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BELARUS

The political situation in Belarus, and its relations with the outside world, saw substantial deterioration. The year ended with violent crackdowns against the opposition, civil society, and media because of their protests against the December elections that saw Alexander Lukashenka declared the winner under dubious conditions.

Earlier in the year, Belarus's relations with Russia—its closest ally and most important trading partner—deteriorated further. Moscow faulted Lukashenka for renegeing on promises to form a customs union with Russia and Kazakhstan, recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and sell key enterprises to Russian investors. In summer 2010, Russia banned dairy products from Belarus and accused Lukashenka publicly of usurping power, repressing the opposition and the media, and murdering his opponents. Although Russian television channels are censored in Belarus, many Belarusians saw the documentaries on the Internet.

Lukashenka continued to try to woo the West to counterbalance his overdependence on Moscow. The European Union promised more aid if the presidential elections were free and fair. Election rules were somewhat relaxed, and nine opposition candidates were allowed to register. The government invited the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to monitor the election. Many hoped this time the government would refrain from an outright crackdown on the opposition and civil society.

They were wrong. Ten days before the vote, Lukashenka agreed to join the Russia-Kazakhstan customs union and secured a deal with Russia that once again gave him subsidized gas and oil, necessary to fuel the Soviet-era state enterprises that ensure nearly full employment.

Official election results gave Lukashenka 80 percent of the vote, deemed improbable by most observers. OSCE declared the election neither free nor democratic. Thousands of opposition supporters took to the streets to protest and were met by riot police and plainclothes agents who violently dispersed the crowd. Approximately 700 demonstrators were detained and given brief prison sentences. Dozens of journalists were attacked and some briefly detained; the KGB raided homes and offices of journalists to seize equipment and footage related to coverage of the protests. Lukashenka told a press conference he had thwarted a revolution and promised there would be no "brainless democracy." He also vowed to "reform the Internet" and warned journalists that they should "stop jeering at the authorities and the people."

The year 2011 is not shaping up to be a good one, the panel agreed. Repressions continue as this report was written. Political opposition, civil society, and independent media feel intimidated. Belarus's independent journalism will survive, yet many might suffer.

BELARUS AT A GLANCE

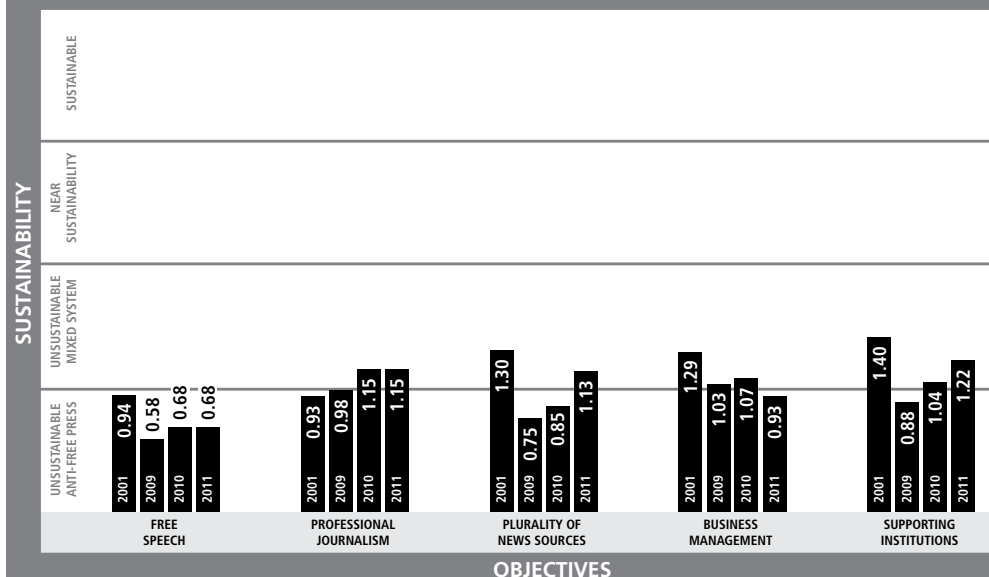
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 9,577,552 (July 2011 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) 36.7%, Russian (official) 62.8%, other 0.5% (includes small Polish- and Ukrainian-speaking minorities) (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2009-Atlas):** \$53.70 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **GNI per capita (2009-PPP):** \$12,740 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **Literacy rate:** 99.6% (male: 99.8%, female: 99.4%) (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Alexander Lukashenka (since July 20, 1994)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, and television stations:** 1,320 publications including 653 newspapers (9 regular dailies), 623 magazines and journals, 36 bulletins, and 7 catalogues; 157 radio stations (2 nationwide); 77 television stations (6 nationwide) (Belarus Ministry of Information, 2010)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** The top three newspapers by circulation are *Sovietskaya Byelorussia* (state-owned, 2,000,000 weekly circulation), *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* (independent, 561,000 weekly circulation), *Respublika* (state-owned, 240,000 weekly circulation) (Medusa Advertising Agency December 2010)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** The top three by audience share are ONT (16.2%, state-owned), NTV-Belarus (16.0%, Russian-owned, broadcasting state-controlled), RTR-Belarus (11.3%, Russian-owned, broadcasting state-controlled) (GEVS, September 2010)
- > **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, 2010)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** \$97 million (\$58 million television, \$14 million press, \$7.6 million Internet, \$5.4 million radio) (ZenithOptimedia advertising group, December 2010)
- > **Internet usage:** 3.3 million (Gemius, August 2010)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BELARUS



Scores for all years may be found online at http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_mscores.xls

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.

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.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Belarus Objective Score: 0.68

The score for freedom of speech is exactly the same as it was last year. Most of the indicators’ scores remained the same; only indicator 1 (legal and social protections for free speech) lost a little ground while indicator 3 (media market entry and tax structure) gained a little. As with last year, indicator 8 (restrictions on media access to and use of news sources) was the sole outlier, scoring about three-quarters of a point higher than the objective score while all other indicators scored well within half a point.

Freedom of speech in Belarus is protected by the law—first, the constitution and second, the media law. They both provide for the freedom of opinions and beliefs and their free expression. Censorship, unlawful restriction of media activities, and monopolization of the media are expressly banned. However, the panelists noted these provisions are hardly enforced.

