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## BELARUS

Belarus maintained its abysmally low MSI score, virtually unchanged from last year. Only two out of forty indicators even approached a score of 2, or “near sustainability,” those addressing professional associations of journalists and short-term training opportunities. Six indicators scored near zero, all of which related to the government’s regulation of, or interference with, the media sector. Licensing and registration of outlets, crimes against journalists, editorial independence, self-censorship, government subsidies, and channels of media distribution remain the stiffest barriers to independent media.

Belarus has almost 1,800 registered media outlets, including about 700 newspapers, 166 radio and 89 television stations; about two-thirds of these are private. What might look like a vibrant media sector at first glance masks a more polarized and hostile environment that stifles press freedom and limits both reporting impartiality and quality. The government retains control over most of the “old media,” either via direct ownership or heavy-handed regulation. State-owned media essentially speak with a single voice, and state television remains the most popular (62.7 percent of the audience) source of news, according to an independent opinion poll.

Dissenting voices are gagged using economic and legal pressure. Critical coverage is undertaken at risk of breaking the law, either on legal grounds of “extremism” or “insulting a representative of authorities.” Self-censorship is common across the spectrum. Libel remains criminalized. Andrzej Poczobut, a correspondent for Poland’s largest daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, once again faced charges of libeling Belarus’s hardline President Aleksandr Lukashenka, and even spent a week in prison.

Separately, 20-year-old photographer Anton Surapin spent over a month in jail after he posted pictures of teddy bears online. Teddy bears holding cards and banners in support of free speech were dropped from a light aircraft that illegally flown into Belarus; the stunt was organized by a Swedish advertising company. Surapin was charged with assisting an illegal border crossing.

Lukashenka, in power since 1994, heads a Soviet-era administration that is secretive, opaque, and essentially restricts access to public information. Legislative and judicial branches are mere rubber-stamps, hardly offering any protection from attacks on the media. Even media distribution channels such as newspaper kiosks, the postal service, and the broadcasting and telecom infrastructure remain largely state-owned and thus selective on political grounds.

A handful of private newspapers, expatriate broadcasters, and online media continue to offer more balanced reporting and a variety of viewpoints. Online media is the most freewheeling in their coverage, offering critical reports and debate on many social issues; the independent poll showed the Internet is the chief source of news for 34.3 percent of the population. At least two pro-opposition news websites were blacklisted by the government, educational institutions, and libraries. A total of 80 websites were on the classified blacklist, mostly extremist and pornographic sites, the government claimed.

# BELARUS at a glance

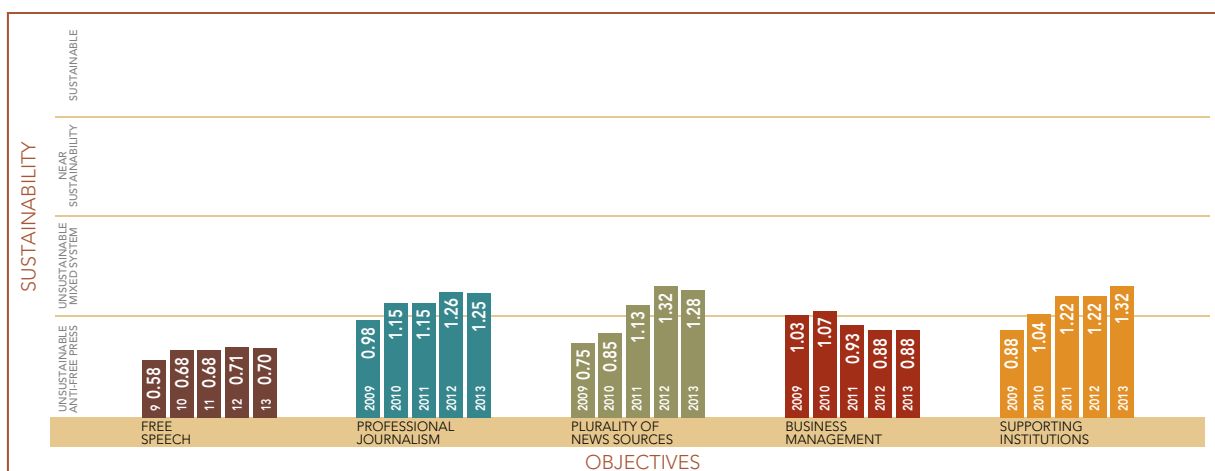
## GENERAL

- > Population: 9,625,888 (July 2013 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Capital city: Minsk
- > Ethnic groups (% of population): Belarusian 83.7%, Russian 8.3%, Polish 3.1%, Ukrainian 1.7%, other 3.2% (2009 census)
- > Religions (% of population): Eastern Orthodox 80%, other (including Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim) 20% (1997 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Languages (% of population): Belarusian (official) 53.2%, Russian (official) 41.5% (2009 census)
- > GNI (2011-Atlas): \$55.23 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > GNI per capita (2011-PPP): \$14,460 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2012)
- > Literacy rate: 99.6 % (male: 99.8 %, female: 99.4%) (1999 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > President or top authority: President Alexander Lukashenka (since July 20, 1994)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals: 1,746 (Newspapers: 692, journals and magazines: 739, radio stations: 166, TV stations: 89, bulletins: 40, catalogs: 9, information agencies: 9 and almanacs: 2 (December 2012, Ministry of Information); Internet News Portals: 25 (2012, Gemius)
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: Top three by circulation *SB. Belarus Segodnia* (circulation 2,000,000, state-owned), *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* (circulation 522,000, private, Russia-owned), *Respublika*, (circulation 240,000, state-owned) (December 2012, Medusa advertising agency)
- > Broadcast ratings. Top three by share: ONT–26.71%, NTV-Belarus–17.89%, RTR-Belarus–14.1% (January-June 2012, NOVAK)
- > News agencies: BelTA (state-owned), BelaPAN (private), Interfax-Zapad (Russian-owned), Prime-TASS (Russian-owned), Ecopress (private), Agentstvo Grevtsova (private), Minsk-Novosti (state-owned), Registr Information and Legal Agency (private) (Belarus Ministry of Information, 2012)
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: \$76.2 million (\$41.9 million television, \$10.1 million press, \$7.9 million Internet, \$4.11 million radio) (ZenithOptimedia advertising group, December 2012)
- > Internet usage: 4.436 million (2010, [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com))

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BELARUS



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2013: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



### CHANGE SINCE 2012

▲ (increase greater than .10) □ (little or no change) ▼ (decrease greater than .10)

**Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):** Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

**Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):** Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

**Near Sustainability (2-3):** Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

**Sustainable (3-4):** Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

Scores for all years may be found online at [http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE\\_msiscorers.xls](http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_msiscorers.xls)

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Belarus Objective Score: 0.70

Belarus's legal environment remained hostile. The country's score was essentially unchanged from the 2012 MSI. The country traditionally fell short of meeting the requirements of even partial sustainability, due to restrictive legal environment, cumbersome and politicized licensing procedures, as well lack of editorial independence for the state media and limited access to public information. On the other hand, access to, and use of, both domestic and foreign news sources remained largely unrestricted and that indicator yielded the highest score of for the field, though still remained under threat of tightening government regulations.

