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BELARUS

In 2016, two opposition candidates won seats in the Belarusian parliament for the first time in 20 years. Although media, including state and non-state operated outlets, were able to report on the campaigns relatively freely, many limited coverage because elections are generally predictable. In some cases, local news outlets resorted to self-censorship, preferring to ignore the violations that took place over the course of the campaigns.

Increased tension between Minsk and Moscow was an important geopolitical factor in 2016. While economic struggles prevented Russia from continuing to subsidize Belarus's economy at its previous high levels, the Belarusian government intensified contacts with neighboring European Union countries, notably Poland. One result of the improved relations was the temporary accreditation of several correspondents from Belsat, the exiled Poland-based satellite television channel.

Despite a thaw in relations with Western countries, administrative persecution continued against journalists, especially those that work for foreign media organizations as freelancers. Under Belarusian law, any citizen that works for foreign outlets must receive individual accreditation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the absence of such accreditation might lead to administrative persecution. Accredited journalists of foreign media also experienced pressure, exemplified in the court case against Associated Press (AP) Belarus correspondent Yuras Karmanau for his coverage of food production in the region contaminated by the Chernobyl nuclear fallout.

Several restrictive laws remain in place that limit independent media's ability to inform the public. While the constitution guarantees the freedom of expression and the right to receive, store, and disseminate information, the criminal code in Belarus contains provisions on defamation, libel, and insult. Since 2014, online media outlets have been subject to the same restrictions as traditional media. In the case of a suspected violation, the Ministry of Information is entitled to limit access to websites, without a court ruling. A law on "extremism" was used to sentence a blogger for writing politically sensitive materials. No new legislation that would further restrict media or the Internet was introduced in 2016. But the economic discrimination of the media continues, and this past year, several private newspapers remained without access to the state-controlled distribution system.

The population's access to information increased due to the growing accessibility of the Internet. In December 2016, mobile Internet of 4G/LTE standards reached regional cities. Also, 2016 saw the first successful online crowdfunding campaigns for independent media outlets.

Relative freedom and the absence of significant setbacks led to a moderate increase in the overall score of Belarus; however, the country is considered an unsustainable mixed system.

IREX protects the identity of the panelists who agreed to participate this study. Amendments to the criminal code include an article, "Discrediting the Republic of Belarus," that provides for criminal liability for giving international organizations "false information" about the country.

# BELARUS at a glance

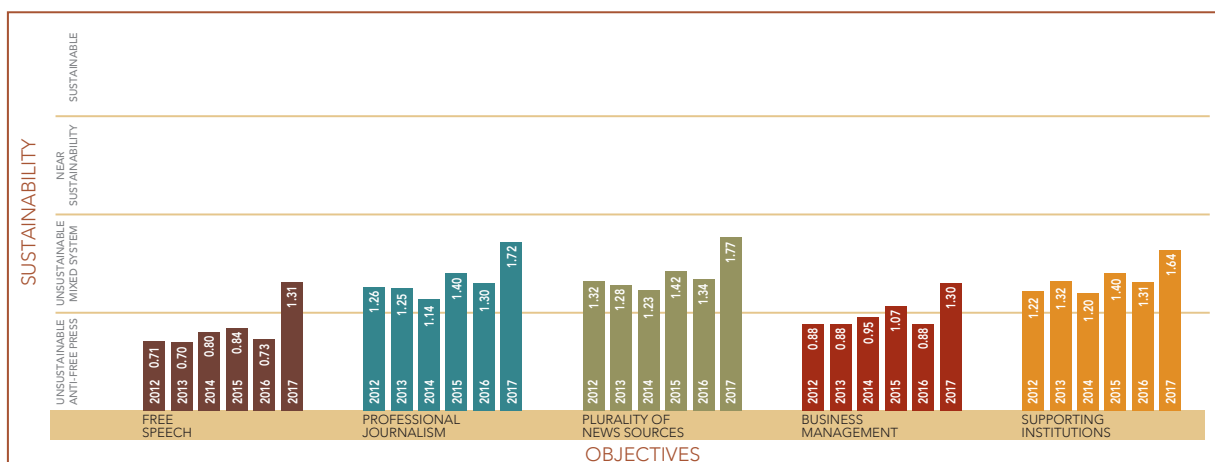
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 9,570,376 (July 2016 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Capital city:** Minsk
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Belarusian 83.7%, Russian 8.3%, Polish 3.1%, Ukrainian 1.7%, other 2.4%, unspecified 0.9% (2009 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Orthodox 48.3%, Catholic 7.1%, other 3.5%, non-believers 41.1% (2011 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Belarusian (official) 23.4%, Russian (official) 70.2%, other 3.1% (includes small Polish- and Ukrainian-speaking minorities), unspecified 3.3% (2009 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **GNI (2015-Atlas):** \$61.42 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **GNI per capita (2015-PPP):** \$16,920 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **Literacy rate:** 99.7 %; male 99.8 %, female: 99.7% (2015 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **President or top authority:** President Alexander Lukashenka (since July 20, 1994)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active media outlets:** Print: 728 newspapers, 831 journals and magazines; Radio Stations: 174; TV stations: 100 (2016, Ministry of Information)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: *Belarus Segodnia*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* (Megapolis Media advertising agency, 2016), *Respublika*, (advertising departments, 2017)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** NTV-Belarus (14.8%), ONT (13.97%), RTR-Belarus (13.27%) (December 2014, GEVS)
- > **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, 2016)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** \$95-\$100 million (2017, IAB Belarus)
- > **Internet usage:** 5.97 million (July 2015 est., CIA World Factbook)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BELARUS



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2017: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



### CHANGE SINCE 2016

▲ (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 <https://www.irex.org/msi>

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Belarus Objective Score: 1.31

The score for Objective 1 nearly doubled since last year, upgrading Belarus to an unsustainable mixed system for the first time since 2002. This is the effect of mostly unrestricted freedom of online expression, as well as less frequent persecution of journalists and bloggers. While the growth is significant, freedom of speech still has one of the lowest scores among all five objectives (only Objective 4, Business Management, scores lower).

