

THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

Mass Media Week in Belarus

Info-posting – January 23-30, 2012

The *Reporters without Borders* international human rights watchdog published the annual [Press Freedom Index 2011-2012](#) within the period under review. According to the research outcome, Belarus dropped to the 168th position in the rating list. (All in all, the list contains 179 positions.) Among other, the dramatic rating fall of Belarus was caused by a severe suppression of civil protest actions in the aftermath of Presidential elections in December 2010.

The preliminary court hearings on a defamation case against the '*Hantsavitski Chas*' non-state regional newspaper were held in Baranavichy City and District Court (Brest region) on **January 23, 2012**.

The claim had been filed against the weekly's publisher '*InterPress-Region*' Private Unitary Enterprise by a former MP Alaksandr Svirid and a former chief of Hantsavitski District Electric Communications Center Mikalay Rylko. The claimants felt offended by a newspaper article "*Signatures in Support of the Head of District Executive Committee Delivered to the Regional Center*" by Peter Guzayeuski, published in '*Hantsavitski Chas*' on November 11, 2011, and its Web-replica "*Petitioners at Sumar's*", published on the newspaper Web-site www.ganc-chas.by. The article narrated about a collective petition delivery to Brest Regional Executive Committee in support of Uladzimir Stolar, who held the post of the Head of Hantsavichy District Executive Committee at that time. Among other, it was mentioned that the petition was presented by A. Svirid and M. Rylko. This way the local officials were trying to save the chief of Hantsavitski District Executive authority from resignation. The claimants told they hadn't brought any signatures anywhere and requested the court to oblige the '*Hantsavitski Chas*' newspaper publisher to pay out 10,000,000 Br (approx. EUR 930) to them in moral damages.

The judge took a decision to send an official request to Brest Regional Executive Committee, in order to check the facts, connected to the case. The following court hearings were scheduled for **February 3, 2012**.

It should be mentioned that Mr. Svirid and Mr. Rylko claimed against the newspaper to the Public Prosecutor's Office for Hantsavitski District, Hantsavichy Department of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Information of Belarus too. However, they received replies that the periodical hadn't violated the law.

On **January 24, 2012**, the Panel of Judges of Minsk City Court refused to support an appeal against the initial verdict of Piershamayski District Court in Minsk in relation to a human rights activist and a BAJ member Ales Bialatski. The decision was announced by the judge Uladzimir Stsiapurka. A. Bialatski wasn't delivered to the court room.

It should be noted that the human rights activist's wife Natallia Pinchuk transferred the whole amount to be paid out by the prisoner to the state on **January 18, 2012**. The

sum was collected by the public. There was a hope that the payment would help to mitigate Bialatski's sentence. However, the Panel of Judges didn't take into account the fact of transfer, while considering the appeal.

It is worth reminding that the judge Siarhei Bandarenka of Piershamayski District Court in Minsk pronounced a verdict to Viasna leader and FIDH Vice-President Ales Bialatski on *November 4, 2012*. The court found Ales Bialatski guilty of large-scale tax evasion and sentenced him to **4.5 years of imprisonment** in a strict regime penal colony with confiscation of his property (including office of human rights center "Viasna"). Moreover, the court ruled to collect Br 721 mln of alleged damage and Br 36 mln of state duties (approx. USD 90,000).

A. Bialatski, 49, is currently imprisoned in Zhodzina jail (Minsk region). The international democratic community, the political leaders of the EU, the USA, and a number of other states treat him as a political prisoner and insist on his immediate release from custody.

As reported on **January 25, 2012**, all civil servants from Luninets District Executive Committee were obliged to deliver speeches in the state-owned regional media, according to schedule. The document was signed by Viktor Rafalovich, Deputy Chairman of Luninets District Executive Committee on agreement with the "Luninetskiya Naviny" newspaper's Editor-in-chief Tatsiana Vaitsiakhouskaya.

At the same time, the district officials are banned to present any information to the local "Inform-progulka" non-state weekly.

The '*Tell the Truth!*' civil campaign activists arranged a flash-mob action '*Switch off your TV! The Belarusian television teaches your children to cheat!*' on **January 29, 2012**. They installed TV-sets with the taped screens near refuse bins close to the Kamarouski market and the Belarusian State Philharmonic in the city center of Minsk. It is worth mentioning that the participants of the previous counter-BT flash-mob action, who emptied a pot with noodles at the entrance to the Belarusian TV and Radio Company in Minsk, were fined.

A political prisoner and a member of BAJ Dzmitry Bandarenka had a phone talk with his wife on **January 29, 2012**. Among other, he underscored that the conditions of his custody in Mahilou Penal Colony No.15 had aggravated. In particular, he was banned to use a crutch for walking. Despite the injuries, he was banned to stay in bed at daytime and obliged to work.

Prepared by the BAJ Monitoring Service