The freedom of speech is guaranteed by Belarusian constitution. It is also provided for by other legislation. "To some extent [these laws] guarantee the freedom of expression, and at the same time they substantially restrict it. For example, accreditations are being used to close off journalists that are considered to be disloyal to the government, rather than to assist them in their work. Besides, communication with most state officials is restricted—as they need to get a go-ahead from their bosses—or only possible via press services or ideology

### LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

#### FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing or registration of media protects a public interest and is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > The law protects the editorial independence of state of public media.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily available; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media, journalists, and citizens.
- > Media outlets' access to and use of local and international news and news sources is not restricted by law.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

The panelists also mentioned restrictions related to distribution. Local governments approve lists of TV channels distributed by cable operators and sometimes list the newspapers to be sold in shops.

departments. That is to say, considerable restrictions have been put in place by laws as well," one panelist commented.

Belarusian laws provide for the primacy of international legislation over domestic, and thus media-related laws should be in compliance with the international press freedom standards. Yet these norms are far from being enforced. The society itself is to blame for that, one of the panelists argued, as it does not value the freedom of expression. He went on to recall the last years of the Soviet Union when there had been no such laws, yet the society was able to put enough pressure on the government to obtain the information that had been previously concealed.

At the same time courts offer very little protection in case of freedom of speech violations. And their decisions are not independent as all judges are appointed by the president himself, they reside in state-owned apartments, and can be fired any time. "I'm not sure a court would take a journalist's side," one of the panelists said, "yet formally there is some sort of a mechanism." The media law protects the confidentiality of sources of information, yet that can be lifted following a court order or a request from a criminal investigation authority.

There was at least one case when a journalist might have been compelled into revealing his sources. Anton Surapin, a 20-year-old journalism student and a contributing editor at Belarusian News Photos (Bnp.by) spent over a month in the State Security Committee (KGB) prison for allegedly abetting an illegal border crossing. On July 4, 2012, a crew working for Studio Total, a Swedish advertising company, illegally entered Belarus in a light aircraft and dropped hundreds of teddy bears holding cards and banners in support of free speech. Surapin posted photographs of the teddy bears on his website that he said had been e-mailed to him by a friend. On July 13, 2012, Surapin's home was searched, his computer confiscated, and he was detained as an accomplice. A 16-year-old girl, who had allegedly sent him the pictures, was also briefly detained and interrogated by the security services. Surapin faces up to seven years in prison, as the KGB believed he was linked to the stunt, since he was the first to upload the photos.

“There is no place for editorial independence, as they [editors] are appointed by the government, outlets are funded by the government and they understand perfectly that if there is any word against [the government], they will be out,” one panelist said.

Belarus’s independent journalists campaigned against Surapin’s arrest, most notably by being photographed with the teddy bears themselves. Two female journalists, Irina Kozlik, who works for newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii*, and Yulia Doroshkevich, a press photographer, were detained while posing for photographs holding teddy bears. They were then taken to a Minsk district court and fined \$400 each for organizing an unauthorized demonstration.

Surapin was released on August 17, 2012, yet the investigation is still underway, as the 2013 MSI went to press.

One of the panelists mentioned the presidential edict #60, adopted in 2010, on Measures to Improve the Use of the National Segment of the Internet, that requires Internet service providers (ISPs) identify all Internet users and keep logs of their activity for at least a year. By the same edict, Belarus law enforcement agencies were granted 24/7 access to this logs, even without a court-issued warrant. The law raises the question of whether the anonymity and confidentiality of sources can be achieved in any case where information is sent over the Internet. One of the panelists also mentioned that journalists of the key pro-opposition news website Charter97.org became victims of a Trojan horse virus attack that stole their passwords, contacts and other information. Charter97.org accused the Belarusian secret service (KGB) of being behind the attack, which also targeted civic activists and other independent journalists.

In order to operate in Belarus, broadcast and print media as well as news agencies should obtain registration from the Ministry of Information. Panelists referred to registration requirements as “draconian.” Applicants need to provide numerous details on the would-be outlet, including topics to covered, frequency, distribution area, as well as information about the sources of funding and the editor-in-chief. The latter should have a journalism diploma and at least five years of editorial work experience. One of the panelists argued that both the registration and licensing procedures are used only to enforce loyalty in the media.

The Ministry of Information reported it registered 110 new outlets in 2012, 98 of them were private. In particular, it handed registrations to 25 newspapers (24 private), 69 journals and magazines (62 private), 1 bulletin, 2 almanacs, 4 radio stations (1 private) and 9 TV stations (8 private). The panelists, however, failed to recall any start-up media that covered news to say nothing of reporting on politics. At the same time the ministry cancelled registrations for 46 outlets: 10 newspapers (all private), 31 journals and magazines (18 private), 1 bulletin, 2 radio stations (1 private), and 2 TV stations (all private).

In addition to registration, broadcasters need one more license from the government. A frequency must be obtained from the Republican Commission on Television and Radio Broadcasting. The commission is a nine-person body headed by the minister of information and comprised of state officials only. Frequencies are allocated via tenders; successful bidders then have to receive a license from the Ministry of Communications and Informatization to use the allocated frequency. However, the National State Television and Radio Company—a conglomerate of four TV and five radio channels and five regional TV and radio companies—as well as broadcasters founded by the prime minister, receive frequencies without a tender. In 2012, only one tender was announced, for an FM station in the town of Baranavichy. In general, the licensing procedure was absolutely politicized and opaque, the panel agreed.

Online media remain the least regulated of all. The aforementioned Internet regulation edict requires all websites selling goods and services to be hosted on servers in Belarus and have national (.by) top-level domains. Yet many news websites are still using foreign hosting and/or have non-Belarusian domain names.

Apart from registration and licensing, market entry is the same for media companies as for businesses in other sectors. The only exception is that direct foreign ownership of media outlets is restricted to 30 percent. Separately, the Ministry of Information may suspend the operation of any media outlet for up to three months, without a court ruling.

Taxation is the same for media organizations as for other businesses. However, the three biggest media companies: state-controlled TV networks ONT and STV, as well as the National State Television and Radio Company, have been exempt from value-added and income taxes for several years.

The panelists also mentioned restrictions related to distribution. Local governments approve lists of TV channels distributed by cable operators and sometimes list the newspapers to be sold in shops.



Although crimes against journalists remained rare, journalists did not feel safe. Law enforcement continues to try to gag the media and bloggers, panelists argued.

Pavel Sviardlou, a Belarusian journalist with Poland-based European Radio for Belarus was detained and served a 15-day arrest in June 2012—when he was grabbed from the street and forced into a minibus by plainclothes police officers just outside his house. The journalist, also a teacher of cultural studies, was accused of swearing in a public place. Sviardlou said he believed his arrest was a punishment for a story that tested the allegedly increased security of the Minsk subway after a blast killed 15 and injured hundreds in April 2011. Sviardlou and one of his colleagues actually carried a huge bag through the Minsk subway, taking the same route as the alleged perpetrators a year earlier.

On September 18, 2012, Associated Press photographer Sergei Grits was beaten and briefly detained by plainclothes security officers in Minsk. Grits said he was among eight journalists covering a protest by four opposition activists calling for a boycott of the parliamentary elections when plainclothes security officers attacked them. Grits spent several hours at the police station, during which time the photos he made during the picket were deleted. He filed a complaint, yet the police said they had nothing to do with the attack and were unable to identify the attackers despite numerous photos and videos of the incident being available.

