

THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

Mass Media Week in Belarus

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Official agencies promised to launch public discussions with the journalistic community about possible amendments to Mass Media Law. Meantime, officials claim there are no plans for any legal changes in 2014.

On January 13 BAJ received a **reply from Usevalad Yancheuski**, head of the ideological department of President's Administration, concerning the government's idea to register and regulate mass media operating online.

We remind that **on November 19 Dzmitry Shedko**, Information Minister's Deputy, informed that the Ministry was preparing **amendments to media legislation concerning online media**. BAJ filed a request to the Information Minister and to Mr Yancheuski asking to include BAJ expert potential to work out a draft project of the amendments, and to hold public discussions on the topic.

"The Ministry of Information has been charged with the task to bring up the issue /.../ for public discussion, with the participation of bodies and organizations concerned, and also to involve /.../ representatives of journalistic organizations and online communities," said the reply.

On January 16 BAJ also **received a reply from the Information Ministry** signed by Deputy Minister Dzmitry Shedko.

"The plan for draft laws in 2014, approved by the President /.../ on December 27, 2013 No572, does not stipulate introducing amendments to the Law on Mass Media. In case such draft law starts being discussed, following legal requirements and an order of the President's assistant – head of the chief ideological department U.V.Yansheuski, – a wide public discussion of the draft law will be organized, involving representatives of the leading media and public associations concerned."

Deputy Chair of BAJ Andrei Bastunets draws attention to the fact that regulation of mass media can be carried out with the help of **by-laws**. "In our request we deliberately asked about changes not to the "law on mass media", but to "legislation on mass media", said Mr Bastunets.

"The reply tells us only about amendments to the Law on Mass Media, cooperation with MPs, draft laws for this year. Meanwhile, regulation of Internet media can be carried out without introducing any changes to the law – because the very Law stipulates that the regulatory provisions can be adopted at the governmental level."

As became known **on January 16**, the political **prisoner Yauhen Vaskovich**, former journalist of *Bobruyskij Courier*, spent **247 days in sum in a solitary cell**. The editorial office of *Bobruyskij Courier* alarmed human rights defenders and international organizations to protest against the tortures of the prisoner.

The 22-year old political prisoner was sent almost monthly to solitary confinement which is a fine for bad behavior in prison. Last time Yauhen was placed into the isolator before the New Year, on December 27, for ten days.

Such regime of serving the sentence (he is allowed only one food parcel up to two kilos a year) made impact on the physical state: being 186 cm tall, he weighs only 65 kilos.

We remind that Yauhen Vaskovich, and his friends Artsiom Prakapenka and Pavel Syramolatau, were sentenced to 7 years in prison for attacking the KGB building in Babruysk (on the night of October 17, 2010). They were found guilty of hooliganism and causing costly damage to property (the damage to the outer façade was estimated at 253 000 Br, which was in 2010 about 85\$). Now Yauhen Vaskovich is in

Mahilou prison No4. Pavel Syramalotau pleaded for pardon and was released in September 2012. Yauhen Vaskovich and Artsiom Prakapenka are refusing to appeal for pardon.

On January 16 Valery Vusik, a civil activist from the village Lebiadzianka of Bialynichy district, lodged a cassation appeal to the Mahilou Regional Court against the decision of the Bialynichy district court dated December 11, 2013. He was denied compensation of legal expenses which he had paid for the administrative case which he subsequently won. Mr Vusik asked to compensate the legal expenses amounting to 2 million 508 thousand rubles (which is approx. 190 euro) without reviewing the case.

We remind that on September 16, 2013 the judge of the Bialynichy district court Aksana Zahorskaya closed the administrative case against Valery Vusik. Earlier on March 29 the activist was fined 5 million rubles for an article in the low circulation newspaper *Mahiliouski Vybar* – for libeling an official representative and for violating the procedure of distributing the press. The case was started after a reporting crew of *Belsat* TV channel visited the local agricultural complex which was the painful issue of the article.

