

THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

Mass Media Fortnight in Belarus

December 13 – 26, 2010

The unprecedented violence in relation to Belarusian civil society, including mass media and journalists took place within the reporting period. The main events within the period included the Presidential election on December 19, 2010, a mass protest action in the evening of the polling day, followed by mass arrests, assaults, and searches of journalists and civil activists that continue till the present moment.

As a result of these dramatic events, more than two dozen journalists and media workers, including BAJ members, were detained and arrested for 10-15 days. Nearly the same number of media workers was injured by riot police (see the list below). The presence of press cards and official accreditations wasn't taken into consideration by the riot police officers during their clean-up operation in Independence Square. Some journalists were released from custody on showing the documents. However, it happened after they had spent several hours in police vans or departments.

Moreover, it should be noted that there was either disabled or complicated access to the popular informational Web-resources on the polling day. Quite a few technical specialists believe that it was done artificially by means of narrowing the Web-channel by the "Beltelekam" Belarusian monopolist Web-provider.

At the same time, the official media have been presenting the abovementioned events in the totally biased way. In particular, they stated that the action participants were extremists and that the riot police acted in the justified and legal way. They asserted that the journalists (including representatives of state-owned media outlets) suffered from "the crowd" that "attempted to storm" the governmental building.

Apparently, the only exclusion to the rule was made by a journalist Siarhej Darafeyeu, the "Vybar" talk show presenter. (The program is broadcast by the "ANT" TV channel.) He put several "inappropriate" questions to the Chairperson of Central Election Committee Lidziya Yarmoshyna and other responsible officials during live broadcasting in the evening of December 19, 2010. Consequently, the program broadcasting was suspended for a month's term.

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The Belarusian Association of Journalists sent an appeal to the Minister of Internal Affairs of Belarus A. Kulashou, the Chief Police Officer on Civil Security Yauhien Paludzien and the Commander of Internal Troops Valery Haydukevich on **December 17, 2010**. The BAJ leadership reminded the police of journalists' right to be report from street actions (including the

unauthorized events) and asked the police commandment to pass the reminder to common policemen.

The Internet users came across problems with access to a number of socio-political Web-sites in Belarus on **December 19, 2010**. Among other, the access was disabled to the Web-sites of charter97.org (“Charter’97”), belaruspartisan.org (“Belorusskiy Partisan”), gazetaby.com (“Salidarnasc” On-line newspaper), ucpb.org (The United Civil Party), udf.by (The United Democratic Forces), electroname.com, bchd.info (The Belarusian Christian Democracy), spring96.org (“Viasna” Center for Human Rights). Periodically, there appeared problems with access to the Web-pages of “European Radio for Belarus”, Radio Liberty, and zapraudu.info (“Tell the Truth!” civil campaign). Moreover, the Web-users couldn’t enter their Facebook and LiveJournal accounts as well as Google. The Web-administrators of some Belarusian independent Web-sites think that the problems were created artificially by means of purposeful narrowing of access to the Web-resources. According to them, this action could be done by the “Beltelekam” state monopolist Internet provider only. The technicians proved their words with the fact that foreign Web-users didn’t face any problems with access to the Web-pages, mentioned above.

The first signals about the facts of rude physical attacks on the journalists, who covered after-the-election events in the streets of Minsk, appeared in the evening of **December 19, 2010**. Thus, a group of journalists that covered a rally, arranged by a Presidential candidate Uladzimir Niaklayeu and his supporters towards Kastychnitskaya Square in the city center of Minsk, was knocked down and beaten by a group of security agents. The latter were seizing and breaking the journalists’ professional photo equipment. A foreign correspondent was hit in his face at his attempt to show his press credentials.

Even more Belarusian and foreign journalists were attacked by riot police in Independence Square, where a mass protest action against rigging the election results took place. Some of them were simply beaten. Others were detained together with the protesters during the meeting and after the riot police clean-up operation. Several members of Belarusian Association of Journalists were detained at their offices and in their private apartments. (Most of them cooperated with the head-quarters of alternative Presidential candidates.) Moreover, Natalia Radzina, the “Charter’97” Editor and several volunteers were detained at the “Charter’97” Editorial office in Minsk late in the evening of December 19, 2010.