On 30 August 2012, when Lukashenka celebrated his 58 birthday, the police detained four young men who were believed to be behind the two biggest anti-Lukashenka communities on VKontakte.ru, a Russian social network. The larger of the two, “We are fed up with that Lukashenka”, had 37,000 members at that time. The houses of their administrators were raided, their computers confiscated and they were interrogated for several hours. Two of them received several days arrest for “disorderly conduct.” On the same day the communities were deleted with all their posts, suggesting these security services had acquired the passwords. However, they were restored in four days with tech support from V Kontakte.ru.

The media law provides for editorial independence of all media outlets, regardless of ownership, and expressly bans censorship and unlawful interference. Belarus has no public media in the Western sense, while state-owned outlets are editorially, financially, and managerially dependent on the government. Editors of the key state-controlled media organizations are appointed by the president himself; his administration also approves candidate editors for other national media and key regional outlets. Private media actually have no chance to receive state funding, and at the same time there are no clear-cut and transparent

The government does control admission to journalism schools, as one of the panelists put it: “the state tries to monopolize the training of journalists at universities; however, it hasn’t fully succeeded.”

mechanisms for distributing state funding to state-owned media. The state media essentially speak with one voice, that of the government. Pro-government publications often publish almost identical front pages with stories touting President Lukashenka’s leadership or discrediting his opponents, a panelist added.

Although the media law claims equal access to information for all outlets, private outlets are usually barred from official events or find it very difficult to obtain official information from governmental agencies. A largely unregulated system of accreditations is in place. Photo reporters and cameramen cannot bring along professional equipment even to celebrations for Independence Day and the New Year. “There is no place for editorial independence, as they [editors] are appointed by the government, outlets are funded by the government and they understand perfectly that if there is any word against [the government], they will be out,” one panelist said.

Libel may be prosecuted both within the civil and criminal law, in the latter case it is punishable by up to six months in prison. Unlike in some other countries, public figures are given greater protection against libel. “Insult of a representative of the authorities” is punishable up to six months in jail. Two articles of the Criminal Code expressly protect the president. “Insult of the president” is punishable by up to two years in prison and “calumny toward the president” by up to four years.

Andrzej Poczobut of Poland’s largest daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and several independent Belarusian news websites once again faced charges of libel against the president. On June 21, 2012 Poczobut was arrested in his apartment in the north-western city of Hrodna. His apartment and office were searched and his computer and documents were confiscated. Poczobut was charged for a story criticizing the government’s handling of the 2011 Minsk Metro bombing for the pro-opposition news site Charter97.org. Poczobut was released on bail after a week in detention, but was told a trial against him is forthcoming.

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In 2011, as detailed in the 2012 MSI report, Poczobut spent three months in pre-trial jail and later received a three-year suspended sentence for libel against the president.

“Criminal prosecution of Andrzej Poczobut, allegedly over libeling the president, is a telling example of how criticism is being suppressed in the media and how independent journalists are being intimidated,” one panelist said.

“Court precedents show that state officials (journalists and official politicians) cannot be prosecuted for libel. Criminal prosecution is only used against independent journalists,” one panelist reported. On the other hand, such court cases remain rare, another panelist added. More common were so-called “honor and dignity” and “business reputation” suits, falling under the civil law.

Access to public information remains restricted both for private and state-owned media. However, one of the panelists noted that private outlets do sometimes manage to bypass those restrictions.

Belarus has a law on information, informatization, and protection of information, adopted in 2009. It guarantees access to, and distribution of, information of interest to the public. On the other hand, 58 state bodies (including the ministries of health, education and culture) as well as regional governments can classify their information as secret. Furthermore, as a rule, state officials cannot talk to journalists without a go-ahead from their top bosses. In most cases, the media can only obtain information via official press services or the so-called ideology departments, which all state-controlled organizations have.

Many events attended by top officials, as well as press conferences, require accreditations and in most cases reporters and photographers working for non-state media find it very difficult to win access to these events. For events, attended by the president, an additional accreditation is required, from his security service. According to the media law, only those who work for registered Belarusian media outlet or are accredited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a foreign correspondent, are considered journalists. As a result, freelance journalists, bloggers, and in fact anyone lacking press credentials from are denied access to many events.

There is no procedure that grants media better access to information, as compared to ordinary citizens: both can request public information on the same terms. Access is equal for everyone, yet it is slow, a panelist said, as written requests are to be dealt within 30 days (or 15 if no additional check is needed). Although the Internet regulation decree ordered state bodies to publish information about their activities on their official websites, that was in most cases

limited to working hours and contact information, a panelist argued. Events, texts of laws, decrees, and regulations were getting harder to find on the Internet, as the government wanted to encourage the use of paid versions of legal databases.

With all those hurdles in place, journalists and media somehow got used to the restricted access and see no point in fighting it in any organized way, the panel agreed.

Access to and use of foreign news remains unrestricted, yet limited by financial conditions. Most notable is the use of pirated photos and artwork, the use of which may at any time lead to repressions against newsrooms, a panelist commented.

The copyright law gives a very loose definition of what is the fair use of other media reports or other copyrighted work, saying they “may be quoted to the extent necessary for the purposes of such quotes.” One of the panelists argued that Belarusians did have unrestricted access to Internet, yet face restricted access to content, as many foreign media companies erect location-based barriers around their copyrighted products. Despite the Customs Union with Russia, many Russian video streaming services are inaccessible in Belarus, as their content is not being cleared for use by Belarusian customers.

By and large, entry into the journalism profession remains unrestricted. The government does control admission to journalism schools, as one of the panelists put it: “the state tries to monopolize the training of journalists at universities; however, it hasn’t fully succeeded.” Applicants to state-owned journalism schools are reportedly checked for political loyalty during admission interviews. Graduates are subject to the Soviet-style “distribution,” requiring them to work for two years whenever the government sends them. Alternatively, they can reimburse the cost of their training and stipends they received during five years of their schooling.

“Some teachers at the schools of journalism openly say they train journalists who will work for the state, rather than try to undermine it. That is, they view journalism in terms of information warfare, and quite obviously they work with students in exactly the same way, either trying to “correct” them or get rid of those who could not be corrected,” one of the panelists asserted.

Separately, strict requirements have been in place for would-be editors-in-chief that “seriously complicate the launch and reorganization of media outlets,” a panelist said. As noted, editors should have a journalism diploma and at least five years of editorial experience. In some cases the

Ministry of Information has made exceptions, yet only for non-political media projects, another panelist added.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Belarus Objective Score: 1.25

Professional standards of quality met the requirements of minimal sustainability, though remained quite similar to the 2012 assessment. The panel praised efforts by independent journalists to cover all key events objectively and practice ethical journalism, thus offering an alternative to state-sponsored propaganda. On the other hand, self-censorship was so common that the indicator was considered a drag on the development of independent media in general. Furthermore, pay levels for journalists remained low and are crippling the impartiality of reporters.

