

BELARUS MEDIA SUMMARY

27 December 2010 – 15 January 2011

Journalists who had been detained and sentenced to administrative arrests of 10-15 days after the events of 19 December in Minsk were released during that period.

At the same time, criminal charges were brought against prisoners of the KGB Investigatory Isolation Ward, six of whom are members of the Belarusian Association of Journalists. Only two of them, Sergey Vozniak and Aliaksandr Fiaduta, were able to meet their lawyers. There has been no information about the others since 29-30 December 2010. All of them were detained in Minsk 19 and 20 December, and after 10 days criminal charges were brought against them for mass disturbances. The period of their detention were thus prolonged for two months. The criminal case was initiated by the Investigatory Department of Preliminary Investigation of the Minsk City Department of Interior Affairs according to Article 293 of the Criminal Code (mass disturbances). Paragraph 1 of this article provides for criminal liability for organizing of mass disturbances and punishment of 5 to 15 years of imprisonment. Paragraph 2 provides for punishment of 3 to 8 years of imprisonment for participation in mass disturbances.

Searches and interrogations of journalists within the framework of the same criminal case go on. They continue despite a broad international response. A large number of international organizations and institutions expressed their support to Belarusian journalists and protested against the clampdown on the media in Belarus, including International Federation of Journalists, International Press Institute, Exiled Journalists Network, Reporters without Borders, and others. The European Parliament President and the Chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Human Rights Committee, EP Delegation to Belarus, and EP Delegation to the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly also issued a joint official statement on Belarus.

At the same time, a campaign of discredit of the opposition goes on in state media. 9 January 2011 the First Channel of the State Belarusian TV broadcasted a documentary “Square – with Metal against Glass” by Agency of Television News. The film was dedicated to the events of 19 December in the Independence Square in Minsk. The authors of the documentary tried to persuade that an attack on a presidential candidate Uladzimir Niakliayeu had been organized by his “competitors” from the opposition and that people had been attacking the House of Government had nothing to do with law enforcements, etc. 14 December 2011 Sovetskaya Belorussiya, a newspaper of the Presidential Administration, started a series of “unmasking” articles about the opposition called “Behind the scenes of one conspiracy.” The articles were also re-published by other national state-owned newspapers, Zviazda, Narodnaya Gazeta, Respublika. According to human rights defenders, the articles violate principles of presumption of innocence.

27 December about 50 people participated in a picket organized by a Russian Novaya Gazeta in front of the Belarusian embassy in Moscow. Journalists of Novaya Gazeta were wearing prison overalls and were holding portraits of their Belarusian colleagues, who had been detained in Minsk 19-20 December.

28 December 12 computers, flash drives and CDs were confiscated by KGB officers after a search conducted at the premises of the Belarusian PEN and editorial board of Nasha Niva independent weekly that share an office in Minsk. Besides, a computer was confiscated from a flat of the Nasha Niva editor Andrei Skurko. According to a search warrant, the searches were related to two criminal cases: on mass disturbances and on affront to state symbols.

29 December criminal charges were brought against the detainees of the KGB Investigatory Isolation Ward, including six members of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, Natallia Radzina, Iryna Khalip, Sergey Vozniak, Aliaksandr Fiaduta, Dzmitry Bandarenka and Pavel Seviarynets.

29 December the International Press Institute (IPI) in Vienna, its affiliated South and East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO), and the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) called on Minsk to stop trying to intimidate independent reporters. "We are alarmed at the arrests and jail sentences handed down to journalists," SEEMO Secretary General Oliver Vujovic said in a statement. Vujovic expressed special concern about Natalya Radina, editor of the website Charter 97, and Irina Khalip, correspondent for the Moscow-based newspaper Novaya Gazeta, whom he said remained behind bars at a Minsk detention facility. "For us, it is important that in Belarus journalists be able to work independently, professionally and freely, like in other countries."

