

THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

Mass Media Week in Belarus

Info-posting September 23 – October 6, 2013

The story of the “extremist” Belarus Press Photo 2011 has had further developments in a new scandal. One of the most popular publisher houses *Lohvinau* has been deprived of license: the Information Ministry accused *Lohvinau* of publishing the “extremist” photo album.

On September 23 the Leninski district court of Hrodna reviewed the criminal case of the journalist **Andrei Poczobut** and **released him from punishment**. We remind that on July 5, 2011 Andrei Poczobut was found guilty of violating article 367, part 1 of the Criminal Code (**libeling the president**) and sentenced to three years in jail with two years’ deferment. The period of deferment ended on September 20.

According to the conviction, Andrei Poczobut defamed Aliaksandr Lukashenka in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, on *Belarusian Partisan* website, and in his blog *poczobut.livejournal.com*. His texts were examined by Aliaksei Nikitsenka, a language teacher of the Hrodna State University, and Pavel Skrabko and Viktor Zhalezniakovich, employees of the ideological department of the Hrodna Region Executive Committee. Andrei Poczobut was set free in court room on July 5, under recognizance not to leave his place of residence. Before that he had been held in detention since April 6, 2011. His appeal was dismissed, and the sentence went into legal force on September 20.

We remind that in between Andrei Poczobut had another criminal proceeding initiated against him in summer 2012, according to article 367, part 2 (repeated libel against the head of state). In March 2013 the charges were dropped, due to absence of crime components in actions of the journalist.

The private entrepreneur, publisher **Lohvinau** was informed **on September 23** that his **license for publishing activities had been withdrawn**. The document was signed by **Liliya Ananich**, deputy of the Information Minister. The license was withdrawn because of “rough violations of the legislation on licensing”. The matter deals with publishing of the **Belarus Press Photo 2011** photo album which had been recognized extremist by the Ashmiany court on **April 18, 2013**.

The management of the company considers that the license had been suspended unlawfully, with many violations, so they have already sent a letter to the Minister of Information Aleh Praliaskouski.

According to Andrei Bastunets, the deputy chair and lawyer of BAJ, the law did not entitle the Minister of Information to taking such measures, and also the procedure of license suspension had been violated. “The publishing house was not involved in the Belarus Press Photo 2011 case in any status. But now the decision of the trial has been made the ground for withdrawing the license,” remarked the lawyer. “If the Ministry does not change their mind, the situation can be resolved only in court.”

The independent publisher house has been operating since 2000. It published works of contemporary Belarusian literature, academic works in humanities studies and translations to Russian and Belarusian.

On September 25 it was reported about new facts of **compulsory subscription** to state-run papers. In particular, the regional newspaper *Hantsavitski Chas* reported about several complaints from school teachers.

Heads of schools confirmed to a journalist of the newspaper that compulsory subscription in schools really exists. The head of school No3 Natallia Snytko confirmed that teachers are obliged to submit paychecks for subscription. She failed to name any document regulating the requirement.

On September 30 the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe announced at the autumn session in Strasbourg that **Ales Bialiatski** was awarded **the Vaclav Havel Prize**. The Václav Havel Human Rights Prize is awarded each year to reward outstanding civil society action in the defense of human rights in Europe and beyond.

As reported **on October 1**, a **journalist** of the state informational agency *Minsk-Novosti* had been **fired** because she had passed over a press release from the Minsk City Executive Committee to her colleagues who work in independent mass media.

The press release presumably was sent to the newspapers founded by the city executive committee. However, it had a syntactical mistake which caused jokes and quickly spread on the web.

The editorial office of *Minsk-Novosti* held an investigation and finally decided to fire the employee who allegedly passed over the press release to a wider audience. The order of dismissal states that the journalist failed to fulfill the requirements of the probation period.

Remarkably, the Minsk City Executive Committee admitted the mistake, however, they refused to defend the journalist, claiming that the agency was independent in its decisions.

On October 2 the Russian Embassy in Minsk refused to receive the petition from BAJ to defend the photographer **Denis Siniakov** and advised to send it via post.

Denis Siniakov was arrested for two months after he was detained together with environmentalists when covering a Greenpeace action on the Arctic Sunrise in the Pechora Sea. The petition against his arrest was signed by 78 journalists, including Zhanna Litvina, Andrei Bastunets, Viachslau Khadasouski, Aliaksandr Starykevich, Sviatlana Kalinkina, Iryna Leushyna, Yulia Darashkevich and other reputable Belarusian editors, journalists and photographers.