THE LISTS OF JOURNALISTS, DETAINED AND ATTACKED DURING THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PERIOD CAN BE FOUND HERE:

<http://baj.by/m-p-viewpub-tid-1-pid-9557.html>

A. Lukashenka's press conference on **December 20, 2010** showed that the dramatic events in Independence Square hadn't been accidental. They were a part of a plan on "curtailing liberalization", including the liberalization processes in the media field. "It is enough to mock at the state authorities and the people! You will take responsibility for each word, written by you," Lukashenka said. "We will reform the Internet and bring it in compliance with the Western examples. We didn't do this before the election. It was my position. Otherwise, some of them would tell that we were pressurizing them," Lukashenka noted. He warned the journalists of printed, electronic, and on-line media that they would be liable for each word after the election at that.

On **December 20, 2010**, the Board of the Belarusian Association of Journalists adopted a statement of protest against "shocking fact of severe force used by the police against journalists and civil activists in the evening of December 19, 2010."

"The authorities of the country used such a brutal way to show their absolute disrespect to basic civil and professional rights," the BAJ Board members said. Among other, the Belarusian Association of Journalists demanded to investigate immediately all the cases of violence against journalists and all the cases of interference in their professional activity as well as called to charge all the guilty of breaking the journalists' rights.

On **December 21, 2010**, the Ministry of Justice of Belarus sent a request for explanation to BAJ in relation to the events of December 19, 2010. Particularly, the Ministry asked for the reasons BAJ had issued its statement of protest against the "shocking fact of severe force used by the police against journalists and civil activists." The Ministry was curious what paragraph of the BAJ statutes had allowed the association to appeal on behalf of "civil activists" apart from journalists.

The international civil society institutes, including journalistic associations, condemned the use of force against peaceful citizens, including journalists, applied by riot police and other security troops during the mass events in Minsk on **December 19-20, 2010**. In particular, letters of protest to Belarusian official authorities were sent by OSCE, the International Federation of Journalists, Reporters without Borders, the Russian Union of Journalists, "Stop Censorship!" Movement (Ukraine), the Lithuanian Union of Journalists, the Journalist Association of Jerusalem (JAJ), the Norwegian Union of Journalists (NJ), the Human Rights House Network, Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists (New York, USA), the Association of Polish Journalists and other organizations.

“Violence against the media is unacceptable. The police should assist reporters who cover public events — not beat or intimidate them, damage their equipment and imprison them. I call on authorities to immediately release all jailed journalists,” said Dunja Mijatovic, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

“Although a record number of journalists were accredited to cover the elections, and their working conditions had been improved, brutal treatment of media representatives by law-enforcement agencies in the aftermath of the election shattered signs of progress,” she added.

Representatives of Belarusian democratic political parties and movements also condemned violence of riot police and internal troops in relation to mass media representatives during their press conference on **December 21, 2010**. “The fact that journalists were purposefully attacked and that their professional equipment was purposefully broken prove true that the official authorities wanted to hide the truth about the events of December 19, 2010 from Belarusian society and international community,” noted Alaksey Yanukevich, BPF Party Chairman during the press-conference.

Despite numerous protests, severe persecution of mass protest action participants and journalists, who covered the action, continues.

Katsiaryna Stsiapanava, a BAJ member and a student of Journalism from the European Humanities University was detained by Belarusian border guards at the Belarus-Lithuania border on **December 24, 2010**. The girl was taken for interrogation to Astraviets District Department of KGB. Among other, the student was inquired if she had taken part in the street actions in Minsk on December 19, 2010. (According to Ms. Stsiapanava’s mother, her daughter was an independent observer at the Presidential election in Vitsiebsk.)

A journalist Iryna Khalip and her husband Andrei Sannikau (a former Presidential candidate) were beaten and arrested after the protest action in Minsk on December 19, 2010. Their son Danik, 3 years old, was left with Iryna’s parents. All of a sudden, the state guardianship bodies took their interest in Danik’s fate on **December 24, 2010**. The guardianship agents tried to take Danik from kindergarten, when his grandparents came to the KGB prison to pass parcels to Iryna and Andrei. On the same day, Danik’s grandmother Lutsyna Khalip was proposed to complete the formalities for becoming Danik’s custodian.

