

### Mass Media Week in Belarus

Info-posting September 10 – 23

**On September 23, 2012** the parliamentary elections to the House of Representatives took place in Belarus. The electoral campaign was covered by more than 350 foreign journalists – these figures were announced by Andrey Savinykh, press-secretary of the Ministry of Information. However, ministerial accreditation for the elections coverage was not a guarantee of work. Several accredited foreign journalists were unable to get entry visa to Belarus, several were detained and even hurt during street rallies; one journalist was deprived of his equipment on leaving the country. Some Belarusian journalists were also subject to detentions within the period, but mostly the obstructions stayed traditional: denied access to information, including information about the elections. Besides, several web resources dedicated to the elections were unavailable on the elections day.

**On September 11** Iryna Khalip, wife of the ex-candidate for presidency Andrey Sannikau, told that her telephones were being “attacked”. The telephones were constantly ringing, so that it was impossible to get through to her via phone. The journalist was sure it was the special securities’ business. Previously the same tactics had been used in relation to other non-state journalists.

**On September 11** the court of Talochyn town (Vitsebsk region) read out the ruling on the **dignity and honor lawsuit** filed by a chairperson of a GONGO Yury Lychkouski against the newspaper “Vitebskij Kurier” and its journalist Mikalay Petrushenka. The journalist was ordered to pay the plaintiff **moral damages** of three million rubles (around 280 euro) and 600 thousand rubles of legal expenses. The charges against the newspaper itself were **dismissed**.

*We remind that the plaintiff, chairperson of the state-run public organization “Belarusian Society of Hunters and Fishermen”, was offended by an article “From forest to prison: still waters run deep”. An editorial on the issue of poaching in the column “Research of Nikolay Petrushenko” was published in “Vitebskij Kurier” in February.*

**On September 12** the **Minister of Information Aleh Praliaskouski** informed that the state-run newspapers “SB – Belarus Segodnya”, “Narodnaya Hazeta”, “Respublika”, “Belorusskaya Niva”, and “Znamia Yunosti” were going to be **united**. The new “socio-political publishing house” will start its work since 2013. “We have rather a lot of main newspapers. Meanwhile Belarus is not a large country and we don’t have so many events and news, so the republican newspapers duplicate one another a lot, write about all the same,” said the Minister. He assured that the reorganization would not lead to staff reduction. Also Mr Praliaskouski said that **on September 11** a publishing house “Zviazda” has been “practically” set up specializing in **cultural topics**. It includes the editorial and publishing establishment LiM (*Literature and Art*), magazines “Polymia”, “Maladosts”, “Neman” and “Vozhyk”.

**On September 12** the editor of “Pressball” **Uladzimir Berazhkou** was summoned to the Maskouski district police in Minsk. The journalist was asked **to name the sources of information** about the budget of the **hockey club “Dinamo-Minsk”** which he had made public in an interview to *Belgazeta* in May. Uladzimir Berazhkou refused to name them, referring to the law “On Mass Media”.

*We remind that after the mentioned interview the director general of the hockey club **Aliaxey Torbin** filed a complaint to start a defamation and insult lawsuit. But after a month’s check-up, the head of the Maskouski district police department Mikalay Nazarau refused to initiate a criminal case.*

**On September 13** BAJ sent signatures for **Anton Surapin** with demand to end criminal prosecution **to the KGB**. Copies of the signatures were also sent to the **General Prosecutor’ office**. *We remind that the campaign to support the freelance photographer and journalism student Anton Surapin on August 14. Within three days dozens of editors, journalists, media persons of Belarusian and foreign media and just sympathizing people joined the campaign. On August 17 Anton Surapin was set free from the KGB detention center under recognizance and obligation not to leave his home town.*

**On September 14** chief-editor of the magazine **ARCHE** and BAJ member **Valery Bulhakau** was **briefly detained** in Hrodna at a presentation of a new issue of the magazine and a book “Sovetization of Western Belarus”. The operation involved policemen and tax inspectors. The latter demanded documents legalizing the distribution of the literature. All 194 copies were seized and loaded into a car. The process was filmed with a video camera. Valery Bulhakau was detained and taken to the tax inspection where he gave explanations and was set free two hours later. Now he presumably faces charges for “illegal business activities”.

Valery Bulhakau considers the incident as “mopping-up before the parliamentary elections and threatening civil society in Hrodna”.