Both local and foreign civic groups condemned the media law adopted in 2008 as severely restrictive, citing the government’s extended powers to penalize media even for minor violations and fewer safeguards for the journalists and the media. A vague requirement of “compliance with reality” was introduced and accreditation rules for journalists tightened. Papers have received notices that their stories are not in compliance “with reality.”

Other laws restrain freedom of speech. The law on civil service restricts access to public information, as the media can obtain official information only via press officers or top officials of governmental bodies. The criminal code offers greater protections for top government officials, most notably the president. Defamation is criminalized. The vaguely worded law on combating extremism also has a chilling effect on critical reporting.

“The freedom of speech never became a value for most Belarusians. The fear of losing your job, to become a social outcast dominates them. At the same time, the economic crisis and presidential elections raised their interest in alternative information,” a panelist commented.

However, the crackdown on the freedom of speech in Belarus has not caused any public outcry apart from some complaining on the Internet. Many Belarusians are afraid to protest, as doing so might mean direct loss of income.

Confidentiality of sources is protected by the media law yet can hardly be enforced, one of the panelists argued. Newsrooms are increasingly relying on the Internet to communicate with their sources and obtain information from whistle-blowers. Their anonymity, however, could be easily compromised. A presidential Internet regulation adopted in February 2010 ordered Internet service providers (ISPs) to store log files with usernames for twelve months.

In March 2010, the police raided offices of main opposition news website Charter97.org and the independent weekly *Narodnaya Volya*. The apartments of Natalia Radzina and Sviatlana Kalinkina, editors for Charter97 and *Narodnaya Volya*, respectively, as well as those of Maryna Koktysh, a journalist with *Narodnaya Volya*, and Iryna Khalip, a journalist for Moscow-based *Novaya Gazeta*, were also searched. Their computers and data-storage devices were confiscated as part

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 or public media.
- > Libel is a civil law issue, public officials are held to higher standards, offended party 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 law on civil service restricts access to public information, as the media can obtain official information only via press officers or top officials of governmental bodies.

of the investigation into alleged defamation of a top regional KGB boss. Their newsrooms, however, claimed they had been reporting on the under-the-carpet war between the Ministry of Interior and the KGB and the police were looking for those who had been leaking information to the press.

The Ministry of Information acts as a regulator for the media (print and broadcast outlets) and publishing (printing presses) sectors. Television and radio stations as well as the press must obtain registrations from the ministry. Under the law, the registration procedure should take 30 calendar days to complete, yet the ministry tends to procrastinate, according to a panelist. And it is “beyond question” that registration of media outlets is politicized, another panel participant added. In response to attempts by independent groups to register regional newspapers last year (detailed in the 2010 MSI report), the ministry introduced additional requirements for potential applicants. Would-be editors were required to have journalism diplomas and at least five years of previous editing experience, and the outlet had to have a nonresidential address.

The number of registered outlets, both print and broadcast, inched up a bit compared with the previous year, according to the ministry’s statistics. The ministry traditionally failed to specify how many newspapers, for example, are registered as “socio-political” publications, i.e., those allowed to report on political and social issues rather than offer only entertainment content. Panelists could not recall any newly established news outlets.

Broadcasters must follow a licensing regime. After obtaining registration from the Ministry of Information for a television or radio program, a broadcaster must obtain a frequency, allocated via a tender by the Republican Commission on Television and Radio Broadcasting, the nine-member body of government officials headed by the minister of information. After that, the Ministry of Communications and Informatization issues a license to use the frequency allocated. The procedure remains obscure and politicized, according to panelists. No tenders were announced in 2010, and there were no reports that a television or a radio station had received a frequency.

Online media remained largely outside of governmental control, although the media law provides for their registration.

Apart from the aforementioned politicized registration and licensing practices, market entry for media companies is by and large the same as for businesses in other sectors. Capital requirements and tax structure for media businesses are the same as in other industries. The media law, however, limits direct foreign ownership of news outlets to 30 percent. Radio stations are still required to air 75 percent Belarusian music. Unlike in other sectors, operations of any media outlet can be suspended for up to three months without a court ruling, following a written warning from the Ministry of Information. The ministry may thus penalize newsrooms even for minor violations—for example, as the law puts it, for “distributing information that does not correspond to reality and discredits the honor, dignity, and business reputation of physical and legal persons.”

Although crimes against journalists remained rare, media professionals do not feel secure. Reporters covering opposition rallies put themselves in jeopardy of being physically assaulted by the police. In October 2009, journalists took complaints to the Ministry of Interior about unidentified men attacking cameramen and photographers during pickets and demonstrations. Police authorities said they would adopt German experience and send “press officers” to mass events, where they would “handle journalists’ requests.” Yet in practice this had little effect. Obstructing the work of journalists is a criminal offense in Belarus, yet it happens frequently. When rallies are dispersed and participants are detained, the police usually treat journalists the same way as protesters, a panelist noted. Yet afterward, unlike demonstrators, they are neither fined nor given brief prison sentences, which leads observers to believe that they are simply being prevented from reporting.

Attacks on journalists peaked on December 19, when at least 20 journalists were detained and dozens more beaten up while riot police were breaking up a post-election protest rally in Minsk, according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), a domestic press-freedom watchdog. The police paid no attention to journalists’ IDs, according to numerous reports. Both foreign and domestic journalists were assaulted, including photographers from state-controlled media outlets. Separately, dozens of journalists had their photo and video equipment damaged.

Some journalists, however, seemed to be a target of a coordinated attack. Natallia Radzina, editor of Charter97.org, was severely beaten by the police. Though rescued by friends during the dispersal, she was subsequently arrested by the

KGB, along with all her coworkers, at the website's editorial office in the middle of the night.

Irina Khalip, an award-winning investigative journalist with the Moscow-based *Novaya Gazeta*, was detained by the KGB, along with her husband, Andrei Sannikau, on their way to the hospital. Sannikau stood as a candidate against Lukashenka. He was severely beaten, and his leg was broken during the dispersal of the rally. Radzina, Khalip, and Sannikau are all in a KGB prison and face up to 15 years in jail on charges of "organizing mass disorder."