On **December 24, 2010**, the Belarusian Association of Journalists appealed to the Belarus’ Minister of Justice, Minister of Internal Affairs, and Public Prosecutor General with a request to

pay attention to numerous offences of law that had taken place since December 19, 2010, to take all possible efforts to restore the rule of law and prosecute all the guilty in breaking the law.

«The representatives of law enforcement bodies prevented Belarusian and foreign journalists from carrying out their professional activity with the use of force... Unfortunately, the events of December 19-20, 2010 showed that the police representatives didn't pay any attention to the professional status of journalists... Numerous breaches of the law took place at the time of detention of journalists as well as at the time of court hearings on their cases," the BAJ leaders emphasized in the statement.

The Minsk bureau of European Radio for Belarus was raided by unidentified plainclothes agents who seized the office equipment on *December 25, 2010*.

Deputy Editor-in-chief Vital Zyblyuk was given an unsigned copy of search warrant.

When Vital reached the office, he saw some people on the stairs, carrying the office equipment out. He was given a copy of the search protocol which was hardly readable.

A technical officer from presidential administration was present as a witness during the search.

Vital Zyblyuk: "It looked like tornado had swept through the office!" Around 50 pieces of technical office equipment were seized.

According to Vital Zyblyuk, the search was carried out in absence of editorial staff workers. The office was opened by the key which was given by a building watchman. The European Radio for Belarus is an international radio station, registered in Warsaw. It's office has been officially accredited in Belarus by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The state security agents broke into the office of "Belsat" independent TV Channel in Minsk on *December 26, 2010*. They used an electric saw to open the door. Practically nothing could be found at the moment of the raid in the office. The "Belsat" official representative in Minsk, Mikhas Yanchuk, said the journalists had taken the equipment and left the premises several days before.

OTHER IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE BELARUSIAN MEDIA FIELD WITHIN THE REPORTING PERIOD WERE AS FOLLOWS:

As reported in mid-December 2010, Minsk Public Prosecutor's Office officially requested materials on the defamation criminal case, filed by Ivan Korzh, former Chief of KGB Department for Homiel region, from the Department of Interior at Homiel Regional Executive Committee. (Surprisingly, the legal investigation within the case had been suspended in May 2010.) Senior legal investigator from Minsk Public Prosecutor's Office Siarhei Ivanou informed one of four independent journalists, treated as witnesses to the case that the computer equipment,

seized from the media workers at the beginning of 2010, contained information, related to another criminal case. He refused to provide any details on that case though.

It is worth reminding that a range of searches and confiscations of computer equipment was held at the apartments and working places of four independent journalists – Natallia Radzina, Maryna Koktysh, Iryna Khalip, and Sviatlana Kalinkina in the first half of 2010. The searches were connected to the so-called “Hunting Case”, as if covered by the media workers. The case deals with four high-ranked police officers who allegedly organized illegal hunting and tried to put illegal pressure on KGB officers.

Since **December 13, 2010**, the First Channel of Belarusian State TV and the EU Delegation in Belarus started a common information project – “A Window to Europe”. It was agreed that a program under the same title would be broadcast by the First State TV channel and the “Radius FM” FM-radio station, founded by the National State TV and Radio Company, for a year. A corresponding press-release was distributed by the EU Delegation in Belarus on December 13, 2010. The EU decision evoked bewilderment within the journalist circles, since previously the program had been broadcast by the non-state media outlets, broadcasting to Belarus from abroad, including “The European Radio for Belarus”, “Radio Racyja”, and “BelSat” TV.

On **December 16, 2010**, the “BelSat” TV Press Service distributed a press release, regarding the step as “inappropriate”. “We are very worried with the situation, when promotion of free world – the EU in this case – is implemented with the assistance of propagandist institutions of a non-democratic state”, the “BelSat” management noted. Also, “BelSat” announced collection of signatures under their statement of protest <http://belsat.eu/be/aktualnosci/a.814.ieurazviaz-finansuie-bt.html> they are planning to pass to the EC President and the EP members.

Prepared by BAJ Monitoring Service