**On September 14** the imprisoned Belarusian human rights defender **Ales Bialiatski** was nominated for **Andrew Sakharov Prize For Freedom of Thought** by the European Parliament. The nomination was supported by MEP Jacek Saryusz-Wolski and 82 other MEPs.

*We remind that on 24 October 2011, Ales Bialiatski was sentenced to 4.5 years in medium security prison for alleged large-scale tax evasion. The grounds for criminal prosecution were bank accounts in Lithuania and Poland. The court did not take into consideration the fact that the money was used not personally, but for human rights activities of the human rights center “Viasna”. Also the court ignored the fact that the damage had been compensated by voluntary donations.*

**On September 17** in the evening in Chyrvonaarmeiskaya Street, not far from the presidential administration, **Mikita Brouka**, a journalist of “**Novy Chas**”, BAJ member, was making an opinion poll in the street for the website, then sat down on a bench with a camera and a microphone on the knees. At that moment an **unknown plain-clothed person** came up and introduced himself as a worker of **security service**. He behaved aggressively: he refused to demonstrate his documents and started to demand for the journalists’, asked what they were filming there. “Having seen the title “Novy Chas”, he claimed that such newspaper did not exist, **tore my press card** and was gone,” told Mikita Brouka.

**On September 18** unknown people **detained** an independent cameraman **Aliaksandr Barazenska**, **AP** photographer **Siarhey Hryts**, **Reuters’** photographer **Vasil Fiadosenka**, photographer of **the European Press-photo Agency Tatsiana Ziankovich**, **BelaPAN** correspondent **Vasil Padabed**, and also the filming crew of the **German TV channel ZDF**, cameraman **Dzmitry Rudakou** and producer **Aliaxey Akulau**.

It happened at noon near a supermarket in Minsk where activists of the youth wing of “Tell the Truth!” campaign were staging a picket dedicated to elections in Belarus. When the picket started, the assailants ran up and started to beat and detain everybody. The detainees were pushed into a mini-van and taken to the Frunzenski district police department. About twenty minutes they were waiting in a concert hall, then were invited to different cabinets. Later the police excused that they had thought the picket was unsanctioned and the people were detained for identity check. They were set free two hours later. Siarhey Hryts had a blow in the eye, had his spectacles broken and a cut wound. His equipment was not broken, but all images of the picket were deleted.

**On September 19** the photographer of *Associated Press* **Siarhey Hryts** **filed a complaint** on the fact of the inflicted wound.

**On September 18** at 5pm near Kalinina square in Minsk independent TV journalists **Viachaslau Piashko** and **Valiantsin Mikhaltsov** were **detained**. The journalists started to make recordings in the square when policemen came up to them. They were taken to the police station in Kuzma Chorny street for identification. At around half past seven they were taken to the Pershamayski district police department where they were fingerprinted and photographed. Also their **video camera** was **confiscated** for a check-up for 10 days.

**On September 18** the journalism student Anton Surapin had his place of residence changed from Slutsk for Minsk where he did academic practice till October 1 and then he was due to pursue his studies in the Journalism Institute of the BSU.

*We remind that 21-year old Anton Surapin is a suspect in the case of assisting in border trespass by Swedish pilots with teddy bears on July 4.*

**On September 18** the independent newspaper in Baranavichy *Intex-press* was **denied interview from a health establishment**. The correspondent **Natallia Salamianka** asked the deputy of the chief doctor

**Ludmila Liashchyna** to give a video interview on the topic of sight disease prevention for children of pre-school and school age. However, the doctor refused, saying that they had given an interview for TV the week before, given an interview for a radio and published an article in a local newspaper. “So your newspaper does not fit into our plans,” claimed the doctor.

**On September 19** the correspondent of *Intex-press* **Yulia Kharkevich** failed to get information on voters’ turnout on the first day of **early elections in Baranavichy**. The duty persons in both constituencies’ commissions in the city answered they did not have the information. The chairperson of constituency No 6 **Tamara Shukala** also claimed she did not have the information and offered the journalist to gather the information at polling stations (which are 60 in number) by herself. The chairperson of constituency No5 **Tatsiana Latyshava** would not answer, excusing by her busyness. In the meantime, Brest Region Executive Committee assured *Intex-press* that the electoral commissions have the information on the number of early voters. The same was asserted by the press-secretary of the Central Electoral Committee **Mikalay Lazavik**.