The laws limiting free speech remain in place but are not strictly enforced. The case of Eduard Palchys, a blogger and founder of the website 1863x.com, proved that courts in Belarus are able to apply a rather mild limitation to freedom of expression despite initially strong accusations. The case attracted international attention and began in May 2016, when Russia detained and extradited Palchys at the request of the security services. In August, Minsk's Centralny District Courts agreed with a panel of experts and concluded that nine articles on the 1863x website were extremist. Human rights defenders and the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) contested<sup>1</sup> that finding. Following domestic and international pressure, the court sentenced Palchys to 21 months of "release under surveillance" but, taking into account his pre-trial detention, reduced the term to one month. Palchys was released on October 28 after 10 months in jail.

<sup>1</sup> <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/21926.html>

### 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 of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > 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 accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

In November 2016, Belarusian president Aleksander Lukashenka claimed that not "shutting down" websites had been his conscious choice, hinting that the government might pay online commentators to support its policy. "We are the freest country as far as Internet is concerned," Lukashenka said. "When attempts to stage color revolutions via the Internet were made in Belarus, many told me that we had to shut it down. But I said we should fight these people on these websites, these webpages, using their own methods. So, instead of shutting them down or restricting access for people, we worked tirelessly through social networks."

In 2016, the Ministry of Information blocked access to a number of "extremist materials." The list is openly accessible on its website and includes online resources promoting neo-Nazism, various religious studies sites, the pro-Russian nationalist website Sputnik i Pogrom, and videos that allege Ukrainian troops "crucified" the Donbas pro-Russian fighters. All of the ministry blockage decisions were based on court rulings.

The number of official warnings to media was relatively low in 2016: just 16, most of which were not content-related. A notable exception involved the independent newspaper *Vitebskiy Kurier's* website, which received a warning in December 2016 for alleged misinformation on the situation of children in foster families.

Licensing and registration of media continues to be unfair, with the government reluctant to let foreign-based Belarusian broadcasters into the local market. Officials refused to issue a permit for dissemination to European Radio for Belarus (Euroradio), an exiled broadcaster with an accredited bureau in Minsk. The permit would have opened the door to the eventual application for an FM license. Print and broadcast media alike have to pass several stages of permit-based, highly bureaucratic registration.

Online media continue to operate without any registration or permit requirements. Also, several Belsat TV channel correspondents, as representatives of the parent company TVP, received temporary accreditation from the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2016—the first time since 2007. Euroradio Bureau's accreditation in Belarus was extended also for one year.

Limitations remain in place for entry to the media market. For instance, unlike other businesses, media editorial offices cannot rent or own premises in residential houses, which would provide relief for smaller outlets that cannot afford commercial office rents. Individual entrepreneurs are not allowed to publish any media, except in online outlets. An editor-in-chief of a media outlet that applies for registration is required to have at least five years of media management experience.

The 2000 and 2004 cases of murder of journalists Dzmitry Zavadsky and Veranika Charkasava have still not been

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investigated in accordance with international standards. In 2016, few notable cases were reported on crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and media outlets. However, one incident occurred in which law enforcement assaulted two journalists, Kanstantsin Zhukouski and Pavel Dabravolski. But the state Investigative Committee has refused to open investigations of their cases, and law enforcement denied that Dabravolski’s case was journalism-related, despite the fact that he was beaten while covering a court case for the website tut.by. “It was quite peculiar that the press releases [of law enforcement agencies] called Pavel a ‘citizen,’ not a media representative,” one panelist noticed. But according to Andrei Bastunets, the truth of the case made it to the public. “[The] pressure from society forced the state TV channels to discuss the case of Pavel Dabravolski, eventually recognizing him as a journalist,” he said.

The independence of media outlets in general continues to be limited. Belarus has no true public service media outlets, and the law does not ensure state media’s editorial independence. The president appoints and dismisses editors of the biggest state media outlets. In 2016, state-owned media received \$48.5 million in subsidies, without an open contest procedure.

Libel remains criminalized, with offended parties bearing no responsibility to prove falsity and malice. Within the libel sphere, Belarus saw a positive trend, as recent court cases have ruled that owners of Internet service providers should not be punished for the content published on client websites. Three criminal code articles can be applied for defamation of the president or public officials, criminalizing insulting the president and public officials, but none of them were used in 2016. One panelist reported that her regional outlet has won several administrative cases in court, some of which were state officials accusing the outlet of libel. Others have involved private entities. “In the latest case, the State Control Committee took our side when we defended ourselves against the accusations from the director of the local ice rink,” she said.

Although the law supposedly disallows liability for journalists if facts are published correctly, the court case of the Milkavita dairy company against AP journalist Yuras Karmanau proved otherwise. In April 2016, AP ran a story about Belarusian farmers using land contaminated by nuclear fallout from the Chernobyl disaster. The story was based on the tests by a Belarusian state

laboratory that showed radioactive isotope levels to be 10 times higher than normal. Milkavita took the journalist to court. “All the facts that were used in Karmanau’s stories were proven to be true, yet the court ruled in favor of Milkavita and ordered the journalist to compensate [for] the court fees,” said one panelist.

Media still struggle to gain access to information. More than 60 state institutions can classify their information as “secret,” and access to non-classified information is also limited. As panelists mentioned, sometimes citizens’ rights to access information prevail over the rights of journalists. As such, reporters use this opportunity to request information as citizens, under the provision of the 2011 Law 300- “On inquiries by physical and legal persons.” One panelist shared his experience: “When I filed electronic requests as a Belarusian citizen, I got replies to all of them, and they were more detailed and more concrete than the replies we later received as a media organization on the same issues.” He also said that sometimes state institutions refuse to reply on the grounds that information “had already been published in other media.”

Another panelist pointed to another practice of state officials. When an independent media outlet files a request for information, the state-run media outlet then publishes the requested information and the official reply from the state institution suggests using the state media outlet as a source.