29 December the Belarusian Association of Journalists received a reply from the Ministry of Justice about its appeal of 24 December. BAJ sent official letters to the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Interior Affairs and the Prosecutor General of Belarus. The journalistic association drew the officials' attention to violations of journalists' rights during the events of 19 December on Minsk and asked to call to account those who are responsible for the violations. The reply BAJ received from the Ministry of Justice contains a request to provide information on whether the journalists mentioned in the appeal are members of the organization. "This is another worrying letter from the Ministry of Justice that might mean some consequences for our organization," Andrei Bastunets, a Vice Chairperson of BAJ, commented.

30 December Aleh Praliaskouski, the Minister of Information, made a statement about the Ministry having complaints about the way several non-state media had covered the presidential election campaign. The Minister blamed independent media of "invalid data, and sometimes insult and slander" while covering the election campaign and said they must share responsibility for "mass disturbances" of 19 December. According to Mr. Praliaskouski, the Ministry "will thoroughly analyze activity of such media outlets and will give an appropriate legal evaluation to it."

30 December law enforcement officers conducted a search of a flat rented by Katsiaryna Tkachenka, a reporter of Belsat TV Channel.

3 January Reporters without Borders condemns the “systematic raids, which seem to be aimed at seizing all documents and files relating to the media’s coverage of the 19 December presidential election and the protests that followed the announcement that Lukashenko had been reelected.” The press freedom organization is alarmed by the intensity of the repression since the election and calls on the governments of the European Union, the Russian government and international institutions to respond firmly in order to prevent an even harsher crackdown on the media by Lukashenka.

31 December law enforcement officers conducted searches in flats of Julia Darashkevich, a photo reporter of Nasha Niva newspapers, and Tatsiana Haurylchyk, a video reporter of the website of the newspaper. The officers told Julia Darashkevich she might have photo and video materials that are evidence in the criminal case on the mass disturbances. Two her laptops, flash drives, dictaphones, external hard drives, CDs were confiscated. Tatsiana Haurylchyk’s video camera, computer and memory sticks were also confiscated. She was also suggested to come to the KGB for “a conversation.” Ms. Haurylchyk came to KGB accompanied by her lawyer and insisted on the legal advisor’s presence during the talk. The KGB investigator objected to that first, but the journalist refused to talk without the lawyer. In the evening of the same day the journalist received an anonymous threatening phone call.

3 January Exiled Journalist's Network called on all supporters of Belarus media to ask for a proper investigation of the violations of press freedom during and after the presidential elections and to appeal to Aliaksandr Mikhnevich, the Belarusian Ambassador in the UK. “Belarus needs a free press if it is to become a free society,” the statement goes.

4 January law enforcement officers conducted a search of a flat of Ales Barazhenka, a cameraman of Belsat TV Channel. The search started at 6 a.m. and lasted for two hours. A laptop of the journalist’s girlfriend was confiscated; he was taken to the KGB for an interrogation in relation to the criminal case on mass disturbances. The lawyer was not allowed to be present during the interrogation.

5 January the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatovic, called today for an end to the attacks on independent media in Belarus and urged authorities to immediately release imprisoned journalists. “I am deeply concerned by the unprecedented wave of violence, intimidation, arrests and prosecution of journalists that started in the wake of the 19 December 2010 presidential election,” said Mijatovic in a letter to Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergey Martynov.

6 January KGB officers interrogated Viktoriya Kolchyna, who is making a documentary for Belsat TV Channel about Belarusian journalists, who had died as a result of their professional activities. The interrogation dealt with Dzmitry Bandarenka, a member of BAJ and a proxy of Andrei Sannikau, one of the oppositional presidential candidates, who is detained at the KGB Investigatory Isolation Ward.

6 January it became public that the Prosecutor’s Office of Minsk Region did not manage to figure out the motives that led to the alleged suicide of Charter’97 Co-founder and Editor Aleh Biabienin. The Prosecutor’s Office refused to initiate a criminal case on the fact.

