books in leisure time. He hopes for early release, if he does not get penalties until September 2015.

We remind that Yauhen Vaskovich, journalist of Bobruyskiy Courier, was sentenced to 7 years of colony for putting fire to the Babruysk KGB building. Only façade was slightly damaged, and it was compensated (the sum was 253 thousand rubles). However, Yauhen Vaskovich was sentenced under article envisaged for large damage. He serves the sentence in Mahilou colony No 15.