

THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

Mass Media Week in Belarus

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At the end of August, six political prisoners were released, including BAJ member Yauhen Vaskovich. Meantime, pressure on independent mass media, including prosecution under art. 22.9, denial of services and interference into work of journalists at task continued in its ordinary manner.

On August 19, journalists **Ales Kirkevich and Ales Dzianisau** were found guilty of violating **art. 22.9** of the Administrative Code and fined 25 basic amounts each (4.5 million rubles). The cases grounded on video reports about a Lithuanian puppet exhibition in Hrodna, published on Belsat website. The cases started yet in July, but the case materials were sent back to the police for completion. The hearing resumed on August 14, without the journalists' participation. The witnesses were summoned to court to testify, the artist Aliaksandr Silvanovich and his wife, director of the exhibition hall Iryna Silvanovich. The total sum of fines at that time amounted over 146 million rubles.

On August 19, in Biarozauka (Hrodna region, Lida district) the flat of freelance journalist **Yury Dziashuk** was **searched**. Police officers looted through his notes, and seized a computer and a printer. The searches were held within criminal investigation of the fact of a flash mob held in the town on July 25, 2015.

On August 21, the Ministry of Information reported that it had **restricted access** to two more unnamed websites for the reason that the resources, as the Ministry deems, distributed information with signs of extremism and hate speech.

On August 21, journalist **Aliaksandr Burakou** was made to **delete photos** of an informational stand about the launch of the **electoral campaign**, which was located near the administration building in Mahilou. An employee of the security department went out and demanded to delete the photos, as they were of an administrative building. The journalist argued they were of an informational stand. He deleted the photos and filed a complaint at the book of suggestions of the administration.

On August 22, Aliaksandr Lukashenka **released six political prisoners**, including BAJ member **Yauhen Vaskovich**. The 24-year old man had worked for Bobruyskiy Courier for some time before the imprisonment.

In May 2011, Yauhen Vaskovich and two other fellows 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\$). Yauhen Vaskovich was serving the term in Mahilou prison No4.

Pavel Syramalotau pleaded for pardon and was released in September 2012. Yauhen Vaskovich and Artsiom Prakapenka refused to appeal for pardon. The imprisonment term would have ended for them on January 17, 2018.

On August 31, the newspaper **Novy Chas** again requested for services of **Belsayuzdruk**, state distributor of printed press. The newspaper was left out from the state-run system of press distributor before elections in 2006. From that time, the public and journalism community pressed the authorities to eliminate economic discrimination, after which several major newspapers returned into the distribution net (including *Nasha Niva* (8000 copies), and *Narodnaya Volya* (26000 copies)). However, some outlets, like *Novy Chas* are still discriminated. Belsayuzdruk refuses to cooperate with the outlets and provide

them with distribution services. This time the editorial office received a reply that the enterprise does not have a possibility to provide services, but promises to consider the issue by the end of the year. The regional newspapers *Hazeta Slonimskaya* and *Intex-press* (Baranavichy) experience the same trouble, although the editorial offices and readers of the outlets insistently appeal to the distributors.

On September 7 in Homel, freelance journalists **Kastus Zhukouski and Natallia Kryvashei** were closed in a dormitory, and the police were called, when they came to make a report about dwelling conditions in the building. The journalists came following a complaint of a resident of the building. The administrator of the building phoned to the communal enterprise Soviet where she was recommended to close the journalists down and call the police. Police officers arrived and set the journalists free, the latter filed complaints against forceful deprivation of freedom and interference into journalists' activities.

On September 7, non-staff correspondent of *Narodnaya Volya* **Katsiaryna Andreyeva** was **detained** when she came to cover a picket of interest holders who protested against alleged fraud near the Palace of Independence. The journalist was detained together with the picketers, although she had a confirmation of the editorial task. She was kept for an hour and a half, and then released without any protocols.

On September 7, journalist and military affairs analyst **Aliaksandr Alesin** reported that he was **still in the status of a suspect in the criminal case** on cooperation with foreign special services. He said there were hardly any investigative operations held. However, he still stays under recognizance, through which he missed many important international meetings. He told about a draft law being prepared which would establish that cooperation with foreign special forces would not be considered as a crime if it did not inflict harm to the state. "If the amendments are adopted, the investigators said the case would be closed," said Aliaksandr Alesin.

We remind that he was detained on November 25, and set free under recognizance on December 10, 2014. He was first accused of state treason, but then the charges were changed for cooperation with foreign special forces.