Men thought to be security agents attacked opposition candidate Vladimir Neklyayev and his supporters on their way to the rally. A group of Belarusian and foreign journalists who witnessed the attack were prevented from using their recording equipment and were ordered to lie face down in the snow, BAJ reported. John Hill, a reporter with *The New York Times*, was hit in the face when he tried to show his press ID to the attackers. Andrei Liankevich, an award-winning freelance photojournalist, had his camera confiscated.

In the days that followed, the KGB raided editorial offices of several independent news outlets most likely seeking footage of election-night protests. Warrants said searches were part of investigations into the post-election "mass disorder." The independent weekly *Nasha Niva* and European Radio for Belarus had their computers, cameras, recorders, and data-storage devices confiscated. The apartments of *Nasha Niva's* editor-in-chief, photojournalist, and video-reporter were also searched and equipment seized. The office of independent satellite television Belsat was also raided, yet nothing was impounded there because the reporters managed to get out in advance.

Panelists also mentioned the strange death of Aleh Biabenin, once a journalist and cofounder of pro-opposition news website Charter97.org. In September 2010, he was found hanged in his country house outside Minsk, and the police were quick to allege he had killed himself. Biabenin's friends dismissed suicide claims and said he was killed by the security services to intimidate the opposition ahead of the presidential election. In an unprecedented development, the government allowed OSCE experts into the country, and their inquiry confirmed suicide claims. It is, however, unknown whether Biabenin had been actively involved in journalism work. According to some reports, he was managing Andrei Sannikau's election campaign.

Like any autocracy, the Lukashenka government keeps a tight control on the flow of information. "Media hold a weapon of a most destructive power," the president told journalism students in February 2008, "and they must be controlled by

the state." The Soviet-style system of "ideology work" has been, in fact, reinstalled. Local governments, educational institutions, and organizations—whether state-owned or private—employing more than 300 people must employ ideology officers. Ideological orientation sessions are regularly held. State-owned media are just part of that system. While outlining ideologists' personnel practices, a presidential edict of February 2004 said the appointment of editors of national and oblast-level state media should be approved by the Lukashenka administration. In the same manner, oblast governments are authorizing the appointment of editors of local media. Editors of key national outlets are appointed by the president directly.

Via generous funding, subsidized printing and distribution, as well as forced subscriptions, the government retained a Soviet-era network of 136 local newspapers. Many of them kept their communist-style names and editorial policies. Bigger newspapers are similarly pushing propaganda, perhaps in a more subtle way.

Although the law guarantees equal opportunities for both state and non-state media, the former enjoy preferential treatment. Private outlets commonly face restricted access to information (via an unregulated system of accreditations where they are denied the ability to cover government news conferences) and distribution channels (either via direct ban or restrictively unaffordable fees).

Furthermore, a presidential decree in September 2009 exempted state-controlled television channels ONT and STV from VAT (value-added tax) and income taxes for three years. The National State Television and Radio Company, a conglomerate of national and regional television and radio networks, also received similar tax breaks. Television and radio stations founded by the president and the Council of Ministers receive frequencies without a tender and pay only a fraction of the state registration fee that other media companies are charged.

The government also restricts how much revenue non-state media can get from advertising. State firms are generally not allowed to advertise in outlets critical of the government; then there are subsidized advertising rates offered by state media that are used to lure advertisers from private media companies.

Many events involving top officials are covered on a pool basis, most notably those attended by President Lukashenka. Of all non-state media, only BelaPAN, a privately owned news agency, was lucky to win inclusion into the presidential pool, according to a panelist.

Discussion participants mentioned only one case when state media face a disadvantage in comparison to private media.

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For the general news press, advertising is restricted to 30 percent of content in non-state publications and 25 percent in state-owned publications.

Belarusian law has both civil and criminal defamation provisions. The criminal code has four articles related to defamation. Two of them, “calumny toward the president” and “insult of the president,” are punishable by up to four and two years in prison, respectively. Two more cover “insult of the representative of the authorities” and “discrediting the Republic of Belarus” and are punishable by up to two years in prison. However, none of these provisions have been applied since 2002. More common are honor, dignity, and business reputation suits, dealt with under civil law, yet still having the same chilling effect on the media. For such suits the plaintiff does not have to prove malice; it is enough to claim the story had caused “emotional distress.”

Every year media face several dozen such suits, sometimes resulting in fines of hundreds or thousands of dollars or even official warnings from the Ministry of Information. Information minister Aleh Praliaskouski told a press conference in December 2010 that official warnings were more of a “security cushion” for the press rather than a tool to silence critical voices. He went on to explain, “Had media outlets faced a suit for every inaccurate piece of information they distributed they would go bankrupt.”

All the judges in Belarus are appointed by presidential decrees, and thus courts provide very little protection, especially when cases are politicized.

Official information remains restricted, especially for non-state newsrooms. Belarusian law does not regard bloggers, freelancers, citizen reporters, or those working for foreign media without accreditation as journalists. Many events require accreditation—and procedures to obtain this remain largely unspecified—and non-journalists are not admitted. Furthermore, under the civil-service law, information or comments from many official institutions may be obtained only via press services or following approval from top leadership.

Though the presidential Internet regulation edict ordered, among other very few positive things, that state bodies should put information about their activities on their official websites, that requirement has not built up the amount of available public information, the panel agreed.

Access to both domestic and international news sources is not restricted by law. The only obstacle is affordability and journalists’ poor foreign-language skills. As a result, only a handful of bigger media companies use subscriptions to foreign news services, such as Reuters, Associated Press, or AFP. Reprints and rebroadcasts are quite common, sometimes with disregard to intellectual property rights. However, in most cases media outlets at least provide links to the original sources. Meanwhile, the Internet remains the main source of news for journalists, a panelist added.

Entry into the profession is unrestricted for journalists. In fact, many reporters working for both state and private media lack journalism diplomas. The government, however, effectively bans new people from becoming editors-in-chief and starting up their own outlets, since, as detailed above, they should have gained both journalism degrees and editorial experience elsewhere. Admission to journalism schools is controlled by the state. Applicants must provide recommendations from local governments and undergo interviews; both of them are used to politically vet would-be journalists, according to some reports.

