

THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

Mass Media Week in Belarus

Info-posting February 18 – March 3, 2013

Within the reporting period there were several cases of denied information, one official warning for contributing to foreign mass media unaccredited, a detention of three journalists “by mistake”. Also the expectations to get back the Belarus Press Photos 2011 did not fulfill; and communication with state structures failed about possible changes in the present-day mass media law.

On February 18 the journalist **Iryna Khalip** who had been formally allowed to visit Britain and Russia until April 3 came to the police station for a regular call-in, as required by the sentence. However, instead of the head of the probation inspection Natallia Kaliada, she met **Aliaksandr Kupchenya**, the head of the probation unit of the Minsk city police department.

According to Mrs. Khalip, the police official inquired when she would leave Belarus. When the journalist answered that she did not know the date, Mr. Kupchenya turned angry. “We have opened up the border for you! You didn't believe we'd do that, but we have, so that you go away and never come back. Listen to me, don't come back. Take your child, fly to Britain, obtain political asylum, but don't come back. You're not needed here, all you do is distort facts,” these were his words.

We remind that on February 13 Iryna Khalip was allowed to go temporarily to Great Britain and to Russia: to see her husband and the editorial office of Novaya Gazeta.

On February 19 Iryna Khalip **filed a complaint** to the Interior Minister **Ihar Shunevich** demanding an **in-house probe against Mr. Kupchenya**. Mrs. Khalip described Mr. Kupchenya's behavior as “a most blatant provocation” aimed to force her to violate the conditions of the probation period.

On February 19 BAJ received an **official reply from the Chamber of Representatives of the National Assembly** to the suggestions of BAJ on **amending the actual mass media law**.

The chairperson of the Permanent Commission on human rights, national relations and mass media of Parliament **Andrei Naumovich** informs that BAJ's suggestions have been discussed by the commission and “processed in details together with the Ministry of Information.”

“At present the Law of Belarus “On Mass Media” in general works stably, allows to solve practical problems occurring in mass media activities, and boosts to gradual development of information space of the country,” said in the reply. “Based upon this, deputies of the House of Representatives – members of the commission consider at present that **initiating amendments** to the legislation on mass media is **inappropriate**.”

The Chairperson of BAJ **Zhanna Litvina** said that it was not the first time when state bodies gave reply officially with reference to the Ministry of Information. “I've got an impression that absolutely all decisions concerning media sphere depend on the **Information Ministry**. It looks as if the deputies are deprived of a possibility to take a decision even on such a harmless issue as hearings within the commission by themselves, without interference of the executive power,” she said.

As became known **on February 19**, albums **Belarus Press Photo 2011**, which were seized in November by Ashmiany customs office for an examination, have been now handed over to the **KGB**. “All materials were transferred to representatives of the Committee of State Security. That's all I can tell you,” said the head of the department on fighting smuggling and administrative customs violations **Ihar Yakutsenka**.

We remind that 41 albums were confiscated on a border control point under suspicion of containing "extremism materials", were examined and were doomed to be destroyed; then the authorities of the ideological department of Hrodna Regional Executive Committee cancelled the previous decision, and the owners of the albums were about to get the albums back from the customs office.

On February 20 the director general of *Beltelecom* **Siarhei Papkou** announced that **wired radio** was going to be shut down by the end of 2014. The decision has been made due to the fact that this system of radio broadcast is old-fashioned and not profitable.

On February 20 the independent journalist **Aliaksandr Barazenska** appeared at the **prosecutor's office of Minsk**, summoned by an official writ handed over to him by post. He had a talk with the Councilor of Justice Mrs **Natallia Zhukavets**, the deputy head of the department on supervising law enforcement and legality of legal acts. The Councilor wanted to take explanations from Barazenska about what he was doing with a camera near the court of Maskouski district of Minsk at the end of December 2012 when an administrative case of the entrepreneur Ales Makayeu was heard.

The journalist answered that he did not remember the circumstances of the events, so Mrs Zhukavets offered him to come the next day. She said she would question several witnesses so that the talk would be more up to the point.

