**Open letter of the Belarusian Association of Journalists and the European Federation of Journalists over prosecution of our colleagues in Vitebsk**

Before November 5, the day of the international campaign Stand Up For Journalism, a team of BAJ members from Vitebsk took a photo at the background of a famous graffiti in Vitebsk – the image of paper-cut birds flying out of cage. This was a symbolic action to join the international campaign of the EFJ and the campaign of BAJ in support of journalists prosecuted for their professional activities.

Now the people in the photo have been summoned to the Chyhunachny district police department of Vitebsk. They have administrative reports against them according to art. 23.34 of the Code of Administrative Offences (participation in an unsanctioned action); they are to be brought to court soon.

BAJ and the EFJ consider these accusations to be absurd.

The yearly campaign Stand Up For Journalism was held by the EFJ for the seventh time. On this day, journalists across Europe hold meetings, presentations, seminars etc. to build up solidarity and mutual understanding among journalists. Team photos is one of the most widely used cooperative actions.

The situation when people are brought to court with charges of an unsanctioned action for a photograph at the background of an ordinary city wall could look anecdotic and funny, but for the real impact that it can make on the people’s lives. The photo session was held in a practically deserted place – near an abandoned building closed for restoration, far from the city center. It is not required to file an application for holding a photo session, because a photo session is not regarded as a mass action according to the [Law on Mass Actions](http://law.by/main.aspx?guid=3871&p0=H19700114e) of Belarus. However, the police officials interpreted the photo session as picketing. The participants of the photo session disagree with such arbitrary interpretation of law.

BAJ and the EFJ also protest against such arbitrary interpretation of the law.

We call on the Belarusian authorities:

* to the Chyhunachny district police department and personally its head Aliaksandr Rybakou – to drop the charges against participants of the photo session dedicated to November 5.
* to the main police department of the Vitebsk Region Executive Committee and personally its head Aliaksandr Kalinouski – to withdraw the ruling from the Chyhunachny district police department about holding the people accountable for an outdoor photo session.
* to courts that might further hear the cases – to consider the situation impartially and use common sense.