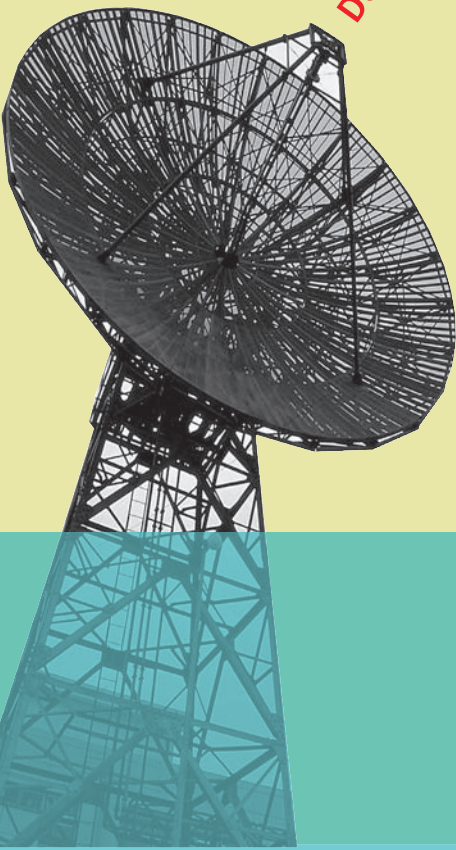


# MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

# 2003

*Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia*





**“Licensing of broadcasters depends on the political situation. The government has been engaged in ‘cleansing’ TV stations.”**





## Introduction

In 2002, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) declared Belarus one of the 10 worst countries in the world in which to be a journalist. In 2003, things got worse.