Despite the tendency to withhold information, the government has improved its speed in responding to media requests related to potentially important events or issues. In 2016, during the construction of the Astravets nuclear power plant by a Russian subcontractor, the reactor housing was damaged twice. The government took several days to respond to media inquiries about the first incident, but only hours to react to questions in the second. One panelist, the editor of a regional newspaper, noticed increasing openness in the Hrodna region. Local authorities reacted more quickly than normal to a rumor about an accident at Azot, one of Europe’s largest chemical plants. “After we and some other media outlets pointed that the delays in information about Azot and the sheer panic among people, the authorities allowed us to publish updates monitoring of the situation online,” he said.

Although ministries’ press offices are expected to deliver information, in some cases they actually serve as filters of information. A panelist gave an example of ministries’ lack of cooperation. “In 2016, the Belarusian Association of Journalists and the Belarusian Union of Journalists [BUJ] jointly organized an international conference. We wanted to invite public information officers from state institutions to discuss access to information. BUJ suggested shortening that part of the agenda since they predicted ministry representatives would not show up. Indeed, no one came.”

Legislation does not restrict access to or use of domestic and foreign news sources. In fact, due to unclear copyright definitions, many news organizations borrow stories from other outlets. Although they do not rewrite the articles, they do give credit to the original sources.

Entry to journalism remains largely unrestricted. While the enrollment process includes a personal interview with journalism faculty during entry exams, panelists noted no public cases of candidates being disqualified from journalism school based on the interview.

Only a registered media outlet can issue a press card, which is often required to prove someone's journalistic capacities. Outlets issue press cards only to full-time staff members. Online media do not have to be registered, and Belarusian laws do not recognize or protect freelance journalists, website journalists, or bloggers. Their correspondents are not entitled to officially approved press cards and instead have to rely on cards that can be questioned by authorities. Journalists working for foreign media organizations must obtain accreditation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Working without accreditation is subject to fines and other types of administrative punishments.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Belarus Objective Score: 1.72

The gap in quality between independent and state-owned media outlets remains wide. Non-state media show considerably higher standards and levels of journalism, and as such, contributed to the growth of this objective's overall score.

This year saw positive examples of rising standards in state media, including the pro-government BUJ monitoring elections coverage for the first time, and the television show *Editors Club* regularly inviting independent media editors to discuss professional standards. *Editors Club* is broadcast by Belarus 1, a state channel, and is hosted by Belarusian State Television and Radio Company chairman Henadz Davydzka.

Still, the dominance of state-controlled media, varying degrees of self-censorship, and the popularity of politicized and unbalanced reporting on certain independent platforms prevent Belarusian journalism from meeting high professional standards. Many independent media outlets offer fair and objective reporting. But given their limited access to information, they have difficulty providing well-sourced stories related to public administration.

Both the independent BAJ and the pro-state BUJ have professional codes of ethics. But only BAJ runs regular meetings of the Ethical Standards Commission, which reviews possible violations and complaints. In 2016, the independent newspaper

*Nasha Niva* contested decisions from the commission, due to lack of trust in the chairperson. But in general, media members follow commission recommendations.

Hate speech was one of the main violations of professional ethical standards in 2016. Monitoring by Mediakritika.by in the first half of 2016 found that hate speech was present in state-run media (such as *Belorussiya*) or Russian-owned media (*Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi*) more often than in Belarus-based independent media. Stories describing the refugee crisis in Western Europe and stories about "social aspects" of life often included hate speech.

Among independent media outlets analyzed by Mediakritika.by, youth-oriented Kyky.org had the most instances of hate speech. The leading private portal Tut.by used hate speech only three times in three months in 2016. In monitoring of LGBTI coverage, the Journalists for Tolerance initiative found from July 2015 to June 2016, 315 stories related to LGBTI topics ran in 22 Belarusian media outlets. Nearly half of them contained elements of hate speech. "As in the previous period, state media are much more negative in their coverage of LGBTI issues and publish LGBTI-related stories much less frequently than independent ones," the monitoring report claimed. The state-run regional newspaper *Vecherniy Mogilev* was the worst of all the outlets examined in using harsh language to describe LGBTI people.

Not all ethnic minorities receive fair coverage in Belarusian media. One panelist gave examples. "Journalists—especially those from Western regions of Belarus—report on Poles in a fair manner. But this attitude changes for media representatives from all parts of Belarus and all types of media when they write about the Roma population. The participants of the study courses held in Minsk openly claimed they did not want to create a 'positive image' of Roma communities."

Still, some media outlets, such as the independent portal Citidog.by, dedicate a considerable amount of time to fight stereotypes about ethnic and other minorities in Belarus. According to a content analysis of regional publications from Paval Bykouski, a consultant and media trainer from Deutsche Welle, the word "gypsies" made a notable comeback in 2016 after being largely absent in 2014 and 2015. In his opinion, new reporters coming to work in the regional press may not be always aware of the ethical standards used by their older colleagues.

Many, but not all, journalists and editors of independent media outlets admit that self-censorship occurs. Some point out that it does not happen uniformly. As one panelist put it, "We do not have any self-censorship issues. In fact, since I became editor-in-chief in August 2016, I've sent a story to the lawyer for a pre-publication check only once, and we ran the

story quickly after clearance.” He explained that rather than self-censoring, his media outlet will sometimes embargo certain information or refrain from publishing stories when they cannot be fact-checked properly. He did share that in 2016, one of his journalists faced pressure from another country. “Our reporter was approached by Ukrainian secret services after we ran his story on war prisoners from the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Under pressure, he decided to stop writing on that topic. But that does not mean that we, as a media outlet, will refrain from covering it,” he said.

A media lawyer present at the panel noted that many independent news outlets that seek legal advice on content often elect for stricter limitations of their coverage than advised. “Editors would send me an inquiry about a story they intend to run, and I provide them with wording that is sufficient and safe under current law. But when I see the story published, it is much more ‘toothless’ than I suggested. To me, that’s a clear sign of self-censorship,” said the attorney.