**On September 19** the chairperson of the Frunzenski district court in Minsk **Iosif Mikhonski** forbid journalists even to enter the court building. The court was hearing the administrative cases of Zmena activists who had been detained on September 18 during a picket near a supermarket. At first the journalists tried to get into the court room, but they were told that the process was open, but was to be held behind closed doors. The journalists did not even manage to take comments from the relatives of the activists. Iosif Mikhonski claimed that it was his personal decision to keep the journalists out of the administrative building and called the police to force them out.

**On September 20** it became known that a number of photographers of independent editions and foreign agencies **did not get accreditation** for covering the holiday of **Dazhynki** in Horki on September 21 – 22. In particular, photo correspondents Siarhey Hudzilin (NN), Siarhey Hryts (AP), Tatsiana Ziankovich (EPA), Viktor Drachou (AFP) were denied accreditation to the event. *We remind that in 2011 at Dazhynki in Maladzechna there was a ban to enter to the territory of the event with photo and video cameras with the objective more than 4 cm. Only the accredited at the Lukashenko’s administration photo and video journalists were able to work there.*

**On September 21** it became known that the **Supreme Court dismissed the appeal of Ales Bialiatski**. The decision on the appeal, signed by the deputy chairperson **Valery Kalinkovich**, states: “The court provided thorough and objective investigation into the circumstances of the case, appropriate legal assessment of the evidence, and reasonably found them sufficient to claim guilt of the convicted Bialiatski Aliaxandr Viktaravich. The punishment is proportionate to the crime and is just”. This way the prisoner Ales Bilaliatski exhausted all national legal remedies. We remind that the complaint of Ales Bialiatski was registered in the **UN Human Rights Committee**. **On June 19, 2012** the Committee sent an inquiry to the Republic of Belarus asking to give information or arguments to the facts mentioned in the complaint by the end of the year.

**On September 21** the chief editor of the independent newspaper “*Nasha Niva*” **Andrey Dynko** received a letter from the Ministry of Home Affairs bringing official apologies that he had been included onto the travel banned list by mistake. The letter was dated **September 9**. According to the journalist, his right of movement was restored only after a number of complaints to different establishments.

*We remind that Andrey Dynko was taken off the train Minsk – Vilnius on March 14 without explanation. In the department on citizenship and migration at the place of his registration he learnt that he was banned leaving the country because of alleged draft-dodging.*

*The travel ban list of around twenty opposition politicians, civil activists and journalists appeared in March this year.*

*By the end of August among the journalists only Andrey Dynko had stayed on the list.*

**On September 21** Australian SBS TV journalist **Amos Roberts** was searched at the customs of Minsk-2 airport at 2.30pm. He had been accredited by the Belarusian Ministry and had worked for a week over an episode about the teddy bear landing. He was going to leave the country, but unexpectedly the customs officers decided to **confiscate his equipment**.

The customs officers and plain-clothed people took away all notes and equipment. Among the confiscated things are HD video camera Panasonic HPX-170, HD video camera Go-Pro Hero, a photo camera Canon G12, a laptop Macbook, an Apple DVD-drive, digital information carriers, an iPhone, several documents from the archive of SBS and a teddy bear with a parachute.

The plain-clothed people refused to introduce themselves. Amos Roberts refused to sign the papers that they were offering to him because he did not understand what it was. As a result, he stayed without any procedural documents. Later, when an interpreter and BAJ lawyer appeared at the airport, Roberts asked for the documents, but the customs officers denied they had taken the equipment. All the time the journalists were accompanied by some plain-clothed people.

On the morning of **September 22 Amos Roberts was invited for a talk** to the KGB (on the phone number he bought on the same very day), but the journalist refused. He freely left Belarus by plane from the airport Minsk-2.

**On September 21** it became known that the **criminal case** against Hrodna-based journalist **Andrey Poczobut** was **extended till October 21**.

*We remind that on June 21 A.Poczobut was detained at his flat in Hrodna; the flat was searched. On June 22 information appeared that the Investigative Committee started a criminal case on "libeling the president" (art. 367, part 2 of the Criminal Code). The case was based on the materials of a check-up held by the KGB. The journalist spent a week under arrest, and on June 30 the charges were announced and he was set free under recognizance.*

**On September 21** at the district **polling station** No 350 at Frunzenski district constituency in Minsk police **forced out** the photo correspondent of the newspaper "Novy Chas" **Mikita Brouka** although he demonstrated his press-card. The command to get the journalist out was given by the **chairperson** of the commission **Anatol Kastsianeovich**. He claimed that the journalist had taken enough photos and forbid to do it anymore. When the journalist kept on, the chairperson had a phone talk and ordered the police to remove him from the polling station.