Graduates of journalism schools—just like any students getting free university training at state-run universities—are subject to Soviet-style “distribution” and must work for two years wherever the government sends them or reimburse their tuition. In 2010, according to the Ministry of Information, 32 graduates were sent to state-run regional newsrooms.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Belarus Objective Score: 1.15

Panelists’ evaluation of professional journalism also did not change compared with last year; no indicator scores changed noticeably, and all indicators scored pretty much the same as the objective did overall.

“Self-censorship, professional compromises, and deteriorating professionalism are common,” one of the panelists, an independent editor, said, while discussing the status of professional journalism. At the same time, he added, most journalists are aware of their ethical duties of supplying objective information to the public but face obstacles in obtaining official information and often lack resources to

conduct thorough research. News agencies and larger media do a better job in this respect.

State-run media, though, are less likely to adhere to those principles because they are just part of the state propaganda machine. Some of their independent counterparts are somewhat following suit. With restricted access to information and officials, they find it hard to get comments from all sides to a story. Since state media shy away from covering edgy issues, independent outlets still try to refute state propaganda, but they are adopting an increasingly antagonistic approach.

Journalists try to consult technical experts. Yet most of them, especially economists and political analysts, must cope with restricted access to information; consequently, they offer few insights, and their forecasts are frequently off target. Furthermore, the “pool of experts” is rather small, and the same names and similar comments tend to appear in numerous media at once.

There are two journalists’ organizations in Belarus—a state-controlled one, the Belarusian Union of Journalists, and its independent counterpart, the Belarusian Association of Journalists. Both have developed their own ethical codes, just like some bigger media companies, and they are accepted quite universally. Journalists do accept gifts, albeit ones of low value. More common is the selling of stories in the form of advertorials, quite often to sidestep a requirement that puts a cap on the maximum amount of advertising.

Self-censorship does exist, since, as a panelist noted, “There is a constant threat of some kind of governmental intervention. There is no way we can avoid it [self-censorship]; otherwise

Self-censorship does exist, since, as a panelist noted, “There is a constant threat of some kind of governmental intervention. There is no way we can avoid it [self-censorship]; otherwise your media business won’t last long.”

your media business won’t last long.” The family of President Lukashenka and business interests of his closest allies, as well as corruption in the law-enforcement agencies, remain the topics that are most avoided. Separately, media outlets steer clear of criticizing prominent advertisers.

Independent media try to cover all key events, panelists agreed, yet slants may range from being pro-opposition to more unbiased. Some panel participants argued that given the government’s wide-reaching control over society and information, one cannot be sure all important issues make it to the news. Bloggers and citizen journalists generally do not provide substantial amounts of new information since they are either reporting on hyperlocal issues or adding personalized comments on top of what the “traditional” media cover. They did a great job of covering the dispersal of post-election opposition rallies, according to the panel. Bloggers even launched a grass-roots campaign to “investigate” what many believed had been a provocation by security agents. Photos, videos, and even intercepted police radio conversations were analyzed to reconstruct the events that had been a pretext to the crackdown on the protesters.

Pay levels of media professionals differ across the sector, being “high to very high” in state-run media companies and “obviously insufficient” in independent ones. Journalists with private media outlets earn \$400 to \$600 a month in the capital, Minsk, and less so in the regions. Heavily subsidized state-run newsrooms are more generous. Journalists are paid around \$800 to \$1,000 a month. Key staff at bigger state-owned media companies, like the presidential daily *Sovietskaya Belorussia*, earn \$2,500 to \$3,000 a month, according to a panelist. Separately, government-owned media are still able to secure for their employees loans on generous terms. State-mandated wage hikes have been used for years to win popular support for the government and President Lukashenka personally. Several weeks before the 2010 presidential election, salaries of government media workers (along with other sectors) were increased once again to reach the average of \$500 a month. As a result, private media companies noticed a more pronounced outflow of staff, first of all technical specialists who prefer to go freelance and accountants and lawyers who find jobs with state

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.
- > Facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exist (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

organizations more lucrative and less frustrating. Journalists tend to work for multiple outlets or supplement their primary jobs with moonlighting.

State-owned broadcasters that dominate the media market have a rather high news-to-entertainment ratio (estimated at 30 percent news and public affairs), yet the quality of both remains low, the panel agreed. One of the panelists said that instead of blatant propaganda he would like to see more news on state television and radio, while newspapers and online media should have more entertainment content.

All media outlets, regardless of how small, have basic equipment for newsgathering and content production. At the same time, many journalists prefer to use their own laptops, recorders, and cameras. Speaking of state-run outlets, the government is spending millions of dollars to equip them with up-to-date technology. Although basic facilities are in place, independent newsrooms still need faster PCs, more professional photo and video equipment, and, most notably, licensed software. Recent confiscations of equipment at independent newsrooms suggest they also need extra sets of equipment stored elsewhere to make sure their work will not be interrupted in case of an emergency. Internet fees are dropping, yet newsrooms said they would like faster and more reliable connections for what they pay.

Most newsrooms are understaffed, and their resources are stretched thin, which makes it nearly impossible to offer quality niche reporting. Some specialized journalism does exist, first of all on economics, legal issues, and sports. In other sectors, Belarusian media find it next to impossible to compete with the niche reporting done by Russian magazines and journals, a panelist said. Investigative journalism is almost non-existent: what has been offered as investigative is at best in-depth reporting or leaks from the security services. In general, news agencies and newspapers offer better at specialized reporting while state media avoid any potentially controversial topics.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Belarus Objective Score: 1.13

This objective showed modest improvement compared with last year, almost entirely due to better evaluations of indicators 4 (news agencies) and 5 (private media produce their own news). Otherwise, there was little change among the indicators. Further, most indicators scored close to the objective score. Indicator 4 led the pack, exceeding the objective score by slightly more than half a point, while

indicator 3 (state media are non-partisan) trailed the objective score by three-quarters of a point.

Readily available media do not offer a diversity of viewpoints. As a rule, non-state outlets are more likely to include multiple perspectives while state-controlled media all speak in a single voice. The expression of alternative views on political developments, however, remained limited to a handful of remaining private newspapers, a few expatriate broadcasters, and the Internet.