Panelists cited another example of self-censorship: Some regional and local media outlets were unwilling to report on anything related to the 2016 parliamentary election. Presumably, coverage was not an editorial priority, despite the election being of local and national importance. But as one panelist asserted, “In fact, they were just reluctant to cover controversial issues.”

Media do report on key events and issues, but stories often lack scope and completeness or are not original reporting. According to one panelist, “The main content producers are news agencies, state media, and some foreign media that have enough resources for such content production. Other media outlets often aggregate content or rewrite content produced by others. This negatively impacts the quality of journalism.”

Panel participants noted that leading media outlets present the same topic almost identically, with little to no attempt at expanding the depth of coverage or approaching the story from another angle. One said that due to a combination of political and economic factors, “editorial teams can dedicate only limited resources to in-depth investigative reporting. There is a trend of producing more light entertainment or ‘tabloid-type’ content.”

Local state-owned media are being cautious in their own reporting, even if nationally important events happen in their region. One panelist gave the example of the Chechen refugees in Brest, a city near the Polish border. “The *Brest Courier* newspaper ran a story about those refugees—the whole page. However, it took the main story from the BELTA news agency about refugees receiving vaccine shots, and did not explain what those people were doing in Belarus, where they wanted to go, and what threatened them at home. Next to it, a TASS news agency story from Russia was reprinted, with Chechen leader Ramsan Kadyrov saying refugees had nothing to fear at home but they better not return. Again, no context was given and no

human rights defenders were interviewed. The only local piece of content by the newspaper was a photo,” he said.

The poor coverage of human rights topics can be explained partially by the hiring of new employees in well-established newsrooms. Some of these journalists lack understanding of the issue of human rights.

The level of pay in the sector has suffered the same decline as the Belarusian economy in general. Media outlets have to compete with non-media businesses for qualified staffers. “Our salaries dropped 17 percent in 2016, caused both by the worsening economic situation and legislation changes,” one panelist said. “Last year, the amended tax legislation forbade enterprises with legal professionals among its founders to receive tax benefits. As a result, we had to pay higher taxes and cut wages.”

Large Internet portals such as Tut.by or Onliner.by dominate the media market by offering more lucrative salaries to regional journalists. National outlets poach the best regional reporters, so the quality of regional outlets drops. Another gap in income is between the leading journalists at state-owned and foreign media and the journalists at local, independent media outlets. Many regional and some Minsk-based independent journalists look for side jobs with foreign media, risking prosecution for working without accreditation.

Russian television channels provide largely entertainment programming, and the content is included into several Belarusian channels available to the population as part of the “social” package. Radio broadcasting has a significant disproportion between entertainment and news. Commercial FM stations—many owned partially by state bodies—pay little attention to national news and rely heavily on entertainment shows. A panelist confirmed that “entertainment content often

## 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.
- > 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 exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

prevails. Belarus-based FM stations have almost no original news content, except, perhaps, Novoe Radio, which is owned by trade unions, and Russkoe Radio.”

The difficult economic situation makes it challenging for newsrooms to upgrade technical facilities for improved production and distribution. As such, distribution via the Internet becomes an increasingly attractive option for startups, such as *Imena* magazine. Since its inception in April 2016, it has targeted only online audiences.

Niche journalism is underdeveloped. Given the combination of economic constraints and limited access to information, investigative journalism is relatively unpopular with media managers.

Economic and business journalism is often based on press releases. Many are rewritten and presented as if they were journalistic pieces on the economy. This practice prevents audiences from understanding the essence of the issues. One panelist said that PRIME-TASS and Doingbusiness.by are two outlets that write original material, but “their stories are written to target specialized audiences and not the general public.”

Another panelist pointed out several other problems with business reporting. “In general, Belarusian journalists who write about the economy often do so not because they know a lot about the topic, but because their editors-in-chief assign them with the task in the absence of a specialized reporter. Another factor that contributes to the weakness of business journalism is the lack of interest in the subject by the regional press. As a result, there is no competition and no incentive to develop,” he said.

An example of the disinterest is the 2015 split of *Belorusy i Rynok* into two separate entities. The change lowered the quality of both, and dispersed the audience of this once-influential business weekly.

One panelist noted an increase in the quality and specialization of NGO publications, especially those dealing with gender and the environment. However, major media outlets in general do not to cover these topics. When they do, they tend to quote “pseudo-experts,” failing to utilize NGO publications or authors as sources as often as they could.

Some media outlets experiment with thematic journalism. *Imena* magazine pioneered “socially responsible” journalism, combining human-interest stories with the crowdfunding platform Talaka.by. This cooperation helped finance the ideas and initiatives described in the magazine’s articles. Citydog.by ran a series of stories on ethnic minorities living in Minsk under the common title of “Diaspora,” and Journal.by became the media partner for the “Live Library” series, where minority representatives talk about their lives and problems in the “live book” format. Euroradio recorded a series of stories about

the Ukrainians who moved to Belarus seeking escape from the military conflict in the eastern part of their country.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Belarus Objective Score: 1.77

In 2016, Belarusians’ access to multiple news sources increased, due to the relative freedom of online media and the growing access to the Internet, including social media. At the same time, Belarusians’ access to impartial and diverse news is limited significantly by many factors. The media sector lacks independent in-country television or radio broadcasters, and is dominated by Russia-originated news content. The state-owned, non-pluralistic Belarusian traditional media have a monopoly. And economic constraints continue to undermine independent media and their coverage of socially relevant topics.

According to the Belarus Ministry of Information, citizens have access to multiple sources of news and information. Belarus has 728 domestic newspapers, 831 magazines and journals, 100 television programs, 174 radio channels/programs (including 30 FM stations), and nine news agencies. While more than 200 foreign television channels are rebroadcast, a significant share of them are from Russia. The overall quantity of outlets does not translate into a variety of viewpoints within the Belarusian media landscape.