**On September 20** members of the electoral commission No 44 in Brest Western constituency No 1 **complained** to the Central Electoral Committee **against** the **photo correspondent** of non-state newspaper "Brestskii Kuryier" **Milana Kharytonava**. The complaint says that on the first day of the elections Milana Kharytonava "started to make an opinion poll among those who cast their votes, right at the polling box" and "hindered other voters to proceed to the polling box".

In her turn, the journalist also **filed a complaint** to the CEC. She wrote that members of the electoral commission **Valiantsina Taradanava** and **Volha Taradanava violated her rights** as a media representative envisaged by article 13 of the Electoral Code. She demonstrated her press cards, and her data were taken down; then she started to take photos. The journalist asked a voter, who had already voted and was heading for the exit, why he voted early. The members of the electoral commission started to express their indignation, saying the journalist did not have rights to ask questions.

**On September 21** the **Belarusian embassy in Moscow denied visas** to the crew of the **Swedish** TV4 channel. **Stefan Borg** and the other cameraman received "visa denied" stamps in their passports. Stefan Borg said they had applied for accreditation in mid-August, but were allowed to work at the Belarusian parliamentary elections only several days before. They went to the Belarusian embassy in Moscow at once. And on the morning of September 21 they received the passports back with the stamps "denied". TV4 channel broadcast does not have political coloring, there was no negative reporting on the current situation in Belarus.

Also on **September 21** two more **Swedish** journalists, **Erik Von Platen** and **Gustaf Andersson** faced with **difficulties in getting visas**. They had also been accredited (they still did not have their press card, but they arranged with a representative of FAM to get it in the airport) and wanted to open visa straight in the airport. Later it became known that they finally did it. At first, an airline company representative told they were denied entry and offered them a flight back. "It seems like they wanted to get rid of us because they didn't know what to do when they couldn't find the "invitation-document" that the ministry is supposed to send to the airport for issuing of express visas. Tragic incompetence," explained Erik.

**On September 22** at the early elections the **chairperson** of Sozhneuski polling station No 33 in Krychau constituency (Mahilou region) **Volha Yurenkova forbid to take photos** to the correspondent of the non-state small circulation newspaper “*Volny Horad*” **Siarhey Niarouny**.

**On September 23**, the parliamentary elections day in Belarus, at least five **websites** were **temporarily inaccessible**. In particular, the informational resource **UDF.by** and the website of the organizational committee on creation of the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party **bchd.info** were inaccessible. **On the morning of September 24** the websites were still not working. They were blocked in Belarus, as they were accessible abroad and with proxy-servers. Also the website of “people’s monitoring” of the elections **electby.org** was accessible only with proxy-servers, up till the **morning September 24**. On the first day of the early elections more than 30 facts of violations were reported on the website. Also, the website of the movement “**For freedom!**” and the specially created **<http://watch.pyx.by/>** were temporarily blocked.

**On September 23** a photo correspondent of “*Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi*” Zmitser Lasko was **detained** at the polling station No 704 (Partyzanskaya constituency) in Minsk. A policeman (an employee of criminal search) detained the journalist just after he **refused to delete photos** of the polling station. The journalist was set free just after his colleagues raised the question at the press-conference of the Central Electoral Commission.

**On September 23** the photo correspondent of the *Solidarity* web resource **Siarhey Balay** was briefly **detained** in Minsk. The journalist was taking photo of the empty **October square** at about 7pm when plain-clothed people came up to him and asked why he was taking photos. They called a patrol car, ignoring the journalist’s press-card. Siarhey Balay was taken to the Central district police department. Nobody took explanations, nor wrote any procedural documents; all the photos were simply deleted from the flash card and he was set free after two hours and a half.

**On September 23** the correspondent of the newspaper “*Novy Chas*” **Mikita Brouka** was **forced out of the polling station** No 752 in Minsk on the order of the chairperson of the electoral commission Volha Smirnova. He was taking photos at the polling station after the elections closed and intended to record how the votes were counted. Although the data of the journalist were registered in the special journal at the station, Volha Smirnova did not want to allow the journalist enter the building in the evening. She tried to refer to some “decision of the electoral commission” that non-staff correspondents should not be allowed to polling stations.

*We remind that article 13 of the Electoral Code envisages that media representatives have the right to be present at the polling stations. The law “On mass media” allows journalists to make video recordings. So, the chairperson of the electoral commission violated the electoral law and the journalist’s rights.*