“Many editors require subjectivity from journalists lest the story will be ‘flavorless’ and uninteresting. That is common for TV, newspapers, and websites, both state and private,” a panelist argued. “Of course, there are different examples, yet in general the media sector fails to meet the standards of objectivity”. On the other hand, this new subjectivity could be an attempt to compete with bloggers, who score points with their highly-opinionated posts. There remained a big problem with experts. Journalists still think that the circle of experts is a very narrow one. As a result, everything the audience was getting was a very limited opinion of a very small group of people. And those people whose opinion journalists were transmitting in many cases were dubious as experts, the panel agreed. Still, many journalists

### JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

#### PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well-sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption and retain qualified personnel within the media profession.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exist (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

“Many editors require subjectivity from journalists lest the story will be ‘flavorless’ and uninteresting. That is common for TV, newspapers, and websites, both state and private,” a panelist argued.

were known to use their experts poorly, at first approaching them for context, then quoting them later, particularly if a predetermined answer were offered, often omitting caveats.

Belarus has two journalism organizations and both have come up with ethical codes of conduct. However, most journalists, even those who belong to these organizations, were not being guided by these ethical standards, a panelist said.

Gifts, invitations to parties and dinners or press junkets were generally viewed as pleasant bonuses from partners rather than some element of bribery. Hidden advertising, usually in the form of paid content, was also quite common, mostly because outlets wanted to pay less in taxes or comply with the requirement that limits ads to a certain percentage of content. Ads are restricted to 25 percent for state-owned general news press and 30 percent for privately-owned. Broadcast media must not exceed the 20 percent cap for total broadcasting time and 30 percent from 6 to 10 p.m.

Some online media were inserting paid hyperlinks into news stories or interviews, making experts or an article’s protagonist look like they are promoting some product or service, a panelist complained.

Disguised plagiarism was commonplace amongst news sites. Often, another site’s content is slightly “camouflaged,” credits buried in the bulk of the text, or dropped altogether. “The same news story will jump through all of my RSS feeds within an hour,” a panelist said, “though sometimes I would not spot it immediately because headlines would be different, yet the remaining part is absolutely identical.”

Both journalists and editors regularly practice self-censorship, one of the panelists argued: “Media workers at state-owned outlets have a clear understanding that they should write in a certain way or go work elsewhere. Private media organizations are just afraid that some stories or their tone might be damaging to their financial interests.” His colleague added, “I can’t say that there are serious social problems that are not being covered. There are no challenges of the kind right now. Yet there is the topic of Lukashenka’s family that is hardly covered ‘by default.’



One panelist argued: “Media workers at state-owned outlets have a clear understanding that they should write in a certain way or go work elsewhere. Private media organizations are just afraid that some stories or their tone might be damaging to their financial interests.”

Reporting about Belarusian oligarchs is very cautious. And almost all newsrooms that rely on advertising are wary of offending their advertisers.”

Coverage by the state-controlled media was described as unbalanced, added another panelist. “Many socially important topics are ignored, while the personality of the incumbent president is being disproportionately puffed up.”

Private outlets report on protests and political prisoners, yet not all of them do so, since some newsrooms think their audience might be tired of such stories.

Some local outlets, such as *Intex-Press* newspaper in Baranavichy, cover both local and national news; other local newsrooms concentrated on their local issues only and reprinted syndicated national news. National media were also sometimes borrowing stories from local newspapers and websites. The panel failed to recall any topics or events covered solely by social media. At the same time, traditional news organizations mined them for story ideas and information.

After the economic crisis unsettled Belarus in 2011, many media professionals saw a decline in their incomes. In private media organization journalists earned around \$300 a month, pretty much the same as collective farmers or school teachers, according to a panelist. Smaller regional outlets pay even less, while offshore donor-funded broadcasters covering Belarus offer better compensation. Meanwhile, Belarus average monthly salary was \$428 in 2012. Key reporters at big national state-owned TV channels or country’s biggest daily *Belarus Segodnia* made between \$800 and \$1,000. In the meantime, even those propaganda pillars were forced to give pay cuts to their employees. A handful of key reporters left once very generous *Belarus Segodnia*, published by the Lukashenka administration, to start their own online project covering business news, *Doingbusiness.by*. As a result of the low pay, many media professionals tend to work for multiple outlets or in other sectors like PR and advertising. One of the panelists

mentioned a blog post by one journalist who wrote she could earn up to \$1,000 a month working for five outlets. At the same time, editors view press junkets as a way to keep and motivate low-paid reporters rather than something that might compromise their editorial independence. Bloggers hardly live off their blogs, yet rather work somewhere else. Still, they might be getting some revenues via banner or classified ads or sponsorship deals.

There was a trend for entertainment to overshadow news and analysis, the panel agreed, most notably on radio and “to some extent” on television. At the same time news were becoming more entertainment-oriented, one of the participants added. According to his colleague, there was some sort of a balance in newspapers, yet entertainment content was bringing them more readers. “News websites work more like newswires, akin to Reuters and Bloomberg, while there are lots of Internet users who read news on weekends only and are mostly interested in entertainment content and tabloids,” another panelist noted, regarding online media.

Around 80 percent of Belarusian Internet users were making use of search engines, 77 percent social networks, 60 percent video services, and 50 percent news websites, according to December 2012 data released by Gemius, an Internet research company.

The panel differed on whether equipment for news gathering and production was easily available and affordable. There was a discussion on whether newsrooms really needed expensive professional equipment to produce content that met the needs of their audiences. Most papers and news websites hardly need anything more than no-frills computers and cheap cameras (or even mobile phones) to produce stories both for the print and the web, some panelists argued. At the same time, those who produce video content need better video equipment and faster PCs. The software newsrooms and journalists use is almost 100 percent pirated. None of Belarusian newspapers or magazines was using publishing platforms that could make their workflow more efficient. One of the panelists said that building or upgrading a website was expensive and took a lot of time. Internet connections remained slow and managers were reluctant to buy them for everyone, so many journalists tended to purchase their own Internet subscriptions. Half of journalists use their own voice recorders, cameras, and laptops, estimates one panelist.

There was hardly a market for quality niche reporting and niche outlets, apart from economics, automotive, and sports. Still, there are journalists who specialized on certain topics. The panel mentioned *Belgazeta*, *Belorusy i Rynok* and several specialized news agencies that report on economy

and business. Many newspapers and websites write about politics, yet that coverage is shallow, one of the panelists argued. Amongst outlets offering good coverage of local news the panel named *Intex-Press* and *Vechernii Brest* weekly newspapers.

Investigative journalism has virtually gone extinct; as no media organization could afford that or even relieve a reporter of his or her daily duties to concentrate on investigations. Restricted access to information was further hampering investigative reporting. In most cases what was referred to as investigations are at best in-depth reporting, the panel agreed.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Belarus Objective Score: 1.28

As with other objectives, little change in news plurality was felt from the previous year. Some sort of plural environment did exist, made up of state-owned outlets and private players. Together they offered some variety of sources and viewpoints. The highest scores were yielded by indicators related to the work of private media organizations and coverage of both domestic and international events. The state media received the lowest scores, largely for playing down important topics and stifling debate.

Numerous news sources do exist, yet not all of them were readily available or affordable to the general public. As mentioned, the Ministry of Information counts 1,746 outlets

#### MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE, OBJECTIVE NEWS.

##### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > Plurality of public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet, mobile) exist and offer multiple viewpoints.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted by law, economics, or other means.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for media outlets.
- > Private media produce their own news.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge the objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources
- > The media provide news coverage and information about local, national, and international issues.