The Internet remains the only true pluralistic environment for Belarusian media. However, despite the growing number of users, the Internet has not become a primary source of daily information for the majority of consumers. Meanwhile, the traditional media sphere remains dominated by media with little to no diversity in the coverage of social and political topics.

The law places no special restrictions on citizen access to domestic or international media. However, independent broadcast media are subject to unequal registration conditions, and the print media face economic discrimination, thus limiting the plurality of news sources for those who do not have access to high-speed Internet.

A positive trend that panelists observed in 2016 was the increased affordability of mobile Internet. According to the Google Connected Consumer Survey, 59 percent of Belarusians own smartphones; for those under 35, the share balloons to 89 percent. Major cellphone operators offer unlimited Internet and data packages starting at \$13 per month (or 3 percent of the average monthly salary, which reached \$400 per month in December 2016). In late 2016, high-speed mobile LTE/4G Internet became available outside the capital city.

Those without Internet access can only watch independent television broadcast via satellite, meaning an additional financial



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

### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge 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.

investment in a satellite dish. Television remains an important medium; 72.2 percent of Belarusians watch it every day, with an average viewing time of 3 hours and 46 minutes.

State media largely reflect the views of the government, with opposition politicians or independent media receiving little to no positive mentions. The Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (part of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) noted the discrepancy in its media monitoring conducted during the 2016 parliamentary elections. It found that "monitored state TV channels dedicated 82 percent of their coverage to the President and government officials and 17 percent to the Central Election Commission Chairperson, whereas candidates altogether received 1 percent of primetime political coverage and were only mentioned collectively with no reference to individuals. A similar tendency was noted on the state-owned Radio 1 channel. In contrast, the monitored private media, including main online media, provided comprehensive and diverse information on campaign activities and election contestants."

Still, local state-controlled outlets attempt to address social issues, criticize local governments, and inspire change. An example is local authorities participating in phone-in shows that are hosted by state-owned newspapers, broadcasters, and websites. As one panelist explained, "The official policy of the Belarusian state underlines the importance of 'ordinary people' and their problems. Direct lines and vox pops flourished in 2016. Each week, state officials had direct phone-in lines with the population, facilitated by the local state-run press. In this way, the state shows that it is concerned. If someone's problem is featured in a state-run regional newspaper, that person has high chances of getting some social justice." One reason for that, according to another panelist, is the presidential decree that

"obligates state officials to react on publications in state-owned media."

According to the panelists, in 2016, national television channels aired significantly more impartial and fact-based reports on events in eastern and southern Ukraine than in previous years. According to one panelist who regularly monitors television news content, "the state-run TV news was more balanced, probably due to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Initially, Belarusian state media were not sure how to cover this topic. Now they offer very balanced and careful coverage of the Minsk peace process and avoid hate speech. One could see it in both the news bulletins and hosts' introductions to the news. The situation on the Poland-based exiled channel Belsat TV was different: hosts allowed themselves emotionally charged comments, and news bulletins had more hate speech. It does not mean that state TV news has become impeccable, but their quality has improved."

No new news agencies were registered in Belarus in 2016. BelaPAN is still the main independent source of news for media outlets. Only four news agencies (BelaPAN, BelTA, Interfax-Zapad, and Prime-TASS) sell newswire services to other media. BelTA and BelaPAN are domestic media organizations, while Interfax-Zapad and Prime-TASS, which is linked to the news agency PRIME, are Russian-owned. On average, domestic news agencies charge approximately \$300 per month for daily news updates and twice as much for real time and hourly news alerts. Apart from newswire services and news websites, BelaPAN and BelTA offer photos, multimedia stories, and infographics. Additionally, BelaPAN sells thematic analytical reviews on a variety of topics and BelTA publishes a weekly newspaper and an economic magazine. BelTA also builds and maintains websites for local state media and government agencies. Economic difficulties often force independent media to cut their subscriptions to news agencies, including national news wires.

Private media have increased their own news production volume. They are led by Tut.by and Onliner.by portals, which each have more than 25 million sessions per month, according to Similarweb.com. Both portals are not strictly news outlets and offer other services, including e-mail and online shopping. Among other leading producers of original news, the foreign-based Euroradio, Radio Free Europe, and Belsat TV tend to have more resources than non-foreign news outlets, and as such produce more original content. According to one panelist, "In 2016, more Belarus-based media outlets produced their own, unique content, providing their own take on events." However, media tend to give space to alternate views in separate stories and news pieces, rather than inside one story. This might leave the impression their news coverage is not well sourced or representative of different viewpoints, panelists said.

Private media ownership is not concentrated, although the government owns a substantial amount, with more than 600 news outlets. Under Belarusian law, foreigners cannot own more than 20 percent of the shares in a private Belarusian media company. However, the leading Russian television channels are registered in Belarus as Belarusian entities. For instance, the RTR-Belarus channel operates on the basis of a license agreement between CTV (a channel owned by Minsk City Administration) and RTR-Planeta channel, and mostly rebroadcasts the programming of the Russian state television channel Rossiya 1.

Overall, media are still far from reflecting a broad spectrum of social interests. Panelists pointed to the habit of aggregating and recycling the same texts in order to decrease the cost of news production and increase web traffic. They also mentioned the habit of following a unilateral approach in covering the same topics. “The news picture of the day is often the same for both state and non-state media outlets,” a panelist said. “This makes it difficult for audiences to distinguish between different media. Notable exceptions are long reads, such as Citidog.by’s feature on Tatars in Minsk, but that’s a niche media outlet. Media with a mass audience tend to concentrate on the same topics.”

A couple panelists referred to the recent subject of alternative civilian service (versus military service) to illustrate the media’s shortage of expertise. “In November 2016, in response to the Ministry of Labor, the parliament announced that 11 people in Belarus completed alternative civilian service. But this number was in conflict with data from the freely available alternative sources. For instance, Jehovah’s Witnesses claimed 50 people applied for alternative service in Belarus. However, since the topic of alternative service was not followed regularly by the media, they did not have the expertise to contest the news coming from parliament and mostly presented it in the ‘he said–she said’ way,” one said. The other commented, “When civil society organizations lead some campaigns, there are plenty of experts and spokespersons on a certain topic. But when they get another priority, suddenly we can’t find even a single expert on the alternative service in Belarus who would be able to comment on the parliament’s announcement.”