The Ministry of Information claims non-state actors dominate the press sector: there are more than twice as many non-state publications compared with the state-owned ones (923 versus 397 in October 2010). However, most of those private titles published entertainment content. According to the BAJ, fewer than 30 independent newspapers are reporting on political and social issues, and their aggregate weekly print run varies from 500,000 to 700,000 copies. Meanwhile, *Sovietskaya Belorussia*, Belarus's biggest daily run by the presidential administration, alone has a weekly print run of more than 2,000,000 copies. Then there are several other national newspapers, as well as the state-owned province-level publications. And finally, there is a network of 136 state-owned newspapers in smaller towns with an aggregate weekly print-run of 897,000 copies.

Most of the radio stations in Belarus are state-owned (135 versus 22); 121 of them are distributed via wired radio network, which reaches millions of households.

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) exists 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 non-partisan, 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.

State television remains the main source of news for Belarusians. In a May 2010 survey by the Center for Information and Analysis, the government's major think tank, 86.4 percent said they get news from national television channels. National newspapers yielded 39.3 percent; local newspapers 36.3 percent; local television 30.2 percent; national radio 27.9 percent; the Internet 22 percent; and local radio 20.9 percent.

Alternative political views do make it into mainstream media, yet only for a short period of time. Media monitoring of the presidential campaign by the OSCE election observers showed that all major television stations with nationwide coverage demonstrate a clear bias in favor of the incumbent president, devoting some 89 percent of primetime news coverage to his campaign activities and official duties. Other candidates tended to be mentioned as a group, their names mentioned infrequently, and generally portrayed negatively. All four state-funded newspapers monitored by the OSCE demonstrated clear bias in the president's favor. For example, *Sovietskaya Belorussia* devoted 91 percent of its political and election-related coverage to President Lukashenka.

The opposition was allowed access to state television, yet only as talking heads. In accordance with the electoral code, presidential candidates were granted one hour of free airtime on Channel One TV and one hour on Radio One. The airtime was then split into two 30-minute presentations. Neither pre-recorded audio and video materials nor photos were allowed during those presentations. The Central Election Commission denied three requests for additional airtime by opposition candidates.

Additionally, the candidates were allowed to publish their platforms (a maximum of five typed A4 pages) in four national and seven regional newspapers. Lukashenka's presentation appeared on the front page of the most widely read newspapers, while the opposition candidates' platforms were published on inside pages.

One televised debate and one radio debate were aired live for the first time since 1994, when Lukashenka was elected as Belarus's first and only president. This time, however, he did not participate in the debates and never used his free airtime.

The candidates were also allowed to purchase airtime and newspaper space from both state and private media. Only Autoradio, a Minsk-based privately owned radio, agreed to broadcast advertisements of two opposition candidates, yet it was forced by the government to suspend advertisements after just three days.

With traditional media being so firmly under the government's fist, Belarusians are turning to the Internet for independent news and analysis, since it remains the least

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regulated of all sectors. The aggregate weekly audience of Belarusian news sites reached 412,000 visitors in September 2010, up from 250,000 in October 2009, according to Gemius, an independent Internet research company. However, media outlets make very little use of mobile-phone technologies, aside from having mobile versions of their websites.

Usage of social networks skyrocketed in 2010, according to numerous reports. By the end of the year almost 1,000,000 Belarusians had accounts with VKontakte, Russia's most popular social network. Belarusian social network I.TUT.BY had 800,000 accounts, followed by Russian social network Odnoklassniki (420,000), Facebook (193,000), LiveJournal (80,000), and Twitter (20,000). Many Internet users turned to them for news and comments, most notably on Election Day, when many independent news websites were blocked and social networks became informal conduits for news, a panelist added.

Access to both domestic and international media is largely non-restricted, bar the domestic independent press. In 2010, 10 private newspapers remained excluded from state-owned distribution networks. In 2005, they were expelled from the subscription offerings of Belposhta, the postal service, and banned from newspaper kiosks of Belsajuzdruk, a press distribution monopoly controlled by the Ministry of Information. Since then, they have relied on their own distribution services and sales via shops that dared to put them on their racks.

The foreign press is in most cases unaffordable. Furthermore, to be distributed in Belarus, foreign media outlets need express permission from the Ministry of Information. Several years ago the ministry ousted all foreign news channels from Belarus's cable networks. Despite the close relations between Belarus and Russia, Russian channels offering news were also swept away. The bigger ones were replaced by localized versions, technically controlled by Belarusian state-run networks. As a result, their news programs and documentaries covering Belarus's affairs are censored; this

Usage of social networks skyrocketed in 2010, according to numerous reports. By the end of the year almost 1,000,000 Belarusians had accounts with VKontake, Russia's most popular social network.

became more acute during the all-out information war between the two countries that erupted in mid-2010.

Still, Belarusian cable operators broadcast 120 television channels, including 60 Russian ones. Most of them offer entertainment content.

Uncensored foreign television remains accessible via satellites. Although installation of satellite dishes is subject to approval by local housing authorities, this requirement is in most cases ignored. The only obstacle to broader use of satellite television and the Internet is affordability and willingness to take extra efforts, panelists argued, as technically they are available everywhere, including remote rural areas.

"A Belarusian living in a small town or a village can afford television, occasional Internet surfing—still better if that's done at work—and buying a newspaper. Yet that hardly equals accessing multiple news sources," a panelist commented.

The Internet became cheaper and faster, yet still not good enough for users to avoid delays on YouTube and similar services, according to a panel participant. It remains largely unrestricted, except for on Election Day, when key pro-opposition and news websites were blocked. The same day Belarus's telecommunications monopoly Beltelecom blocked secure HTTPS connections outside of Belarus. That made it impossible for thousands of Belarusians to log into their social network accounts and use mail services like Gmail. Some online media reported they also had trouble logging into their websites to add content. Several reports mentioned attempts to spoof at least nine pro-opposition and news websites by redirecting users to the dated copies of those websites rather than just blocking the originals. Beltelecom was believed to be involved, since fake websites were reportedly hosted on its facilities. Those spoofing attempts, however, turned out to be unsuccessful, since they were spotted in their early stages by cyber-activists and made public.

There are no true public media outlets in Belarus, while "state-owned ones are just informational servants of government at all levels," a panelist commented. Election campaign coverage was no different. OSCE election

observers said state media were grossly biased in favor of the incumbent president. The only way state media serve public interests is via cultural, educational, and sports programming.