On February 21 an **official warning** was issued to **Aliaksandr Barazenska** that he must not **work for foreign mass media without accreditation**. The document was signed by the deputy head of the Minsk prosecutor **Kazimir Kezhun** and handed in by the Councilor of Justice Natallia Zhukavets. The warning says that Aliaksandr Barazenska "performed functions of a cameraman to the benefit of the Polish TV channel **Belsat**." *We remind that representatives of the Polish TV channel Belsat have several times applied for accreditation, but were denied first on the grounds that the documents were not appropriate with the law, and later – because journalists of Belsat many times violated the law on mass media, by working without accreditation.*

On February 21 the photo journalist of the newspaper *Brestskij Courier* **Milana Kharytonava** received an official **reply to her complaint to the prosecutor's office** where she demanded to hold liable the **policeman who interfered with her work**. *We remind that the incident took place on November 25, 2012 in Brest during the last game of football championship of Belarus. The journalist was taking photo of football fans celebrating the end of the game. When she caught detentions of the most active football fans, a policeman demanded that she stop taking photos and even pushed her to the traffic way. It lasted around 10 minutes; the policeman ignored Milana's arguments that she was a journalist and stopped only after remarks made by a special forces officer.* In the complaint Milana Kharytonava asked to find out who the policeman was and to hold him liable. The official reply, dated **February 14** and signed by the head of the Linin district police department of Brest **Henadz Vaitovich**, says that the check-up did not reveal any violations in the policeman's actions.

The **website** of the organizational committee of the **Belarusian Christian Democracy party** was **blocked** almost two days, **on February 24 - 25**. Representatives of BCHD consider that the blocking was staged by *Beltelecom* intentionally to hamper the **Marathon of Solidarity with political prisoners**. The website was accessible from abroad and via proxy-servers, which proves that the blocking was staged on purpose, but not through technical faults. The website started working properly after several complaints to *Beltelecom*. *We remind that the state company Beltelecom is a monopolist for the exterior gateway in Belarus via which other providers in Belarus are connected to the World Wide Web.*

On February 25 in Minsk a police officer **forced** a **cameraman** of the informational agency *BelaPAN* **out** of the territory around the house in Plekhanava Street where an explosion and a fire had occurred. The journalist got through to the cordoned zone lawfully, having demonstrated his press card to a police lieutenant. He was filming the venue with a camera and was waiting for an official commentary from a representative of the Red Cross, upon previous arrangement. Suddenly the officer commanded the journalist to leave and pushed him out of the zone.

On February 27 an employee of the **press-service** of the **Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus** **denied information** to a journalist of the *European Radio for Belarus* **Zmitser Lukashuk**. The journalist sent a list of questions to the chairperson of the Federation **Leanid Kozik** and requested to hold a phone talk up to the questions. The press-service referred the journalist to the website of the Federation, saying that all information about the organization activities can be found there. “By the way, we looked for the information requested for in our letter to Kozik, but we failed to find it on the website of the FPB,” said the editorial office of the *European Radio for Belarus*.

On February 28 three *BelaPAN* journalists were **detained** near the building of the National Academy of Sciences where they were conducting a regular weekly opinion poll. The correspondent **Hanna Afonina**, cameramen **Siarhei Satsiuk** and **Vasil Siamashka** were detained and taken to the Pershamaiski district police department. In the department the journalists' IDs were checked and copied, the video was looked through, and an hour and a half later they were **set free**. The police **apologized** and advised that next time the journalists should conduct such opinion polls in another district.

On February 26 in Bialynichy district (Mahilou region) the **local policeman** Siarhei Karytkin appeared at the house of the **local activist Valery Vusik** and drew up two **administrative protocols** against him: one for **libeling** the present-day chairperson of the farming complex in Bialynichy district and the other for **illegal distribution of a newspaper**. Valery Vusik, the former deputy of the council in Bialynichy district, published an open letter to the local authorities in the **small-circulation** newspaper *Vybar Mahilouski* (published since February 2012 in 299 copies, which does not require official registration). He provided facts of violations at the agricultural complex (which is state-run) and called to bring matters in order.

On February 28 journalists of the satellite TV-channel *Belsat* were invited by Valery Vusik to report about some violations at the local farming complex. The journalists came to the animal farm in order to talk to workers there about salaries and working conditions. However, they were interrupted by the deputy chairperson of the agricultural complex, who accused them of **“industrial espionage”** and demanded that they leave the secret object otherwise he would call the police.

On February 28 in the evening the local policeman called on Valery Vusik again, just to ask why he had invited the TV. As Valery Vusik told on **March 2**, two **participants** of the interviews with the journalists had **administrative protocols filed against them**.

On March 2 at the official sports celebration **“Minsk ski track 2013”** people in **plain clothes prevented** journalists **from taking pictures** of the participants of the skiing round – they were higher officials, including Aliaksandr Lukashenka.