Other “seasonal” topics that do not have regular coverage are the death penalty (Belarus is the only European country that continues applying this penalty) and HIV/AIDS.

Media in the languages of ethnic minorities did not become more accessible in 2016. It is important to note that the Belarusian language, despite being an official language alongside Russian, is not actively promoted by the government in education, culture, or the media sphere.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the language of the titular nation’s majority can be considered a

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/133624/ECMI\\_WP\\_50\\_Final.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/133624/ECMI_WP_50_Final.pdf)

minority language, while the language of the actual minority, Russian, dominates. The most notable media startup of 2016, *Imena* magazine, chose Russian as its main language. The only television channel fully operational in Belarusian, the Poland-based TV Belsat, came to the brink of closure in 2016 after the government of Poland announced budget cuts and a “modernization” of this broadcaster. This prompted Belarusian elites to act in solidarity with the channel and its workers by writing letters of support and official requests to the Polish government to continue funding.

At the same time, according to Polish official sources, Belarusian authorities hinted at the possibility of including the Polish-language TV Polonia into Belarusian cable networks. In 2005 it had disappeared from the Belarusian broadcasting scene. Poles constitute a significant ethnic minority in Belarus, but more than 400,000 people are not served with broadcasts in their language. More than 270,000 Ukrainians also do not have any television channel or radio program available in Ukrainian, despite the promise of the Belarusian government in 2014 to include the Ukrainian public broadcaster in its cable package.

Belarusian media focus primarily on domestic issues. While many outlets cover international affairs, they often rely on Russian media, republishing that coverage. Original reporting on events in neighboring countries is irregular, and constrained by poor financial and human resources for independent media and different editorial priorities for state media. In 2016, in attempt to increase the amount and quality of information coming from the region, some Belarusian media began contributing to the newly established Russian-language News Exchange in Prague. The company facilitates the sharing and joint production of stories by independent media outlets in seven post-Soviet countries. However, it is still too early to judge the impact of the effort.

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Belarus Objective Score: 1.30

The overwhelming majority of media in Belarus are either directly owned by the state or co-owned by state enterprises. State ownership implies governmental subsidies and benefits. Those without support from the state have to survive in a situation of economic discrimination. Advertising in traditional media has continued to shrink, further worsening the situation for independent media. Newspaper circulations continue to fall, while Internet versions fail to compensate for the revenue losses. International donor support to media in Belarus is also decreasing due to the re-prioritization of donor funding. Distribution of traditional media outlets remains monopolized at the national level, and online projects rarely get income sufficient enough to cover the cost of news production. Media

projects have started crowdfunding, but this remains an exception rather than a trend.

Media outlets are far from operating as self-sustaining enterprises. Neither state nor independent media disclose financial statistics that would allow observers to evaluate performance. The state-run subscription and distribution systems Belposhta and Belsajuzdruk are a strong tool to gauge influence on private media, given that being excluded from their catalogues means serious losses for any media outlet.

Several panelists said that the difficult economic conditions are the reason why media are reluctant to invest more in professional sales and marketing staff. According to one, “Even rather big non-state online media outlets do not employ marketing specialists or analysts of statistical data and programmers because it is too expensive.” Another commented, “While it is true that many newsrooms lack resources to employ such specialists, a bigger problem is that many media do not prioritize the search for revenues. Some media outlets that are financed by the state prioritize the content, which the government would like, not the buyers. So, they are not interested in whether they have advertising and subscriptions or not. Other media do not have advertising or state revenues, but receive donor funding, so they are also not too interested in circulation numbers or advertising.” The panelists also said that media outlets decide not to hire dedicated advertising personnel and instead outsource this function to specialized agencies.

Several experts observed the growing circulation of the newspaper *SN Plus*. It does not employ staff journalists, has no advertising or subscriptions, and is sold only in Belsajuzdruk kiosks. This outlet specializes in opinion columns and reprints from the most popular articles in other independent media outlets. The paper mentions the authors but does not pay any royalties or honoraria, possibly because of the copyright laws that allow quoting as long as the republishing outlet credits the original source.

The situation is different for the *Vechernii Grodno* newspaper, a private business whose founders demand revenues. This regional newspaper remains profitable and made a conscious choice to employ a financial director to support its operations. Professional advice on changing the distribution network helped the outlet to increase profits despite a drop in circulation. “We restructured the distribution department and strengthened quality control, making sure that we closely monitor how our newspaper is sold. This investment yielded positive results,” one panelist said.

Panelists also cited professional training programs offered by BAJ, Mediakritika.by, and Press Club Belarus as important sources of knowledge on different sources of revenue. Still, many regional media do not develop their business departments. As a regional editor-in-chief said, “In marketing,

we more often rely on our intuition and understanding of processes than on paid research.”

Most outlets have several sources of revenue, but the majority of them shrank in 2016. The exception is state-supported media. The government subsidizes them directly and provides indirect support in the form of tax breaks and rent payments. State-imposed press subscriptions continue to bolster the circulation of many state newspapers. Moreover, due to subsidies, they are able to undersell their privately owned competitors.

Advertising sales are essential for private outlets. But according to one panelist, “Advertisers do not hide that they are advised not to place ads in non-state media. Some media outlets, such as *Narodnaya Volya*, do not have any advertising at all, despite having a relatively high circulation and being present in state distribution networks. On the other hand, some local newspapers do not have access to state distribution but are able to use their advertising quota in full.”

Newspapers also depend on copy sales, and local media outlets rely heavily on publishing personal messages, such as birthday greetings or congratulations. In some cases, media are supported by owners’ revenues from other businesses, such as copy shops and kiosks and publishing services. Alternatively, grants from foreign donors sustain some outlets. However, donor funding to support independent media in Belarus shrank drastically in 2016 due to their changing priorities.