8 January a Hrodna-based journalist Andrzej Poczobut, was detained in front of his house and taken for “a conversation” to a local KGB office. There he received an official warning about “inadmissibility of illegal actions.” Mr. Poczobut had been detained at the Independence Square in Minsk 19 December, but was released on the next day from court.

10 January the editorial office of Borisovskie Novosti independent regional newspaper was searched. The warrant that had been signed at the Minsk Region KGB Department entitled the police officers to conducting searches at the newspaper editorial and at the private apartment of Anatol Bukas, the Editor-in-Chief. The police seized all office equipment from the newspaper’s editorial office that included 12 PCs with monitors and even mice, three fax machines, a scanner, 3 photo cameras, flash-sticks, DVDs as well as Mr. Bukas’ personal laptop. An electric kettle was the only electrical appliance remaining after the search at the editorial office.

11 January UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon expressed concern for political prisoners being held in Belarus in the aftermath of December’s presidential elections. He called on release of journalists, opposition candidates and their supporters and the full observance of human rights and due process.

11 January Yauhen Vaskovich, a journalist of Bobruyskiy Kurier independent newspaper was “invited for a conversation” over the phone to Mahiliou Regional KGB Deptment. Three KGB officers he met there were interested about the events of 19 December in Minsk. As a result the young journalist was warned about participation in unsanctioned actions being illegal. Yauhen Vaskovich had previously served an administrative term of 12 days for participating in the rally.

11 January law enforcement officers conducted a search of a flat of Larysa Shchyrakova, a reporter of Belsat TV Channel from Homiel. Two computers with monitors, a laptop, about one hundred DVDs, several memory sticks, a player and two dictaphones were confiscated.

11 January the Committee to Protect Journalists condemned the ongoing official crackdown against the independent media in Belarus. “The Belarusian security service, known as the KGB, continues to relentlessly raid newsrooms, confiscate reporting equipment from publications and journalists’ homes, imprison independent and pro-opposition journalists, and harass their families,” the statement said.

12 January another search was conducted in a flat of Iryna Khalip, a journalist who is detained at the KGB Investigatory Isolation Ward, and in a flat of her parents. Khalip’s mother was banned from informing anybody about what had been confiscated during those searches.

12 January the Belarusian «Autoradio» FM radio station received an order from the Ministry of Communications of Belarus, introducing bans for the use of radio frequencies and radio transmitting devices. The document was based on a decision, signed by the National Committee on TV and Radio Broadcasting, led by the Minister of Information Aleh Pralaskouski. The decision cancelled the right of ‘Autoradio’ to ground-based broadcasting in connection with “non-compliance with the art concept and dissemination of calls to extremist activities.” The ruling didn’t contain any concrete information about the mentioned calls and discrepancies with the art

concept though. The «Autoradio» broadcasting was terminated at 12.40 am Minsk time on January 12, 2011. It is worth mentioning that «Autoradio» broadcast campaigning materials of alternative presidential candidates Andrei Sannikau and Uladzimir Niaklayeu during the recent Presidential election campaign.

12 January the EP President and the Chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Human Rights Committee, EP Delegation to Belarus, and EP Delegation to the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly issued a joint statement on the situation in Belarus. The statement contains several requests, including enacting a travel-ban for the Belarusian officials involved in the violent crackdown of 19 December 2010, amplifying financial support to Belarusian civil society and independent media.

12 January Andrei Alaksandrau, Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, delivered a speech at the European Parliament in Brussels. "It is impossible to talk about fair elections in Belarus in the absence of freedom of speech and freedom of the press in the country," he noted. Andrei Aliaksandrau reminded that "the main media problems hadn't been solved even during the so-called 'liberalization period' preceding the Presidential election." He stressed that independent media still faced administrative and economic pressure in Belarus. Also, he noted that a range of popular informational Web-sites had been disabled on December 19, 2010. "Apparently, the situation with independent media will deteriorate further on," Andrei Aliaksandrau underscored. The Deputy Chairman of BAJ stressed that the European Union should have a single voice and the united position on the events in Belarus. He called upon the EU authorities to take all efforts possible in order to help to release all political prisoners in the country.

