

Belarus Media Week. Elections 2010.

19 – 25 October 2010

29 October will mark the end of the period of collecting signatures for nomination of candidates for the Presidential elections in Belarus. Still, editors of non-state media point out low level of activity of most of the potential candidates in their contacts with media.

The last week was also marked by several events like the management of Belpost enterprise forbidding its employees to give interviews and a political reporter of a non-state newspaper from Babruysk being forced to go on vacation because of the pressure from the local authorities.

Moreover, at the end of the week Dunja Mijatovic, the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom, arrived to Minsk on an invitation of the Minister of Information.

19 October observers of *Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections* campaign received information about a written order sent to post offices in Minsk by Deputy Head of *Belposhta* (Belarusian Post) state company. According to the order, it is forbidden for post officers to give interviews to any media and to disclose events taking place at the enterprise. Observers do not exclude that such a step is connected to the presidential elections.

20 October the management of *Vecherniy Bobruysk* newspaper suggested its journalist **Dzmitry Rastaeu**, a member of BAJ, to go on vacation. Such a decision was a result of a visit of **Valiantsin Sysoy**, the founder of the newspaper, to the Deputy Chairman of the local Executive Committee **Mikhail Kavalevich**. The official showed the founder several articles from *Belgazeta*, a national newspaper Dzmitry Rastaeu is also a reporter of. "Either Rastaeu stops writing anywhere else except of your newspaper, or, you understand... Think about your newspaper," Mr. Kavalevich told the founder of *Vecherniy Bobruysk*. As a result the journalist was asked to apply for a vacation and was informed that his publications are stopped temporarily. At the same time Dzmitry Rastaeu is sure his "forced vacation" will turn into indefinite leave. The journalist is sure local officials did not like his publications about collecting of signatures for alternative candidates and about pressure put by the authorities on citizens who are members of their initiative groups.

20 October *Reporters without Borders* issued their Press Freedom Index. Belarus appeared to be at the 154th place out of 178 (last year the rank was 151st). "The situation is dreary and stable in Belarus, torn between two allegiances – one to Moscow and the other to the EU – and caught up in a delicate balancing act between these two powers. The regime makes no concession to civil society and continues, as the December presidential elections approach, to put pressure on the country's few remaining independent media outlets," *Reporters without Borders* noted.

20 October marked the 6th anniversary of a cruel murder of a Belarusian journalist **Veranika Charkasava**. The investigation of the case was suspended in February 2007 and has never been renewed since, although her murderer has not been found and brought to court. "Today, six years after the murder it is absolutely clear that the reason of Veranika's death was certain people's fear of information leakage," **Uladzimir Mialeshka**, the journalist's father, admitted. "There are still a lot of questions left in this case, and we continue demanding an objective and thorough investigation of Veranika

Charkasava's murder, as well as disappearing of Dzmitry Zavadski and death of Aleh Byabenin," **Andrei Aliaksandrau**, a Vice Chairperson of BAJ, commented.

22 October BAJ conducted a round table discussion with participation of editors of regional independent newspapers. The role of mass media during the electoral campaign was discussed. According to the regional editors, potential independent candidates are not very active yet in their contacts with media. And even when journalists display their interest themselves and ask questions they sometimes face complete unwillingness to cooperate on behalf of political activists and possible candidates. Still, journalists express their intention to cover the election campaign led by their responsibilities before the audience. **Andrei Bastunets**, a Vice Chairperson of BAJ, pointed out that the situation may change. "I would like to remind that they are only aspirants for positions of candidates, and not all of them are going to become candidates. That is why their behavior, including their contacts with press, may change," Andrei Bastunets admitted.

25 October Dunja Mijatovic, the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom, who is in Minsk from 24 till 27 October, made a statement she hopes for changes in Belarus media legislation in the field of Internet regulation. "I raised my concerns about some provisions of the new legislation, such as the requirement for mandatory identification of all users, and the vaguely defined limitations and bans on illegal information I called upon the government not to design or apply new legislation that would limit freedom of the media on the Internet," she said, adding that the Belarusian side agreed to consult her Office and civil society when reviewing current and adopting future Internet legislation.