In 2016, two media outlets in Belarus successfully used crowdfunding to support their activities. *Nasha Niva* ran a campaign on the crowdfunding platform talaka.by in December 2016 to support its investigative journalism projects. While the newspaper set a modest goal of collecting \$5,000, it raised more than \$8,000 from 295 contributors. After a successful launch in

## INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > 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 at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

April 2016, the online start-up *Imena* decided to pay for its small team of professional journalists via crowdfunding and managed to collect more than \$20,000 from more than 400 contributors. Unlike *Nasha Niva*, *Imena* offers its supporters the opportunity to become “co-investors” of the outlet. It also publicly accounts for how the received donations were spent.

Distribution of printed media in supermarket chains is yet another way to receive revenues that became popular in 2016. Some regional independent outlets received up to 70 percent of their retail revenue from this distribution channel this past year.

In some cases, local media are too slow to absorb changes. As one panelist explained, “Back in 2011, regional news outlets were advised to create a joint system of classified advertising. In 2016, the United Mass Media association of regional press approached me, willing to implement that idea. But it was too late, since other platforms, such as Kufar.by, had already occupied that niche.” Some local outlets are on the opposite end of the spectrum and are quicker than bigger media in adapting to the changing advertising reality. In recent years, the Minsk-based websites Citidog.by and Kaktutzhit.by have made a breakthrough in native advertising.

This year showed positive trends among advertising agencies. The Belarusian-Ukrainian company AdMixer, founded in 2015, bought the Belarus-based Internet advertising company MediaCode. Currently, the company offers Internet advertising on websites that reach more than 90 percent of Belarusian users. AdMixer is an authorized partner of the DoubleClick AdExchange service of Google in Belarus. It sells advertising in traditional media as well as on mobile platforms and social media.

Belarusian law restricts the volume of advertising to 30 percent in newspapers and magazines (25 percent in state-owned titles). For radio and television, the volume is limited to 20 percent, including no more than 16 minutes per hour between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. Advertising-only outlets are exempt from this rule. Online media have no limitations in the volume of advertising. However, online media outlets that wish to sell advertisements for Belarusian services and businesses are requested to host their websites on servers within Belarus, per the 2010 President’s Decree No 60.

State subsidies continue to be distributed in a non-transparent way and without competition. As stated above, state-supported media enjoy tax, printing, and distribution benefits. According to official sources, the 2016 state budget allocated \$48 million for the operation of state media, with two-thirds designated for broadcasting media.<sup>3</sup>

Market and audience research is quite scarce. Most media do not have resources to contract specialized online audience research. “Last year, tut.by and *Komsomolskaya Pravda v*

<sup>3</sup> <https://news.tut.by/economics/480119.html>

Another commented, “While it is true that many newsrooms lack resources to employ such specialists, a bigger problem is that many media do not prioritize the search for revenues. Some media outlets that are financed by the state prioritize the content, which the government would like, not the buyers.”

*Belorussii* were among the very limited number of newsrooms in Belarus that could afford to subscribe to full data of Gemius Internet audience research,” one panelist said.

Television channels order broadcast rankings data, which are not disclosed publicly. “In other countries, we can find information about the rankings of a given media outlet. But in Belarus, one can rely only on fragmented data,” a panelist said.

Circulation numbers are available on each copy of a print publication but can be found online only in the advertising kits of selected media. The Ministry of Information maintains data on the circulations of all Belarusian press, and issues warnings if published data are not true, but does not release this information on its website. Internet statistics can be purchased from the agency Gemius, but otherwise, the independently-run Akavita.by remains the only in-country open source for comparable statistics. Many media choose to use Similarweb.com to compare their performance with competitors. The digital marketing agency Ashwood Creative publishes the rankings of Belarusian media brands on its Facebook page, but no other social media pages post open data on the popularity of media brands.

In 2016, the Lithuania-registered Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies stopped operating in Belarus. The closure came after the manager of its interviewers network was arrested in Belarus, accused of conducting polls and publishing results without official approval.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Belarus Objective Score: 1.64

In 2016, Belarusian media received professional support from established as well as relatively new supporting institutions. While access to traditional media distribution facilities and professional equipment remains at a low level, media professionals can use new channels of distribution via the Internet. Professional courses and short-term education,

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

### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

including data journalism and new approaches to media management, enriched and embraced new technologies and introduced new topics relevant for the changing media landscape.

Trade associations of newspaper publishers, television broadcasters, cable operators, and print distributors exist in Belarus, but cannot be regarded as influential players, according to the panelists. United Mass Media represents 14 regional independent newspaper publishers from all regions in Belarus except Homiel. This represents a growth in both quality and reach compared to 2015. The Telecommunications Industry Union has 88 members, mostly state-supported local television stations and cable operators. The Union of Publishers and Press Distributors has nine full members (seven state-owned press distribution companies and two private enterprises) and 16 more affiliated members (printing houses and newspaper publishers). These organizations mostly provide networking and learning opportunities for their members, attempt to sell advertising in bulk, and purchase newsprint and programming rights.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists and the Belarusian Union of Journalists both aim to protect journalists' rights and promote quality journalism. BAJ boasts around 1200 members, while BUJ claims about 2000 members. The scope of these organizations' influence is limited, however. "None of them is registered as a journalistic trade union or entitled to sign collective labor agreements, so they cannot protect journalists in labor disputes. This is especially painful in times of job cuts in the newsrooms," a panelist explained.

According to another panelist, "Every three years, around 300 new members join BAJ, mostly young people active online, while old members leave, either due to age or due to a change of profession." BAJ is a member of the International Federation of Journalists and the Reporters Without Borders

network. In 2016, BAJ became a permanent member of IFEX, a global network of non-governmental organizations that defends and promotes freedom of expression. BAJ provides legal and professional support to its members and organizes free educational programs, with the help of the International Federation of Journalists and the Sweden-based Fojo Media Institute. In 2016, BAJ and BUJ found common ground in discussing ethical challenges in journalism and co-organized an international conference: "Professional Ethics: Challenges and Solutions."