There is high percentage of female reporters in Belarusian media, yet few hold editorial positions, thus, "there is some recreation of the gender imbalance that is characteristic of the Belarusian society in general," a panelist said.

on its register. That multitude of outlets did not deliver plurality to the media landscape. There were very few private outlets that covered politics, and not enough TV and radio stations, as well news websites, the panel said. Moreover, the outlets offered very little diversity. Amongst online media it was difficult to differentiate between online newsrooms and news aggregators. Furthermore, almost all of them were syndicating stories from other websites and it did not really matter whether the same story could be read elsewhere, a panelist argued. This has made censorship of the most critical pro-opposition news websites senseless, since the same stories would be published by a dozen of other websites, he added.

Meanwhile, government-controlled media dominate the media sector with the exception of the Internet, audience data suggest. In an independent opinion poll conducted in May 2012 by NOVAK, a research company, 62.7 percent of respondents said they were getting information from national state TV channels, 46 percent Russian TV channels, 18.4 local television, and 7.3 Western TV channels. National state newspapers were the source of information for 19.2 of those polled, local state newspapers for 15.9 percent, national private newspapers for 9.9 percent, private local newspapers for 6.5 percent, and Russian newspapers for 2.7 percent. National and local radio stations were mentioned by 18.6 percent and 13.6 percent, respectively. And finally, 34.3 percent said they were getting information from the Internet, while 34.5 percent from friends and relatives.

The government retained tight control over television, radio, and print outlets. Six out of seven TV channels with national reach were either owned or technically controlled by the government. Private radio and TV stations were small local broadcasters offering very little to no news at all.

The government claimed the private press outnumbered the state controlled press. This is accurate on paper: 1,071 titles versus 411. However, circulation-wise, the state newspapers continued to dominate the market. National state-owned dailies report aggregate circulation of 800,000 copies, and local government-owned weeklies 900,000 copies,

Private radio stations were all music-based and supplied relatively little news outside short bulletins with official information, some local issues, and weather.

according to the Ministry of Information. *Belarus Segodnia*, the country's biggest daily and the mouthpiece of the Lukashenka administration, has a share of 33.72 percent of newspaper readership, according to the aforementioned opinion poll by NOVAK. It is followed by *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* (28.77 percent) and *Argumenty i Fakty* (20.35), popular Russian tabloids. Pro-opposition weeklies *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva* yielded 5.28 percent and 2.81 percent respectively.

On the Internet, Russian portals Mail.Ru and Yandex, each reaching around 60 percent of Belarusian users Internet users, and Russian social network VKontakte (over 50 percent) are the most popular, according to Gemius. They are followed by Google, YouTube, the Belarusian portal TUT.by, the Russian social network Odnoklassniki, and the Belarusian portal Onliner.by. Russian and Belarusian portals syndicate news from Belarusian online media, both private and state-owned. Meanwhile, standalone pro-opposition and independent news websites were much more popular than state-owned ones, according to another Internet research company, Akavita.

While state outlets uniformly praise state policies, many non-state outlets follow the same pattern. "With very few exceptions, media outlets do not allow for plurality of viewpoints. And some people would squabble when newsrooms deviate from those 'wonderful' editorial policies", a panelist said, noting the censorship within loyal private outlets.

"We have restricted access to media that are "physically" distributed in Belarus via Belarusian networks, are it print or broadcast media. Belarusian media with circulation of over 300 copies should be registered with the Ministry of Information. Foreign titles and broadcasters need expressed permission from the ministry to be distributed in Belarus. On top of that, local governments approve the list of TV channels cable operators distribute via their networks. But for a citizen that makes certain efforts [to access alternative media], the only restriction would be the knowledge of foreign languages and their affordability," a panelist commented.

No registration is needed to own a satellite dish, and 22 percent of those who watch TV have access to satellite television, according to research company Zerkalo-info. The same poll said 53 percent of them watch Belsat TV, an expatriate satellite channel broadcasting news and cultural programs into Belarus from Poland.

Almost 80 websites are blacklisted in government agencies, educational institutions, and libraries, the government reported in July 2012. The list itself was never made public, yet telecom officials claim it mostly contained extremist and pornographic websites. Yet according to numerous reports, key pro-opposition news websites Charter97.org and BelarusPartisan.org are on the list, as well as the website of the human rights center Viasna (Spring96.org), and a satirical blog by Jauhen Lipkovich (Lipkovich.livejournal.com).

Restricted access to state-controlled distribution channels essentially limited the reach of private newspapers. In 2005, more than a dozen titles that were criticizing the government were expelled from state-owned postal service Belposhta and its press distribution network Belsajuzdruk. Since then, they have relied on in-house networks of distributors and private shops. Some outlets that won access to state-controlled distribution reported caps put on the number of copies they were allowed to sell. As a result, in many regions people do not have access to private newspapers writing about politics, especially in smaller towns, to say nothing rural areas, a panelist said.

Foreign press largely remained unaffordable. Still, NewspaperDirect, a digital newspaper distribution and publishing operator, was offering 2,000 same-day international newspapers from 95 countries in 52 languages. Although those newspapers were printed in Minsk in black and white only, they were sometimes much cheaper than original titles, according to a panelist.

The panel also mentioned the digital divide with people in bigger towns having better access to multiple news sources, including cable networks and faster and cheaper Internet. Rural areas in most cases have access to several state-owned terrestrial television and radio channels. Similarly, Internet was only available via state-owned telecom monopoly Beltelecom, selling ADSL subscriptions. Mobile phone penetration reached 113 percent in January 2012, with many citizens carrying several lines. Fully 98.1 percent of country's territory was served by mobile networks. One panelist argued that access to multiple news sources became simply an issue of willingness to take additional steps, and to some extent, of affordability.

There were no public-interest media outlets in Belarus, while state media, as one of the panelists put it, "deliberately does not reflect the full spectrum of political life in the

country.” They mostly report about the government, with the president getting most of the coverage, and only praise at that. State media were used not only to push the official line, yet lambaste opponents, including independent journalists. Critics of the government were commonly referred to as the “fifth column.” Meanwhile, only 38.1 percent of those polled in December 2012 by the Independent Institute of Social, Political, and Economic Studies said they trusted state-owned media. Private outlets yielded 48.1 percent.

Nine companies were registered as information agencies with the Ministry of Information, two state-owned and seven private. Only four of them—BelaPAN, BelTA, Interfax-Zapad, and Prime-TASS—were selling newswire services to other media. Others were offering legal updates or publishing specialized business journals. BelTA is the official agency of Belarusian government, while BelaPAN is private. Interfax-Zapad and Prime-TASS are Russian-owned. There was no selective distribution of news on the part of news agencies, however not all outlets, especially smaller ones, could afford their services. “It is only because BelTA and BelaPAN are unwilling to take legal action against those who steal their information; alternative information from news agencies is there in the Belarusian media. The rest is either stolen—and that can get media into trouble at any time—or there is nothing at all,” a panelist argued.

On average, a newswire subscription would cost around \$300 a month for daily news updates and \$600 for real-time ones, according to a panelist. In addition, those news agencies were selling roundups and analytical reviews. They also ran websites that offered some of their news stories for free, yet for personal use only. Other services included photographs and infographics (BelTA and BelaPAN), video and audio (BelaPAN), building and running websites for other organizations (BelTA and Interfax-Zapad).

