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UK: Why was a British Brussels-based journalist abusively detained in Calais?

Why was a British Brussels-based journalist abusively detained and interrogated in Calais?

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

The European Times (17.03.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3N0s0VT> – Martin Banks, a well-known British journalist in the EU Bubble in Brussels, was stopped and detained by the British police authorities at the Eurotunnel terminal in Calais. He was interrogated for six hours about his journalistic activities in Brussels by the UK Border Force under “Schedule 3 Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019” without ever being told what he was suspected of.

Martin Banks, 62, is married to a Belgian lady and has two teenage children. He has been a journalist for 42 years and living in Belgium since 2001. On 26 February, they all went to the UK by car for a week’s holiday. He had not been back to his country of origin for two years because of the pandemic.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has met him and collected his testimony.

Arrival in Calais

It was about 9.30am when the family arrived at the Eurotunnel terminal in Calais (France), a few days after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. They were stopped as they were going to pass through UK Border Force control and Martin Banks was escorted by three officers into the police station on the “British side.”

He was taken to a small room in the station where he was read his rights by an “Examining Officer” in the presence of another officer. According to the Counter-Terrorism and Border

Security Act of 2019, the real names of the officers cannot be revealed but their identification numbers can be obtained on request. Martin Banks was given this information.

He declined an invitation for legal representation as he did not know why he would need one and because his repeated questions about the nature of the police suspicions remained unanswered.

He was just told he was being detained to be questioned by the UK Border Force in charge of “hostile actors” and “hostile acts” under Schedule 3 of the Counter Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019. In the meantime, his wife and their two children were staying in their car, unaware of what was happening to their husband/father. In addition, their vehicle was thoroughly searched along with the handbags of his wife and teenage daughter and items were taken away. This experience had reduced both to tears.

Interrogation about his journalistic activities

Over the course of six hours, the examining officer and his colleagues asked him hundreds of questions. These were mainly related to his journalistic work about the coronavirus pandemic, Ukraine and Russia but also about each item collected from his car: a two-year old issue of the New York Times, dozens of articles printed from the internet, personal notes, etc. He was fully cooperative and volunteered to answer all of them.

Concerning Ukraine, he was repeatedly asked about his visit in the Donbas region 2014-15 when he was on a fact-finding press trip with other international journalists. There were also quite a number of questions about his supposed ties with Russia that he had only visited once, in 1992, soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He answered he had no such contacts.

Martin Banks also had to face numerous questions about the respected private and independent communications company, based in the UK, he works for, how it is financed and what is its "political policy. He replied he was just a journalist and he did not have that sort of information. There were also questions about his colleagues, their names, their titles... (!)

In this regard, he was asked how he thought his reporting might "influence" policymakers and opinion makers.

There were also intrusive questions about his own personal finances and income.

DNA, biometric fingerprints and photographs

As the interview approached two hours, he was told the police had to do a "review" of the investigation. This involved him speaking, via the phone on a loudspeaker, to a DS officer (Detective Sergeant) in Dover, Kent.

He was recited his rights, summarised the preceding two hours

and also asked more questions.

He was then said there were reasons to continue the “investigation” and taken to another part of the station. There, another officer took his DNA, numerous photographs from various angles and biometric fingerprints.

Afterwards, he was taken back to the interview room. Two hours later, he was told another “review” was necessary, this time by another DS officer who entered the room.

Police produced a copy of a New York Times, dated February 2020, containing an article about the pandemic, not written by him, and bizarrely asked him questions about it.

Several times, Martin Banks was asked about a couple of articles written around mid 2021 which were, in part, critical of the vaccine policy and performance of the UK, but also the EU and Belgium.

He was then again informed that the maximum period one can be detained in such a way is six hours.

Confiscation of his professional laptop and personal belongings

When the six-hour mark was eventually reached, the Examining

Officer told him he would have to retain several possessions which the police had taken from his car and that he could retain them for a maximum of seven days.

These were: his laptop; a Belgian mobile phone; a UK mobile phone; five DVDs containing family photos, and a memory card for his camera.

Due to the seizure of the laptop, he could not, as he had planned, use it during the seven days he spent in the UK; he could not make or receive phone calls; he had no access to his emails; he could not take photos of his family holiday and could not, as intended, use the DVDs for a gift for his daughter's upcoming birthday.

At the end of the six-hour procedure, he was told he would not be arrested or charged, without any further word of explanation.

Much to his surprise, he was asked if and when he (and his family) planned to visit the UK again. He told them they plan to go to the grave of his mother in Manchester in April, which he could not do for two years because of the COVID.

Back from the UK

On 3 March, Martin Banks received a phone call from an officer who told him he could collect back the seized items.

On 6 March, his due date for returning to Belgium, he collected the items from Longport police station, located close to the Eurotunnel site at Folkestone.

The reasons of this horrendous experience which has left Martin Banks and his family traumatised remain unexplainable and unexplained by the British authorities.

What is behind all this?

This deprivation of freedom for six hours of a well-known British journalist based in Brussels is an extremely serious attempt to curtail freedom of the media and journalists all the more so as his laptop was confiscated for seven days.

It can be reasonably assumed that the British authorities had access to all his sources of information and made a copy of this precious material. His family's private life was also gravely violated.

It can also be suspected that his computer and his mobile phone might not be safe anymore and all his communications might be taped.

One can wonder if, beyond Martin Banks, it was not other

actors of the European media world that were targeted with this police operation which seemed to have been carefully premeditated and planned.

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