Although nine media companies—two state-owned and seven private—are registered as information agencies by the Ministry of Information, only four of them work as traditional news agencies, panelists argued: BelaPAN, BelTA, Interfax-Zapad, and Prime-TASS.

Just like during previous panel discussions, the participants were complimentary of BelaPAN, an independent news agency. Despite limited resources and intense pressure from the government, it is able to deliver high-quality content that includes news subscriptions, the e-paper Naviny.By, photos, infographics, audio, video, and multimedia.

State-owned BelTA is the mouthpiece of the government, according to the panel. It offers news, photo services, and infographics and analytical bulletins to over 300 media outlets, both domestic and foreign. In addition, it publishes the weekly *7 Dnei* and several journals and builds and maintains websites for local governments and state-owned newspapers.

Two more agencies—Interfax-Zapad and Prime-TASS—are Russian-owned. Prime-TASS offers mostly business and financial news.

Subscriptions, ranging from \$300 per month for daily updates to \$600 for hourly, are too expensive for many newsrooms. At best, media outlets can afford to buy news from one company only. In most cases, they instead prefer to use information from these agencies that is available for free, but certainly cite them as sources, a panelist said. Subscriptions to international agencies like AFP, Associated Press, and Reuters are affordable only to big state-owned media.

Private print media seek to produce more of their own content, since that is essential for their survival, a panel participant argued. Regional outlets tend to be more prolific in producing their own content, while national ones offer more thorough analysis. One of the panelists quoted a survey by a media-development NGO that analyzed news sources for dozens of independent news sites and newspapers. The percentage of original content varied from 30 percent to 80 percent. BelaPAN tends to be the most widely used source of news, followed by BelTA, Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, European Radio for Belarus, Interfax-Zapad, and Ria Novosti (a Russian news agency).

There are 70 private broadcasters in Belarus—48 television channels and 22 radio stations—yet they produce very little of their own news programming. Instead, they tend to rely on the Internet and official information as sources of news

content. Expatriate broadcasters such as European Radio for Belarus, Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, Radio Racyja, and satellite channel Belsat that beam news into Belarus do produce most of their own news programming. However, they are only reaching smaller audiences via broadcasting. According to an August 2010 poll by NOVAK, an independent pollster, 5.7 percent of Belarusians watch Belsat; 2.6 percent listen to the European Radio for Belarus, 2.4 percent Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, and 1.1 percent Radio Racyja. However, broadcasters such as European Radio for Belarus and Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe have substantially larger audiences accessing via the Internet and are operating as de facto news agencies with their content widely used in other media and online.

As mentioned above, bloggers produce very little of their own content. Yet they helped cover and distribute information on the post-election protests and then reconstruct events and even identify possible provocateurs of the violent crackdown on the protests.

Media ownership is not always transparent, especially in the case of online media and blogs. For registered outlets, the law orders disclosure of the founder as well as the publisher and the broadcaster, yet real owners are not always apparent. In many cases, media do not mention that the government owns them. Judging by the content, however, an average consumer can always tell whether an outlet is state-controlled or independent. The government remains Belarus's only media tycoon.

As mentioned above, foreign media ownership is restricted in Belarus. The only foreign investment in the media industry is from Russia. In addition to the two aforementioned news agencies, Russian businesses own popular daily *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Byelorusii* and the weeklies *BelGazeta* and *Argumenty i Fakty*.

The Lukashenka government has always been keen on ensuring Soviet-style "stability." As a result, many social issues receive very little, if any, coverage in the mainstream media. While presenting his platform to the Belorussian National Assembly (a convocation of handpicked Lukashenka supporters) two weeks before the election, he said there was no discord on ethnic, religious, or cultural grounds in Belarus. He went on to recall the Polish foreign-affairs minister's attempt to discuss problems of the Polish minority and telling him: "Remember, we do not have any minorities: neither sexual, nor ethnic. These are our people, these are our Poles, these are my Poles." Underrepresented issues are, however, discussed online and in small-circulation publications distributed within relevant communities.

Quite the contrary to underreporting minority issues, while trying to appeal to Lukashenka's electorate the mainstream

state-owned media report extensively on local issues, including rural areas and smaller towns. The coverage is in most cases positive, with little reporting on "smaller drawbacks." While covering international developments, state-run media mostly report on calamities, like scandals, crimes, riots, economic crises, and accidents. Against such a background Belarus looks like an island of stability in a turbulent world. Privately owned media, news websites, and blogs offer much more balanced coverage of both local and international affairs.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Belarus Objective Score: 0.93

The score for this objective fell slightly, mostly as a result of a precipitous fall for indicator 5 (government distortion of the media market). This indicator also received the only score to lag behind the objective score by more than half a point. To some degree this is due to the rewording of this indicator, which was intended to focus panelists' attention on the government's impact on the media market as a whole, beyond subsidies. For example, in Belarus the government controls much of the commercial and industrial sectors and is not shy about steering advertising away from independent-minded media. On a positive note, panelists awarded a higher score to indicator 7 (audience and circulation measurement), and this indicator was the only one to exceed the objective score by more than half a point.

"Media businesses, apart from a very few projects not related to reporting on political and social issues, are hardly making

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.

“Media businesses, apart from a very few projects not related to reporting on political and social issues, are hardly making both ends meet, and mostly survive due to funds coming from other sources, like state subsidies, grants, or revenues from owners’ other businesses,” a panelist commented.

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Private media try to operate as efficient firms, including some that use basic business planning and put efficient policies in place, yet to very little avail. Restrictions imposed by the government related to printing, distribution, and sales make profitable and legal businesses all but impossible.

State-controlled media are far from being sustainable. Apart from direct funding—\$56 million from the national budget alone—state media are supported via subsidized salaries, rent, printing, and distribution fees. Their propagandistic functions are much more important. “I have always said and repeat it once again: sustainability should not be seen as an end in itself. Nowadays the emphasis should be placed on informational and ideological components, improving the content, the quality, and the competitiveness of the press,” the Belarusian information minister told a press conference in December 2010. He went on to say that only 46 (out of 136) local state newspapers are self-sustainable, which is up from 18 five years ago. Among regional state television stations, 85 percent are at least breaking even.

