

## THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

### Mass Media Week in Belarus

*Info-posting – November 07-13, 2011*

The recent events have shown that law enforcement agencies continue to keep track of publications in the non-state printed and on-line media and continue to react to them. Thus, e.g., the police made attempts to get information about the participants of a public street action in Brest from an independent photo correspondent, who had taken pictures of them. The Editor-in-chief of the largest non-state newspaper *Narodnaya Vola* was summoned to the Prosecutor General's Office to explain the appearance of a publication about the Popular Assembly on the newspaper pages.

The state-owned press started a defamation campaign, focused on a human rights activist and a BAJ member Ales Bialatski, prosecuted for tax evasion on a large scale. According to international observers, the state-owned media present the news in such a way, as if the guilt has already been proved.

At the same time, the attempts of Belarusian citizens to rebuke the state TV for indecent methods of work were unsuccessful. (The complaint concerned an odious documentary under the title 'Social Shadows'.) The Head of Belarusian State TV and Radio Company accused the claimants of 'gross interference into the editorial policy' of the TV Company and blamed them for 'putting pressure on journalists'.

The Examination Committee on Special Settlement of Kuplin village in Pruzhany district has refused to mitigate punishment to a civil activist and BAJ member Paval Sieviarynets.

On 16 May 2011, Paval Sieviaryniets was sentenced to 3 years of labor in a minimum security correctional facility for his participation in the protest of December 19, 2010. He has already served one third of his sentence and has received favorable character reference, so he is entitled to the change of restriction measure by law (he hoped to get supervised release).

Several days before, chair of the Minsk City Court Uladzimir Putsila rejected the supervisory appeal against the conviction.

On **November 8, 2011**, the Co-Head of Organizing Committee on Foundation of Belarusian Christian Democracy political party and BAJ Council member Pavel Sevyarynets was refused to change the form of detention in the open labor correction colony for the labor corrective work at home. The decision was taken by the administration of special commandant's office No. 7 in the village of Kuplin, Pruzhany district.

It is worth reminding that Paval Sieviaryniets was sentenced to 3 years of labor in a minimum security correctional facility for his participation in the protest actions of December 19, 2010. He has already served one third of his sentence and received favorable character reference that entitles him to mitigation of punishment by law.

The Chair of Minsk City Court Uladzimir Putsila had refused to reverse the sentence to Pavel Seviarynets in October 2011.

As reported on **November 8, 2011**, *Milana Kharytonava*, an independent photo-correspondent from Brest had been summoned by phone to the Leninski City District Department of Interior to provide explanations, regarding a civil action of solidarity with political prisoners, held in Brest on October 26, 2011. The journalist was told that law enforcement agencies carried out verification of the legality of the event. Therefore, a district police officer Siarhey Liauchuk asked the photo-reporter to tell if she knew anyone, depicted on her photos from the civil action. M. Kharytonava responded that she wasn't acquainted with the people in person and took pictures of them at random. The journalist thinks that the police may use the photos as a piece of evidence for bringing charges against the action participants.

Tax inspectors continue to put pressure on *Siarhei Niarouny*, 'Volny Horad' independent newspaper Editor from Krychau (Mahilou region). As reported on **November 8, 2011**, the journalist received another letter from the local tax inspection with a request to provide explanations regarding his profit of 4.5 million Belarusian rubles, spent in 2009 and in the first half year of 2010. According to S. Niarouny, he submitted a detailed declaration of his profit and private property for the recent two years in October 2011. However, the tax inspection was not satisfied with the presented arguments. Siarhei Niarouny believes that the pressure on the part of tax inspectors is connected with the Editor's work.

As reported on **November 9, 2011**, the Embassy of Belarus in Berlin refused to issue a visa on invitation from BAJ to *Galina Rudnik*, the oldest journalist of RFE/RL's *Belarus Service*. The Belarusian diplomats didn't bother to explain the reason for turning down the visa application at that. Mrs Rudnik was planning to hold a presentation of her memoirs "Migratory Birds" in Minsk.

**Iosif Siaredzich**, *Narodnaya Vola* Editor-in-chief was summoned to the General Prosecutor's office on **November 10, 2011**. The talk concerned an article about the Popular Assembly published in the newspaper on November 9, 2011.

Mr Siaredzich had a two-hour talk with three men from the supervisory department on Law Enforcement. They exchanged ideas and opinions on the most burning issues.

"I was reminded that any mass media, including Narodnaya Volia, while covering news must not only stick to the principle of objectiveness, but also comply with the law," said Iosif Siaredzich.

The prosecutor thinks that the publication caused some divergence from the Belarusian legislation.

On **November 10, 2011**, the trial of **Ales Bialatski** continued in Piershamayski City District Court of Minsk. The following hearing was scheduled for November 16, 2011.

The judge admitted a number of documents as evidence from both the defense and the prosecution. In particular, the judge admitted a copy of the letter from the Lithuanian Ministry of Justice refuting the information on Ales Bialatski's bank accounts, dated August 24, 2011.

Ales Bialatski was asked why he hadn't stopped his human rights activities on the closure of Human Rights Center Viasna. He answered that the decision to close down the center was unlawful and violated international obligations, taken by Belarus. The prosecutor solicited for the postponement of hearings till November 16, 2011. He stated that new charges would be presented to Bialatski by that time. His colleagues suppose that the charges might be connected with his activity on behalf of unregistered organization.

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and the World Organization against Torture (OMCT) delivered a common statement on *November 9, 2011*. They drew attention to a mass defamation campaign against Ales Bialatski in the Belarusian official mass media.

The international experts emphasized that the state-owned media presented the case **in such a way, as if the guilt had already been proved.**

As reported on **November 11, 2011**, a lawyer of 'Za Svabodu!' Civil Movement Andrei Sushko and a famous Belarusian advertising agent Yulia Liashkievich received a reply to their appeal concerning the 'Social Shadows' documentary broadcasting from the Belarusian State TV and Radio Company.

It's worth mentioning that the Belarusian citizens complained against broadcasting the scenes of violence from Libya in the peak-viewing time on the Belarusian State TV Channel.

The Head of Belarusian State TV and Radio Company Hienadz Davydzka accused the claimants of '*gross interference into the editorial policy*' of the TV Company and blamed them for '*putting pressure on independent (sic!) journalists*' in his letter of reply, dated *October 25, 2011*.

Having received the response, Andrei Sushko noted the claimants would go to the law.

Independent journalists were detained by police during the so-called Popular Assembly actions in the cities of Homiel and Lida (Hrodna region) on **November 12, 2011**.

**Homiel:** An independent journalist and BAJ Council member *Anatol Hatouchyts* was detained without any explanation of reasons at a bus-stop. The journalist was taken to the Chyhunachny City District Department of Interior No.2. His audio records were checked. Also, the police asked the reporter to provide explanations. However, A. Hatouchyts refused to comply with the request. The journalist was released without any police records from custody in 2.5 hours after the moment of detention.

An independent journalist and BAJ member *Mikalay Bianko* was also detained near the 'Vipra' House of Culture. He was kept in custody for nearly three hours. Then, he was driven to the opposite side of the city and released.

The police deleted all photos of the Popular Assembly meeting in Homiel from the photo camera, owned by Pavel Mitskievich, 'Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus' newspaper correspondent in Homiel.

**Lida:** A 'Belsat' correspondent Siarhey Karpienka was detained in the city center. He was taken to Lida District Department of Internal Affairs. The journalist was kept in custody for three hours and released on drawing up a record of interrogation only.

*Prepared by the BAJ Monitoring Service*