Only a handful of big state-owned media organizations like national TV networks and *Belarus Segodnia* can afford subscriptions to international news agencies like Reuters or AP. However, many outlets use their stories for free by “borrowing” them from other sources, according to a panelist.

As noted above, there were no private broadcasters with national reach. Private radio stations were all music-based and supplied relatively little news outside short bulletins with official information, some local issues, and weather. Expatriate radio stations, like European Radio for Belarus, Radio Liberty, and Radio Racyja, which broadcast daily to

Belarus from the West, have several hundred thousand listeners, according to various estimates. All of them had a significant proportion of news and current affairs throughout the day. Radio Liberty is largely talk format.

Private television was also dominated by entertainment formats with news playing a minor role. In most cases they offered only short bulletins with local news and weekly roundups.

More news was produced by private newspapers, the panel agreed. Regional titles were mostly offering local features (business, government, accidents, and sports). They relied on newswires and national websites to fill their pages with national and international news. National press tend to concentrate on national issues and analysis. The vast majority of newspapers operated their own websites alongside their print editions. Almost all media websites aggregate news from other sources, some of them, both national and local, produced their own content.

Media ownership remained opaque. “The media law requires disclosure of media outlets’ founders, yet owners of newsrooms, meaning, those who control a certain media business, might not be apparent. There is a mechanism to file a request with the Ministry of Justice about owners of the specific company, yet no one is doing that. Furthermore, those requirements only apply to registered outlets and it is unknown who is behind news websites,” a panelist commented. There is no monopolization of the media, except by the government. Immediate foreign ownership of media outlets is restricted to 30 percent. An exception was made for those media organizations that were foreign-owned before that requirement was introduced in 2009. Thus, Russian businesses own two news agencies (the private Interfax-Zapad and state-owned Prime-TASS) and three newspapers (popular daily *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Byelorussii* and weeklies *BelGazeta* and *Argumenty i Fakty*) and have stakes in VTV, an entertainment television channel.

Coverage of many minority issues like ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability and subcultures remained scarce, the panel agreed. Journalists and editors at mainstream media were unwilling to pursue those topics referred to by one of the panelists as “very slippery.” Most minority communities largely remained invisible unless there was some sort of a conflict. Still, communities discussed issues of interest for them on the Internet, there were also small-circulation newspaper published by ethnic groups, most notably by Poles.

Government officials sometimes contributed to stereotyping and stigmatization of certain groups, for example, by mentioning the ethnic origin of alleged offenders in police reports, usually Roma or Caucasians. These attributions were

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then mirrored in news stories. There is high percentage of female reporters in Belarusian media, yet few hold editorial positions, thus, “there is some recreation of the gender imbalance that is characteristic of the Belarusian society in general,” a panelist said.

Most outlets offer a mix of national and international news, alongside “lighter” news, and entertainment. “Local media tend to concentrate on local issues, less so on national. National media organizations mostly cover Minsk, and less so the country on the whole. And they do write about the president. I would say there are not enough national news stories; they are being substituted by reports on the activities of top officials and news from Minsk. Consequently some country-wide trends might not be apparent,” one panelist commented. Still, state television has local news bulletins for specific regions and websites, most notably TUT.by, Ej.by, or Belta.by aggregate news for specific regions. International news remained a sore point, since very few newsrooms could afford a correspondent abroad. As a result, international developments are being viewed via Russian media, giving a somewhat distorted picture. There were no hyper-local media in rural areas, as there was no market for them.

#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Belarus Objective Score: 0.88

Business also experienced few changes. Most media organizations, regardless of ownership or sector, found it next to impossible to operate as efficient and sustainable businesses, the panel agreed. The tiny advertising market, strict legal environment, state interference, financial and political, exasperated by digital challenges all complicated the quest for workable business models. Highest scores were given to the indicator related to media ratings, and first of all because of the availability of accurate Internet statistics from the web research company Gemius.

“The market is distorted and media is not a business in the common sense of the word,” one of the panelists

commented. “Most of the outlets are on the brink of survival, some of them are balancing on the brink only because they receive financial assistance outside of the media business,” his colleague added.

Meanwhile, the sector was still recovering after 2011 financial crisis. Although the ad market grew 10.6 percent in 2012, per capita ad spending was mere \$7.7 a year. Government interference was huge: in 2012 state-owned outlets received \$57 million in direct funding, including \$43 million for government-owned broadcasters. That came on top of subsidized rent, printing and distribution costs, as well as tax breaks for national TV networks. For comparison, the advertising market totaled \$76.2 million in 2012: TV \$42 million (55.1 percent), press \$10.1 million (13.3 percent), web \$7.9 million (10.4 percent), radio \$4.1 million (5.4 percent), and outdoor billboard advertising \$12.1 million (15.9 percent), according to the advertising group ZenithOptimedia.

Some newsrooms had to cut jobs, most notable being the layoff of one third of the TV team of TUT.by. Privately-owned weekly *Obozrevatel* ceased publication at the end of 2012. Its owner, a lingerie tycoon, cited financial problems. Many outlets, even most successful ones, were unwilling to hire new people, since even the existing staff happened to be unhappy about the pay levels, according to a panelist.

Most media did some basic business planning, usually short-term, since the planning horizon was as such very short in Belarus’ turbulent economy. Having a certified accountant is a legal requirement, and paying taxes remains time consuming. Although electronic filing made it easier and less

#### MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED ENTERPRISES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

##### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets operate as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards.
- > Government subsidies and advertising are distributed fairly, governed by law, and neither subvert editorial independence nor distort the market.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor the product to the needs and interests of the audience.
- > Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliably and independently produced.



costly, it still takes 337 hours per year for a medium-sized business to pay taxes, according to research by World Bank. All outlets employ advertising sales managers, print media usually have dedicated circulation managers. Only richer and bigger newsrooms can afford lawyers and sometimes marketing specialists.

It is difficult to assess whether state media use government funding responsibly and efficiently. “Still, the president seemed to be dissatisfied with how these funds are being spent, and so are we as taxpayers. However, the situation has not changed for years,” a panelist asserted. Apart from the aforementioned funding from the national government, many local state-owned outlets receive subsidies from their respective local authorities, making it even more complicated to assess their impact.

There are multiple sources of revenue, although, “They are not very generous and not very reliable,” as one of the panelists put it. All outlets depended on advertising in their revenue mix, yet to varying degrees. State-owned media did have guaranteed sources of funding from the government. Newspapers relied on copy sales and subscriptions. Local television generated a significant percentage of their income via classified ads and personal messages like birthday greetings. The commercial model for online media was banner, display, and search advertising. Some websites, usually those that write about automobiles or cover local issues managed to secure revenues through classified ads. Foreign donors fund expatriate broadcasters, as well as some websites and print media. Sources of revenue do influence editorial policy: those who heavily rely on ads were wary of offending their advertisers. Most media managers did feel pressed to sell more advertising, yet, as mentioned above, the law restricts ads to 30 percent of content in press (25 percent for state-owned outlets) and 20 percent for broadcasters (including 30 percent during primetime).