Instead of spending money training their journalists, some state-run newspapers still employ typists, a panelist said. Personnel policies at private outlets are much more efficient, yet in most cases apart from newsroom staff they can afford only professional accountants (a legal requirement), advertising managers, and sometimes lawyers.

Revenue sources vary across the sector. State media depend on direct funding from national and local governments and to some extent on advertising. State-owned newspapers are also benefiting from imposed subscriptions and cheaper printing, distribution, and advertising fees. Regional media rely on sales of copies and to a great extent on classified advertisements by local small businesses. Quite often both state and private companies come under pressure not to advertise in non-state newspapers or online media. Radio

stations rely on advertising while regional broadcasters are getting most of their revenues from congratulatory messages and greetings.

Apart from bigger portals, like TUT.by, online media hardly generate enough advertising revenue to sustain their operations and must be subsidized either by owners or sponsors. Foreign donors continue to fund independent broadcasters based outside the country, as well as some non-state publications and online media.

Belarus’ advertising market totaled \$97 million in 2010, according to advertising group ZenithOptimedia. Print media earned \$14 million, the Internet \$7.6 million, and radio \$5.4 million. Television spending was up 11.5 percent against 2009, while the Internet leaped by 28.8 percent; print and radio remained the same. Big multinational companies, including Procter & Gamble, Schwarzkopf & Henkel, Colgate-Palmolive, and domestic mobile-phone operators remained the biggest spenders. Newspapers also depend on advertisements from banks, lotteries, and car dealers.

Revenue sources do influence editorial policy, the panel agreed: state media do not criticize the government while all media outlets avoid giving bad press to key advertisers.

Advertising agencies do very little to foster the development of the advertising market, especially outside the capital, Minsk, a panelist argued. Another panel participant, an independent editor, added that his regional newspaper is getting a maximum of 10 percent of its revenues via advertising agencies. As seen in the figures above, the lion’s share of advertising expenditure—almost 60 percent—is going to television (mostly big state-run channels). Although media outlets themselves set advertising prices, prominent advertisers and bigger advertising agencies that dominate the market tend to demand huge discounts. Subsidized state-run outlets often undersell private media companies. As a result, private newspapers, for example, might feel pressure to add more pages to comply with a legal restriction on the amount of advertising: 30 percent of content in non-state, general news publications and 25 percent in state-owned. For radio and television, advertising is limited to 20 percent of total daily broadcast time and 30 percent of prime time (6 p.m. to 10 p.m.).

State subsidies are meant only for state-owned media, and the government is hardly selling any advertising. One of the panelists mentioned informal orders from the Lukashenka administration that “did not recommend” that banks and other big state-owned companies advertise in independent newspapers and online media.

Commissioned market research remains affordable to only a handful of big media companies. Still, one of the panel

participants added, “In 2010 I did not hear about surveys of media audiences, except for online media.” Some regional outlets are doing their own research—mostly via paper-based and online questionnaires—to tweak editorial policies and attract advertisers. Donors have also commissioned research, but its use for business or editorial purposes by the media has been limited.

Press sales figures remained suspect: advertisers had to rely on published print-run figures only, since no circulation auditor has emerged.

There were some developments as far as broadcast ratings and press readership data are concerned: GEVS had built up its peoplemeter panel and started offering national television ratings beginning in January 2010. In December it launched two more national phone-based research tools. One would measure ratings and advertising of 36 Belarusian FM stations. The second would provide data on readership and advertisements placed in 100 newspapers.

Another private research outfit, NOVAK sells ratings on television, radio, and print media via subscriptions to its diary panel; it also conducts face-to-face polls twice a year.

Just like commissioned market research, these ratings are affordable only to wide-reaching media companies and leading advertising agencies. Meanwhile, both big television channels and key advertising firms seemed to be dissatisfied with the quality of television ratings and the discrepancy between data provided by GEVS and NOVAK. A workgroup was set up to announce a tender that would invite a bigger western company like TNS Gallup Media, AGB Nielsen Media Research, or GFK Group to run measurement of television audiences. The head of the working group said in an interview that diary panels are archaic and peoplemeters should be introduced instead, while failing to at least mention ratings produced by GEVS.

Internet statistics are offered by Gemius (via online counters, online questionnaires, and face-to-face interviews), Akavita (online counters and questionnaires), and NOVAK (Internet usage panel).

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Belarus Objective Score: 1.22

This objective improved somewhat compared with last year, due to the relative strength of the newly added indicator 8 (communications infrastructure meets the needs of media) and because of small improvements in indicators 3 (NGOs) and 5 (short-term training). This objective did see more varied scores than the other objectives, with indicators 2

(professional associations) and 3 exceeding the objective score by about a half a point each. Indicator 6 (apolitical sources of media inputs) lagged by about three-quarters of a point, while indicator 7 (apolitical distribution channels) trailed the objective score by nearly a point.

Supporting institutions remained shackled. The government retains control over production and distribution facilities and put a stranglehold on trade and professional associations. Press-freedom watchdogs and human-rights defenders are constantly harassed. Though the Internet remains relatively unrestricted, some alarming legal developments and Election Day censorship suggested the period of relatively loose controls over the Internet might soon be over.

Panelists mentioned only two trade associations: United Media, an association of 17 private regional newspaper publishers, and the Telecommunications Industry Union (TIU), a 99-member organization of cable operators and television broadcasters. Both serve as a forum to exchange ideas and experience. United Media still maintains its own training program for participating outlets. In addition, there is an exchange of news (mostly via their websites) and advertising. The TIU said on its website that it worked to liberalize the telecommunications market, licensing, and customs and taxation procedures, and contributed to the legislative process. It was, however, unknown how successful those lobbying attempts have been.

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 (e.g., 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.

The press depends heavily on the state-owned printing houses, as very few privately owned presses are licensed to print newspapers. Printing facilities remain monopolized by the state and are politicized, panelists agreed.

Two professional associations of journalists work in Belarus. The 2,000-strong Belarusian Union of Journalists is the “governmental” organization of media professionals employed by state-run outlets. Panelists failed to expand on what the Belarusian Union of Journalists is doing apart from organizing contests and giving out prizes.

