

Mass Media Week in Belarus

Info-posting December 3 – 16, 2012

On December 11 BAJ received a reply from the head of the Investigative Committee Valiantsin Shayew. BAJ had filed a letter to the Investigative Committee to resume the cases of abduction of Dzmitry Zavadski, of murdering Veranika Charkasava, and to hold an additional investigation into suspicious deaths of Aleh Biabenin and Vasil Hrodnikau. In the reply the Investigative Committee says that resuming the cases lies beyond its competences, because the decision on the cases was made before January 1, 2012 (the date when the Investigative Committee was set to work): “The right to cancel unlawful and ungrounded decisions on criminal cases and check-up materials which were made before 01.01.2012 is granted purely to the bodies of the prosecutor’s office,” says the letter signed by the head of the procedural control department A.S.Shandarovich. The deputy chairperson of BAJ Andrei Bastunets considers that the Investigative Committee avoided answering: “We did not ask to cancel any unlawful or ungrounded decisions. We asked to resume investigation of the cases that have been transferred in the scope of the Investigative Committee’s activity. In my view, it is fully within their competence.”

On December 3 in Vitsebsk policemen **briefly detained** the editor of the website “**Narodnyia Naviny Vitsebska**” **Siarhei Serabro** while he was taking photo of the road condition near a wood-working factory. The police were called by guards of the factory. Later it became known that the factory was getting ready for Aliaksandr Lukashenka visit.

On December 3 it became known that the **documentary "Capital Punishment"** made for *Belsat* TV channel by the film director **Siarhei Isakaw** and **Yuliya Khlashchankova** was awarded with a **prize of "Reporters for Reporters"**. The contest among Eastern Partnership countries was organized the second time by the Polish Reporters Foundation and the foreign Affairs Ministry of Poland.

This year 142 authors from Eastern Partnership countries – Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan – submitted 325 works for the contest.

On December 5 it became known that two journalists of the online resource “**Salidarnasts**” were **briefly detained** in Minsk **for taking photos of** the former minister of culture, now Ambassador to France **Pavel Latushka** in an informal situation.

The incident took place on December 1 in a Minsk night club “Center” at a music concert, for which the journalists had been accredited. The correspondent Alena Yakzhyk asked her colleague to take a photo of Mr. Latushka, but it turned out later that the ambassador was not inclined to being photographed. Ten minutes later the photographer and then the journalist were detained by security guards of the club. The guards demanded that the photographer delete all the photos, and copied his personal data. Alena Yakzhyk was set free after she had a talk with Mr. Latushka.

On December 6 BAJ sent a **letter** to the head of **Ashmiany customs office** Ivan Niviarkevich asking about the fate of the albums “**Belarus Press Photo**”, **confiscated** on November 12 from Belarusian photographers and “sentenced to elimination” upon the results of the local expertise.

BAJ would like to know who conducted the expertise, what violations were found, who took the decision to destroy the albums, what were the legal grounds to do so, and were and how it was performed.

Before that officers of the customs office at the “Kamenny Loh” border point refused to give the information on the phone.

**On December 7** video technicians of the state-run TV channel **STV** (close corporation “Capital TV”) **went on strike** demanding to increase salaries. For this reason sports news were not broadcast for some time on that day.

As it turned out later, the employees on strike worked not on a permanent basis, but under a contract of engagement. The management of the channel was unavailable for comments. We remind that a similar case happened on the *Novoye Radio* (radio of the Federation of trade unions).

**On December 11** the editor of “**Bobruyskij Courier**” **Anatol Sanatsenka** received a **reply to his complaint** sent more than month before to the **prosecutor’s office**. But this reply came once again from the police. The journalist complained against actions of the chief ideologist of the deputy chairperson of Babruysk City Executive Committee Aliaksandr Markachou. We remind that on September 14 while covering the lawful pre-electoral picket, Anatol Sanatsenka heard a threat and an insult from the ideologist. It was recorded on a video which then was attached with the complaint. In the meantime, the answer from Babruysk City Executive Committee (dated December 4) signed by the head of the police station No2 E.Baradauka says that “the actions of the deputy chair of Babruysk City Executive Committee Aliaksandr Markachou do not contain any features of a violation”.

**On December 12** the **Ministry of Information denied a new registration** to the magazine **Arche**.

The application for registration (filed in November by the team of the magazine) was dismissed on the grounds that the current editor-in-chief **Ales Pashkevich** does not correspond to the necessary criteria (at least five-year work experience in executive position (requirement of the Ministry of Labor, Ruling dated 31.08.2000 #120).

“We applied for re-registration because of the latest events that resulted in suspension of our bank account,” said Mr. Pashkevich. “The publication of the magazine was suspended. The Department of Financial Investigations is carrying out a check-up in the activities of the previous editorial office, and it is unknown how it all will end. We changed the editorial office and applied for re-registration hoping to start again normal publishing of the magazine.”

**On December 12** the **National Platform** of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum made a **statement** in defense of independent journalists. “In 2012 an unacceptable tactics of persecuting independent journalists, independent editions and creative youth communities has been applied in Belarus. We consider that such actions inflict irreparable damage on the Belarusian culture and intellectual community, and we demand to finally dismiss the criminal charges against **Andrei Poczobut**; we also express concern over the pressure on the intellectual magazine **Arche** and prosecution of its chief-editor **Valer Bulhakau**,” says the press-release.

The authors of the statement also mention the **visa denial** to the head of *Radio Racyja* and editor of the Belarusian weekly in Poland *Niva* **Yauhen Vapa**, calling it an example of artificial obstructions to foreign partners of Belarusian civil society organizations.

**On December 16** **Mahilou branch of BAJ** received a **reply** to their request to the **President’s Administration**. Mahilou journalists called on the authorities to stop prosecution against **Andrei Poczobut** and **Valer Bulhakau**, and also against the magazine “**Arche-Pachatak**”. The letter said the following: “We realize that cases of Poczobut and *Arche* and Bulhakau are scattered over different agencies to which we must apply now. Formally it is so. But in fact we

understand the thing known to everybody in our country – that the President’s Administration is the final instance which actually takes the most important decisions, and which become mandatory for all other instances and agencies.” The Administration did not agree with such point of view, though, and answered that the problems outlined in the request do not lie within the scope of their competence, and that “functions and tasks of state bodies are clearly defined...”

**On December 16** the TV channel **STV** in its program “Tydzen” (Week) dedicated a whole report to **journalists’ access to information from official sources**. The emphasis was placed on the work of press-services of state bodies.

The journalist of the “2<sup>nd</sup> National TV Channel” Dzmitry Semchanka complained about systematic problems in getting information from official sources. In particular, he has recently faced with a refusal to give a comment from an official of the Ministry of Education. The journalist of STV Volha Petrasheuskaya phoned to the Ministry of Dwelling and Communal Services and tried to get a hot comment on that very day, but unsuccessfully: she was told to file an official request to the Minister’s deputy. She was able to get through to the official only after making an official appointment for a meeting (the recording of the visit was made with a hidden camera). *We remind that journalists of non-state media systematically come across with denying access to official information.*