Belarus’s unreformed command economy was still dominated by government-owned companies that generate around 75 percent of GDP. “State companies are not very interested in advertising their products or services. As a result the market is underdeveloped, since the bigger part of GDP is not being advertised,” a panelist said. The biggest advertisers represented the same group of industries as in previous years: mobile operators, food and consumer products, and banks. Around 50 percent of total advertising was coming from non-Belarusian businesses. Almost 90 percent of all budgets were controlled by a handful of advertising agencies working with big domestic companies and multinational companies like Procter & Gamble, Nestle, Coca-Cola and Unilever. Brands and agencies continued to invest in TV advertising (mostly via state-controlled national TV networks) and outdoor advertising. Only a

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small percentage of ad agencies’ money was channeled to regional media, mostly from mobile operators and banks. On the positive side, classified ads from local small and medium businesses continued to underpin those news organizations, regardless of recurring economic meltdowns. Elsewhere, Internet spending was up almost 30 percent, yet amounts of advertising income generated by news providers remained small.

Government subsidies did distort the market, as they were comparable to what the entire media sector was earning through advertising sales. Only government-owned organizations received government financial support—either in the form of direct funding; discounted postage, printing and broadcasting fees, or special tax breaks. Their subsidized status made it possible for state-controlled outlets to undersell their privately-owned counterparts. For years both state and private companies were coming under pressure not to advertise in the media that criticized the authorities, according to numerous reports. Cash-strapped government agencies usually publish their advertisements and notices for free in state-owned media. The government requires businesses to publish their legal notices in certain state-owned newspapers.

Market research remained a weakness, according to the panel. “There is real demand for market research. Quite often advertisers ask about audience profiles and media have almost no information of the kind,” said one panelist. Most outlets cannot afford professional surveys. Sometimes such surveys are commissioned by big advertising agencies for their own purposes and outlets have no access to results. Some in-house research is done, mostly by local outlets and through questionnaires or online polls. Generally, market research is not used to tailor the editorial policy, one of the panelists argued.

Broadcast ratings and press readership data are subscription-only and thus affordable mostly to big media companies and advertising agencies. They are available from two private research companies: GEVS and NOVAK.

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The former is using People Meters for TV ratings and phone interviews to measure radio and newspaper audiences. NOVAK is using self-completion diaries for TV and radio ratings and twice annual face-to-face interviews for press audiences. Alternatively, many Internet usage statistics and online ratings are available for free. Panelists complemented Internet research firm Gemius on the amount and scope of information it shares. It gathers its rating via a combination of website counters, offline panels, and offline research. Gemius has also been chosen by advertising agencies as a provider of online metrics for media planning. Online ratings are also available from Akavita. Whether ratings and statistics are accepted depends on whether a certain media outlet looks good on these ratings, the panel agreed. Furthermore, not all media professionals understand ratings terminology, web statistics happen to be the most confusing.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Belarus Objective Score: 1.32

The government retained a tight grip over supporting institutions. Trade associations and academic institutions remained weak, while printing and media distribution infrastructure was inefficient and politicized. This objective constituted the country's most notable change, with a modest improvement over last year. The highest scores were assessed for associations of journalists, non-governmental organizations, and short-term training opportunities, though even these remained low.

Two trade associations currently operate. United Mass Media brings together 12 regional publishers of 20 newspapers in central and western Belarus. Telecommunications Industry Union represents almost 100 local TV stations and cable operators. Both organizations offer mostly networking and learning opportunities for their members, the panel said. There is also some bulk sale of advertising and purchase of newsprint and programming rights through them. Although the Union's 2012 work plan provided for their participation in joint meetings with the telecommunication and information ministries, as well as some sort of work

on telecommunications and copyright laws, it is unknown whether the association was successful in lobbying their interests.

There are several professional associations in Belarus, most notable being Belarusian Union of Journalists (BUJ) and the Belarusian Associations of Journalists (BAJ). BUJ is the “official” journalists’ organization that brings together around 2,000 media professionals working for state-owned media. BAJ has around 1,000 members, mostly employed by private media. Both organizations offer legal assistance to their members and run professional development programs and give awards to honor excellence in journalism. BAJ is also publishing a quarterly journal, *Abajour*. Admission procedures are similar. Any media worker, who agrees to follow principles of ethical journalism and secures two recommendations from active members, can join in. According to BAJ reports, they received almost 100 new members in 2012, mostly young people. In general, around a quarter of their members are under 30.

BAJ is working to protect journalists’ rights and doing much, especially given the very hostile legal environment and its very limited resources, the panel agreed. The MSI panel mentioned BAJ’s campaigns for the release of photographer Anton Surapin and Andrzej Poczobut specifically. “It is hard for me to judge what BUJ is doing to protect journalists’ rights,” a panelist commented on BAJ’s counterpart, “As they never actually say that journalists’ rights are being violated. The maximum they can publicly speak of—and there recently was a story on one of the state-controlled

## SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of media owners and managers and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists’ rights and promote quality journalism.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs exist providing substantial practical experience.
- > Short-term training and in-service training institutions and programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of media equipment, newsprint, and printing facilities are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, cable, Internet, mobile) are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

TV channels—that they also face restricted access to information.”

Both associations cooperate with similar organizations in other countries, yet BAJ tends to work with Western and international partners, while BUJ mostly partners with organizations in other post-Soviet states, first of all Russia. The panel mentioned a two-year project by Swedish media development institute FOJO that set its sights on promoting ethical journalism. The project brought together representatives of BAJ and BUJ as well students and faculty of state Journalism Institute. A series of roundtable discussion and trainings was held that offered some networking opportunities. However, after the aforementioned teddy-bear stunt, organized by a Swedish firm, BUJ walked away from the project.

Panelists once again noted there should be some sort of a journalists' trade union, as employment-related disputes were not uncommon. Managers usually maintain the upper hand, despite the country's labor-friendly laws.

Separately, there is an organization of sports reporters, the 102-strong Belarusian Sports Press Association. However, according to a panelist, it mostly helps its members get accreditations to sports events.

The panel noted that BAJ also meets most of the requirements of a free speech-defending NGO. It monitors and publicizes, including internationally, violations of freedom of information in Belarus and is, by and large, the country's only press freedom watchdog. There are also organizations of human rights defenders, both registered and informal, that in most cases react to freedom of speech violations. They work both in bigger cities and rural areas. These organizations mostly provide publicity, express solidarity and might offer some sort of legal assistance. “It turns out that everything these organizations can do themselves they do properly and in full. The problems arise where they need to cooperate with the government,” a panelist commented. As a result they were not involved in such things as legislative reviews. There is some cooperation with international organizations, yet it remains limited as access to foreign funding is restricted by law and use of unregistered foreign aid is criminalized.

Several universities offer journalism degrees; most notable is the Journalism Institute at the Belarusian State University in Minsk. The institute offers courses in print, broadcast and web journalism, as well as editing, media management and international journalism. Almost 1,000 of its 1,500 students are based on campus. “I'm afraid no one is getting practice-oriented training there,” one of the panelists argued. “All students are perfectly aware that they will learn real journalism only on the job, and not earlier. Practical

“It turns out that everything these organizations can do themselves they do properly and in full. The problems arise where they need to cooperate with the government,” a panelist commented.

experience is obtained outside of universities.” Furthermore, his colleague added there are too many “arts and science” courses to the detriment of core journalism training. Students have to spend too much time on literature, arts, history and philosophy. The curriculum seems corrupted by political interference, as the government considers media to be part of the ideological apparatus of the state. Meanwhile, the Institute's up-to-date TV studios have been used for years to film talk and lottery shows, while students have very little access to these facilities. Although the Institute offers majors in web journalism, some teachers actually learn from students, as the latter happen to know more about online media, one of the panelists recalled in his conversation with one of the students.