The BAJ has over 1,200 members representing mostly private media. Only BAJ works for the benefit of journalists and protects the freedom of speech, panelists said. Apart from networking activities, it maintains a training program for its members and offers them legal assistance. It cooperates actively with similar organizations in other countries. BAJ is in fact the only organization actively campaigning for media freedom and journalists’ rights and frequently comes under pressure. In January 2010, BAJ received a warning from the Ministry of Justice over its legal assistance center and membership cards. The ministry said that BAJ, being an NGO rather than a media outlet, had violated the media law by issuing membership cards that read “PRESS.” It was urged to collect all the IDs used by journalists during their daily work since 1995, when BAJ was established. The warning also attacked BAJ’s internal legal-assistance unit, which the ministry said had not been properly established. The organization appealed to the Supreme Court, but the appeal was dismissed. BAJ faces closure if it fails to comply and receives a second warning within the next twelve months.

In December 2010, BAJ came under pressure once again after it condemned police brutality against Belarusian and foreign journalists during the Election Day opposition rally. The Ministry of Justice said the organization could defend the rights of only its members.

Apart from BAJ, the panel agreed, there are no other organizations working to systematically support the freedom of speech. The few surviving organizations of human-rights defenders, most notably the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and Viasna, sometimes provide legal assistance to journalists and media outlets and offer limited publicity of such cases.

Journalism degrees are offered by the journalism institute at the Belarusian State University (BSU) in the capital,

Minsk, as well as by state universities in Homiel, Hrodna, and Viciebsk. There are also journalism programs at several smaller private institutions, all based in the capital. Their faculty and curricula remain very Soviet-style, a panelist said. Editors of both state and private media remain dissatisfied with the quality of training. Graduates themselves think skills obtained at these universities are of very little practical use, a panel participant added. Meanwhile, the country’s biggest journalism school, BSU’s 1,500 student-strong journalism institute, is offering majors in online journalism. In a positive development, domestic journalism schools increased cooperation and had joint programs with German and Swedish media-development organizations.

Opportunities to get journalism degrees abroad do exist—for example, at the European Humanities University (EHU), once a leading Belarusian university now in exile in Vilnius, Lithuania, just 20 miles from the Belarusian border. EHU offers two journalism-related majors: media and communications and visual design and media. Belarus education authorities do not recognize EHU’s bachelor degrees, so many students enroll in master programs, either with EHU or other European universities, rather than going back to Belarus.

Other opportunities include government and foreign donor-funded scholarship programs in Poland, Germany, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Short-term trainings are available, and “non-state” media professionals have better access, one of the panelists argued. As a rule, such training opportunities are offered for free by domestic and foreign media-development organizations. Sometimes media companies cover all or part of participation fees. Most trainings target journalists and editors while advertising and sales managers, newspaper designers, photographers, and video journalists are often neglected, a panel participant complained.

Hands-on onsite consultations and trainings by invited practitioners would be most useful, a panelist argued, since most outlets find it next to impossible to send key staff away for several days.

Sources of newsprint, software, and equipment are neither monopolized nor politicized. The only restriction is that of affordability. Although broader use of laptops and netbooks sold with preinstalled licensed operating systems somewhat lowered the percentage of pirated software, office, graphic, and video editing packages are almost 100 percent pirated, according to many panelists. Meanwhile, most outlets remained reluctant to use free and open-source alternatives.

Distribution remains a sore point. Very few broadcasters own transmitting equipment, which puts them at a disadvantage, since the government may take away their frequencies at any

time. The press depends heavily on the state-owned printing houses, as very few privately owned presses are licensed to print newspapers. Printing facilities remain monopolized by the state and are politicized, panelists agreed. Under the law, a printing house director is responsible for the content of the printed materials produced, so censorship is not infrequent. Printing services are expensive while quality is notoriously poor; most notable are color inconsistencies and an inability to print photo-spreads.

Likewise, press distribution channels are almost entirely owned by the state, and around a dozen independent titles have been banned from them for years. The press distribution network Belsajuzdruk and the postal service Belposhta are owned by the state, and access is politicized. A dozen regional private newspapers were denied access in 2005 and must rely on their own limited in-house distribution via shops. The latter frequently come under pressure from local governments that urge them to stop selling these critical publications. Those non-state titles that are lucky to win access to state networks are also dissatisfied with huge mark-ups (up to 70 percent of the retail price), caps on the number of copies allowed to be sold, and delayed payments. Belsajuzdruk has huge outstanding debts; even debt-recovery suits offer little help since its revenues are dwindling, a panelist commented.

Cable networks are often privately owned, yet the list of television channels must be approved by the local government and the Ministry of Information, which means they keep controversial channels off the air.

ISPs continue to build up their last-mile networks, especially in Minsk and bigger cities. The government, however, retains control over most of the telecom infrastructure, interconnections between computer and mobile-phone networks, and all international Internet traffic. State telecommunications giant Beltelecom sells Internet subscriptions to both end-users and ISPs, charging the latter exorbitant fees.

A presidential Internet edict in February 2010 ordered all Belarusian companies selling goods or services via the Internet to move to Belarusian hosts and have .BY domain

names. Media outlets wishing to sell advertisements or subscriptions to their online content had to comply. Many pro-opposition websites chose to stick to foreign hosting and non-Belarusian domain names. Others must use expensive and inefficient services of Belarusian hosting providers, which are themselves, in most cases, using Beltelecom's infrastructure. According to industry sources, Beltelecom in fact had only one secure and reliable datacenter in Minsk, and its resources are already stretched to accommodate more websites. The same edict provided for filtering of websites that the government considers dangerous. Those provisions were never implemented, yet, as detailed below, independent news sites were inaccessible on Election Day. Separately, ISPs are required to identify all the devices (including computers and mobile phones) that are being used to connect to the Internet. Identification cards must be presented at Internet cafés.

Still, Internet use continued to grow, and prices dropped. In August 2010, 3.3 million Belarusians used the Internet, according to Gemius. The Ministry of Telecommunications said 1.8 million people use broadband connections. Plans with 1 Mbps connections without a traffic cap were sold in December 2010 for as low as \$18 a month, down from \$35 in 2009. Mobile-phone networks cover 97.8 percent of the country, and all operators were offering 3G Internet connections.

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.