Belarus has a professional association of sports media, chaired by the press secretary of the National Olympic Committee. Together with the state, the association organizes training courses and grants annual rewards to the best sports journalists.

While not being a professional association, Press Club Belarus was founded by 23 journalists, editors, and publishers from independent Belarusian media in 2011 and registered in 2015. The organization defines itself as a "platform for the professional growth of the media community" and is registered as "a cultural and educational institution." It plays an important role in promoting quality journalism, organizing workshops and lectures from foreign media managers and specialists and running an analytical journalism school.

Free speech and media independence are on the agendas of leading human rights NGOs. In addition to BAJ, human rights defenders Viasna and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee most frequently react to violations of freedom of expression and provide legal defense and publicity. Among civil society organizations, media freedoms are rarely part of sector campaigns or discussions. However, in December 2016, the Belarusian National Platform of Civil Society wrote an official letter to the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs asking to prevent the closure of TV Belsat.

BAJ offers educational opportunities for journalists, including skills training in photo and video journalism, introduction to data journalism, political journalism, and economics and financial reporting. The courses combine online and offline studies and take place both in Belarus and neighboring countries.

The Belarusian State University (BSU) remains the leading institution offering journalism degree programs. Its Minsk-based Journalism Institute offers courses in print, broadcast, and online journalism, as well as editing, media management, literary work, and international journalism. Currently, 1,250 students are enrolled. BSU's curriculum envisages internships in newsrooms for students in order to introduce them to the realities of media work. However, in general, state-provided education is criticized as "too theoretical" and too dependent on state ideology. State universities in Brest, Homiel, Hrodna, and Viciebsk, as well as several private institutes in Minsk, offer some limited journalism training.

The exiled European Humanities University in Vilnius, Lithuania, offers a bachelor's specialization in new media (previously called mass media and journalism). The curriculum focuses on "educating professional journalists to work in print and electronic mass media (radio, television, internet media) and be specialists in the spheres of media planning, media management, advertising and PR."

In 2016, short-term training for journalists became more centered in Minsk, not in neighboring countries. The Press Club and the Belarusian-German International Educational Center's Media School joined BAJ in organizing courses and workshops on various aspects of media management and journalism activities. In November 2016, the Media School organized the first Belarusian media management forum under the title "Media // Management // Future" together with Deutsche Welle Akademie. Both BAJ and BUJ, as well as several other Belarusian NGOs, supported the forum.

Not all panelists regard short-term training as effective. One said that he could not see any significant upgrade in the skills of his journalists who regularly underwent such training. Meanwhile, another underlined the importance of short-term training in redefining her media outlet's distribution strategy. With regard to BAJ's offerings, a third panelist said that participants value training programs that are recurring. "We get positive reviews of courses where participants meet every weekend for one or two months and work on assignments in between," he explained.

Access to printing plants and sources of newsprint remains politicized and strictly controlled by the government, with printing houses belonging mostly to the state. Regional printing houses may refuse to print independent media outlets, as is the case for the newspapers *Borisovskie Novosti* and *Gazeta Slonimskaya*. However, the panel's experts could not recall any outlets refusing to print in 2016. Most newspapers are printed domestically and at the state-run printing plants. Price discrimination against privately owned newspapers continues to be a common practice. Private media are required to make down payments, while state media can print on credit. Additionally, Belarusian law holds owners of printing facilities responsible for the content of printed materials they produce, and printing equipment must be registered at the Ministry of Information.

Distribution channels continue to be restricted and monopolized for traditional media. The government controls press and broadcast distribution channels. Belsajuzdruk, a state network of around 1,500 newspaper kiosks, is the main retail distributor. Press subscriptions are handled by the state postal monopoly Belposhta. "Eleven non-state media have problems with access either to Belposhta or Belsajuzdruk or both," Bastunets asserted. These media have to rely on their own distribution systems, as well as on sales at private shops. Since 2015, the

state has heavily regulated the distribution of media that it does not publish. Distributors have to enter a special state register and take responsibility for monitoring the content of media outlets they disseminate. They also can receive official warnings from the Ministry of Information, discouraging independent distributors from dispensing media outlets that are excluded from the state system. Additionally, newsrooms that create their own independent systems of distribution are discouraged from selling the media products of their colleagues that may not have such systems in place.

Digital subscriptions remain insignificant. Almost all television and radio broadcasting equipment is state-owned. Private companies own most cable television networks, but the government approves the list of channels included in the packages, which is published on the Ministry of Information's website.

The access to ICT has increased, with Minsk leading the way. A growing number of Belarusians use video streaming and IPTV, although their share is still relatively small. This may be related to slow growth of broadband video access and a gap between urban and rural citizens with Internet access. According to the Belarusian Statistical Committee data published in June 2016, 62.2 percent of Belarusians have access to Internet, and Internet penetration in the cities is 67.5 percent, compared to 47.4 percent in rural areas. Only 31.5 percent of Belarusians have access to a fixed broadband connection. However, the national Internet provider and monopoly Beltelecom is expanding fiber optics Internet connection to the rural areas in order to address this disproportion.

Now at 99 percent digital, nearly all of Belarus has access to the television broadcasting that replaced analog broadcasting. The penetration of 3G is nearly universal, with 4G growing increasingly popular. In 2016, the leading mobile operator Velcom acquired one of the biggest private Internet providers, Atlant Telecom, with the aim of offering better services to mobile and stationary Internet users. However, one panelist said that "access to ICT is not universal. Regional journalists who participated in my trainings often claimed it was too expensive for them to watch a study video on their mobile phones, and they would watch it back in their newsroom. It was also difficult for them to imagine that they would regularly post video content from their phones on social media for the same economic reason."

## List of Panel Participants

*IREX protects the identity of the panelists who agreed to participate this study. Amendments to the criminal code include an article, "Discrediting the Republic of Belarus," that provides for criminal liability for giving international organizations "false information" about the country.*

The panel discussion was convened on January 5, 2017.