Similar, rather theoretical, training is offered by state universities in Homiel, Hrodna, and Viciebsk, as well as several private institutes in Minsk. One of the panelists argued their training is closer to linguistics than journalism.

Amongst foreign opportunities most notable is the European Humanities University (EHU). Once a Belarusian university, it now works in exile in Vilnius, Lithuania. EHU has around 200 students on-campus and almost 500 distance-learning students divided amongst four majors: mass communication and journalism, visual culture (cinema, television and Internet), design and visual media, and new media. The panel similarly criticized EHU for too much of general-education courses like philosophy, sociology, and other humanities classes. EHU students receive more practical training in journalism compared to their colleagues in domestic universities, the panel agreed. That is mostly owing to EHU Media Hub, a fully-equipped multimedia training facility provided by the international community. The facility has a television studio, a radio studio, and a multimedia newsroom that allow students hands-on experience in producing a variety of multiplatform reports. However, as noted during previous discussions, many graduates are either not coming back to Belarus, or pursue other careers not related to journalism.

Newsrooms, especially regional ones, can easily absorb journalism graduates, panelists said. Both state-controlled

**“A number of Belarusian and foreign organizations are good at organizing individual seminars and trainings, but in general this process suffers from unsystematic and uncoordinated approach,” one of the panelists argued.**

and private outlets are understaffed. As not noted above, the government “distributes” graduates that received state scholarships for their studies to state-run media outlets after graduation. They are being sent to work for two years wherever the government wants them, usually small regional newspapers. Alternatively, they can reimburse the cost of their training, approximately \$1,500 a year. For comparison, EHU charges its students \$2,500-\$3,200 a year, depending on the program.

Short-term, mid-career trainings are offered by both Belarusian and international organizations, ranging from one-day seminars and webinars to hands-on workshops and exchanges. They tend to focus on newsroom staff and first of all reporters, according to the panel. There was a lot of emphasis lately on web journalism, multimedia reporting and photography, one of our experts noted. However, advertising and finance departments, for example, tend to be neglected.

“A number of Belarusian and foreign organizations are good at organizing individual seminars and trainings, but in general this process suffers from unsystematic and uncoordinated approach,” one of the panelists argued, mentioning the lack of coordination between media assistance organizations, resulting in overlapping dates or even topics. One of the panelists spoke about the “seasonality” of training sessions: sometimes there are too many of them, sometimes there are none at all. Some events had to be held outside of the country as certain foreign trainers were banned from entering Belarus. Separately, understaffed newsrooms are often reluctant to send away key personnel for more than a couple of days. Furthermore, changing the entrenched newsroom practices seemed to be the toughest task trainees faced after they received new knowledge and skills. Training programs should be more comprehensive and involve some element of training of media managers as well, the panel suggested.

Most trainings are donor-funded, and thus are offered for free and they are quite popular, “provided tutors are experienced practitioners”, a panelist said. There are

however, paid courses from private companies on journalism, photography and computer graphics. More media-focused paid courses are available from the Journalism Institute at the Belarusian State University. They last four to ten days and cover 15 different topics from newspaper and broadcast journalism to advertising, media management, and website promotion. The institute also offers longer 16 to 21 month distance courses in web and photojournalism.

Access to media equipment and software is only restricted by affordability. Printing presses are mostly owned by the government or otherwise controlled via strict licensing procedures. The few private printers are similarly open to political interference. Only 53 of 341 printing houses are licensed to print newspapers and just three of them are private. For years, a handful of private newspapers had to print in the capital, Minsk, or other cities after they were banned from their local printing presses for critical reports, according to a panelist. Most outlets remain dissatisfied with both the quality of printing and the prices. As a result, some monthly magazines that are more flexible with their publishing dates prefer to print in either Lithuania or Russia.

Sources of newsprint are not monopolized, yet most papers are using domestically-produced paper. Regardless of its somewhat poor quality, and the availability of better, more expensive imported newsprint, many outlets can afford nothing else. All the newsprint papers purchase is usually warehoused at the printers’ facilities. And, not infrequently, publishers have seen their copies printed on cheaper, locally-produced newsprint rather than on their own.

Media distribution channels remained monopolized by the state. Two government-owned companies, postal service Belposhta and press sales network Belsajuzdruk dominated the press distribution market. Belposhta has around 3,800 post offices and kiosks and Belsajuzdruk runs a network of 1,500 newspaper kiosks. Both offer press subscriptions and sales of copies and both are criticized for high commissions and slow payments for sales. State newspapers are getting better spots on the counter, while private news publications are tucked away. Kiosk employee salaries reportedly depend on whether they sell a certain minimum amount of government newspapers. The few remaining critical publications have to either put up with circulation caps or are just banned from these networks altogether. Since 2005, a dozen private outlets have to rely on private shops as well as their own in-house subscription and street sales.

Most of the terrestrial broadcasting infrastructure remained state-owned and a handful of private outlets with their own transmitters are controlled via strict licensing requirements. Cable networks are owned by both private and state-controlled companies, yet, as mentioned above,

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local governments approve the lists of TV channels operators can broadcast. Expatriate satellite channel Belsat TV was unsuccessfully trying to get into cable networks for several years, according to a panelist.

The government similarly retained tight control over most of the telecom infrastructure via direct ownership. State-owned companies control connections between domestic Internet service providers that connect Belarusian networks with other countries. All 57 providers have to purchase international traffic from the state telecommunications company Beltelecom. Beltelecom also sells to end-users: it has 1.5 million subscribers, or 65–70 percent of all wired broadband subscriptions.

Internet penetration reached 56 percent in November 2012, according to web research company Gemius. Almost 70 percent of Belarusian Internet users were using broadband connections. Still, complaints about quality, prices, and speeds were common, the panel agreed.

The average Internet connection speed was 2 Mbps in mid-2012, according to Akamai Technologies, a leading Internet content provider. Belarus's neighbors Poland, Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine all had average connection at around 5 Mbps, while Latvia was at 8 Mbps. The global average was 2.8 Mbps, according to the same report. On average, Belarusian providers were selling 2 Mbps Internet subscriptions without a traffic cap for around \$10 a month. Such connections were more or less acceptable for comfortable web browsing, yet still slow for video streaming services like YouTube.

Users in bigger cities can enjoy faster connections and better deals. ADSL connections from Beltelecom could be obtained pretty much everywhere in the country. Another alternative, although a costly one, is mobile Internet, similarly available nationwide.

## List of Panel Participants

*Note: MSI panelists in Belarus agreed to participate only if they were not named publicly. Amendments to the criminal code were introduced in December 2005 to add an article, "Discrediting the Republic of Belarus," that provides for criminal liability for giving international organizations "false information" about the situation in the country.*

*Human rights groups, both domestic and international, believe the article's vague wording makes it possible for the government to detain for up to six months anyone reporting negative information or to imprison them for up to two years.*

*The panel discussion was convened in December 2012.*