12 January Andrei Bastunets, a Vice Chairperson of BAJ, was interrogated at the KGB Office in Minsk as a witness on a criminal case about the events of 19-20 December. The interrogation lasted for 3 hours. Andrei Bastunets signed non-disclosure statement.

12 January in Hrodna KGB officers conducted searches in flats of Andrzej Paczobut, a journalist of Polish Gazeta Wyborcza, and Aliaksei Salei, a photo reporter of Glos znad Niemna newspaper. Andrzej Paczobut was detained, taken to Minsk, where he spent a night at a police station, and then brought to court. M. Labko, the judge of Kastychnitski City District Court of Minsk sentenced the journalist and a BAJ member to an administrative fine of 1,750,000 Belarusian rubles (around USD 600) "for breaking the procedure of arranging or holding mass events."

12 January the Editor of Novy Chas independent newspaper Aliaksei Karol was interrogated by the police, because his mobile phone had been detected by a mobile operator near the Independence Square in Minsk in the evening of 19 December. An interrogator told the editor the police interrogate everybody whose mobile phones had been located there. Aliaksei Karol informed the officer he had been at the Square as a journalist and had performed his professional duties. After the conversation the officer suggested to take a picture of the journalists, but he refused.

13 January Zhanna Litvina, the Chairperson of BAJ, and Maryna Koktysh, Deputy Editor of Narodnaya Volia newspaper, were interrogated at the KGB Office in Minsk as witnesses on a criminal case about the events of 19-20 December. Both of them signed non-disclosure statements.

13 January law enforcement officers conducted another search of a flat rented by Katsiaryna Tkachenka, a reporter of Belsat TV Channel. The search was conducted while the journalist wasn't at home, the lock of the door had been broken. A modem was confiscated.

13 January law enforcement officers conducted a search of a flat of a sister of Iryna Charniuka, a reporter of Belsat TV Channel. A computer and several discs were confiscated. The journalist herself was taken for an interrogation to the KGB. Its officers were primarily interested in activities of Belsat TV Channel.

14 January the Council of the Belarusian Association of Journalists expressed its resolute protest against mass violations of the rights of journalists and media outlets during the last month starting from 19 December 2010. "Persecution for free expression of opinions and violent interference with editorial activity of several media outlets still continue," the BAJ Council statement goes. The BAJ Council demands immediate release of its members who are kept behind bars. BAJ also demands all the information carriers and journalistic equipment confiscated to be returned and the persecution for free expression in Belarus to be stopped.

14 January Sviatlana Kalinkina, the Chief Editor of Narodnaya Volia newspaper, was summoned to the KGB office in Minsk for interrogation. She had to sign a non-disclosure statement. It is worth mentioning that in the evening of 19 December 2010 she could not participate in the events at the Independence Square as she was a guest of a live show at ONT TV Channel.

14 January the official website of the Ministry of Justice informed that it "revealed several media outlets that distort information from lawyers of the arrested candidates." It is for the Ministry of Information to "define the fate of such media outlets."

15 January KGB officers searched the home of Naviny.by website journalist Viktor Fedarovich and the home of his parents, although he had nothing to do with the 19 December post-election protest in Minsk and had no affiliation to any opposition parties or groups. According to him, the search of his apartment was conducted by three KGB officers. They seized a computer, a laptop, a digital voice recorder, USB flash devices, notebooks and documents and records containing his journalistic material, including that on the criminal case against Sviatlana Baykova, a former senior investigator with the Prosecutor General's Office.

15 January a search was conducted at the office of Silnye Novosti website in Homiel. Two computers, USB flash devices, DVDs and other information carriers were confiscated.