On January 17 it became known that **ideologists of the Vitebsk Region Executive Committee exerted pressure** on several local journalists, BAJ members. On December 28 local journalists gathered for a celebration, talked, listened to bard music, and made plans for the coming year. However, later some journalists and some editors from local newspapers were summoned to the ideological department for talks. The people were asked about the event and their **membership in BAJ**. Those who were not members of BAJ were warned that they had attended “the wrong place” and had met “the wrong colleagues”. Those who wanted to join the journalistic organization were recommended to join the Belarusian Union of Journalists. Also there were phone calls to the editorial offices of some members of BAJ, there editors were warned that their colleagues were members of BAJ and were warned against attending such celebrations.

On January 20 Aleh Barscheuski, chief editor of the non-state newspaper *Vitebskij Courier*, was **detained** under the pretext that he was suspected of forging the driver’s license.

He spent some time in the Kastychnitski district police department. Then, according to the detainee’s wife Volha Karach, representatives of tax inspection came and made him sign an obligation to submit a tax declaration before February 11.

On January 21 the court Frunzenski district court of Minsk **dismissed the suit** to defend business reputation filed by **Evroopt** against the Minsk **entrepreneurs’ union** and several mass media, including TUT.by and ej.by. Evrotorg Co Ltd (trade mark Evroopt) has to compensate 12.5 million rubles of legal expenses. The trading company demanded refutation of the information dated June 24, 2013 that the company was presumably involved in corporate raiding. The defendants were Uladzimir Karahin, the chair of the Republican Confederation of Entrepreneurship, his advisory Alexander Paulau, TUT.by, Ezhednevnik, and journalists Dzmitry Zajats and Siarhei Satsuk.

On January 21 the Central Electoral Committee of Belarus decided to set up a **civic council on controlling the procedure and rules of holding electoral agitation in mass media** in the soon-to-be local elections. The council will be headed by the Information Minister’s Deputy **Lilija Ananich**. The council will include representatives of state-run mass media and members of the Belarusian Union of Journalists who had already worked in such council at parliamentary elections in 2012.

According to the head of the CE Lidzija Yarmoshyna, this is the first time that such council is set up for local elections; earlier it was formed only for parliamentary and presidential elections.

On January 21 the Belarusian Association of Journalists made a **statement of solidarity** with journalists in Ukraine. BAJ expressed indignation at violence applied against journalists who covered protests in Kyiv.

The journalistic organization called on the Ukrainian authorities to stop the insulting practice of using brutal force against our colleagues. “We also back the demand to review newly adopted legislation in Ukraine which significantly restricts not only civil rights, but freedom of word,” said the statement.

On January 22 Ales Lipay, head of the informational agency *BelaPAN*, told *Radio Svaboda* about what **the Belarusian TV channel censored** in the evening program from a press-conference given by Aliaksandr Lukashenka on January 21. The press-conference lasted five hours; BT broadcast an hour and a half of this.

“In fact they cut out my question whether political prisoners will be liable to amnesty. I set the example of Statkevich and Bialiatski and explained why they should be released.”

Lukashenka’s reply with the order to verify the information about Bialiatski’s payment of the damage was also cut out. Also BT did not show the reply with a suggestion that Statkevich could write a plea for pardon, without even pleading guilty, and then amnesty for him might be considered. The question about the Belarusian language and the reply were significantly abridged too.

On January 24 Siarhei Arzhantsau, publisher of the low-circulation socio-political bulletin *Klimavitskaya Info-Panorama* read a reply to his complaint in the local district executive committee. We remind that the journalist **was not allowed to attend an open hearing** of an administrative case. The ban was issued by the head of the administrative commission Natallia Asmalouskaya.

The reply says the journalist’s presence was “ungrounded” because he was not involved in the administrative process. The journalist objects to such reasoning: “The Code of Executive Procedure on administrative violations stipulates that administrative cases are open for public attendance (article 2.14). So I disagree that the actions of the officials were lawful, they violated my citizen and journalistic rights.” The publisher is going to appeal to the Mahilou Region Executive Committee.