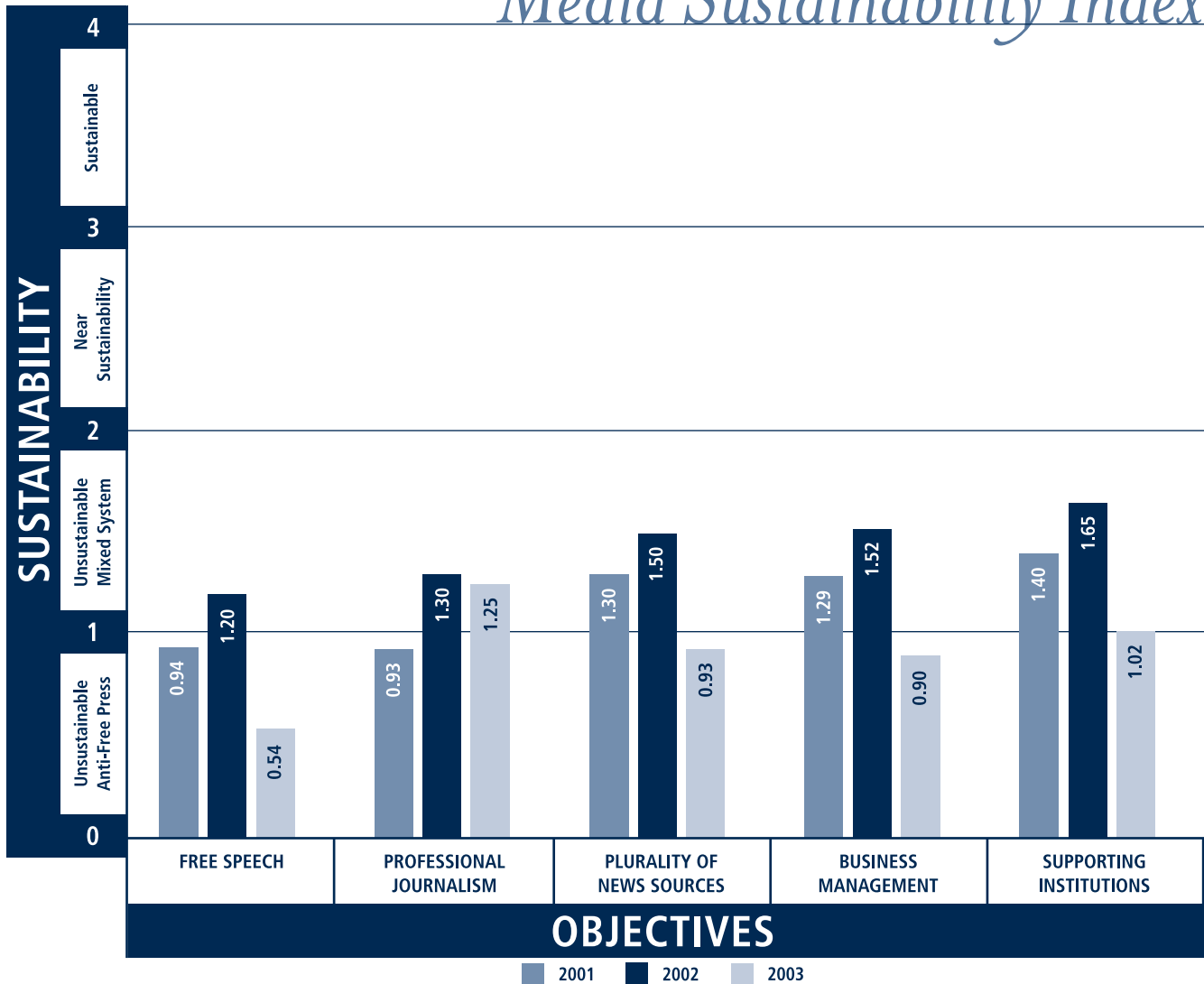
Faced with a stagnant economy, President Alexander Lukashenko's government turned its back even more firmly on the West, relying increasingly on assistance and the forgiving of debt from Russia and on the sale of state-owned enterprises to Russian interests. The Lukashenko government intensified its interventionist, top-down approach to managing the economy. It continued to hinder the growth of small and mid-sized businesses under an avalanche of ever-changing, highly restrictive, and often retroactive regulations, making it all but impossible for independent enterprises to survive. Unemployment remained very low (under 2 percent, officially), but widespread underemployment and continuing inflation made it more difficult for the average citizen to make ends meet. Meanwhile, the government half-heartedly pursued a proposed currency union with Russia (slated for 2005) and an eventual economic and political union, although ambivalence on both sides left the future of this union very uncertain.

Despite growing public dissatisfaction with Lukashenko, the political opposition remained marginalized. In the local elections of March 2003, nongovernment political parties mustered only 600 candidates for the 24,000 available seats. Very public scandals over campaign finances further undermined the opposition. A third of the registered opposition candidates in the local elections still managed to win despite extensive manipulation of the results by the administration. Several strikes by small business owners reflected a new willingness to publicly oppose administration policies and actions.

Nonetheless, Lukashenko retained overwhelming political control and took advantage of this by systematically moving to repress the independent media and to monopolize information channels in Belarus. While some news media fought back effectively against government harassment, the worsening situation was reflected in a sharp drop in the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) for Belarus compared with 2002.

# Belarus

## Media Sustainability Index



### Objective Scoring

The averages of all the indicators are averaged to obtain a single, overall score for each objective. Objective scores are averaged to provide an overall score for the country. IREX interprets the overall scores as follows:

- 3 and above:** Sustainable and free independent media
- 2–3:** Independent media approaching sustainability
- 1–2:** Significant progress remains to be made; society or government is not fully supportive
- 0–1:** Country meets few indicators; government and society actively oppose change

### Indicator Scoring

Each indicator is scored using the following system:

- 0 =** Country does not meet indicator; government or social forces may actively oppose its implementation
- 1 =** Country minimally meets aspects of the indicator; forces may not actively oppose its implementation, but business environment may not support it and government or profession do not fully and actively support change
- 2 =** Country has begun to meet many aspects of the indicator, but progress may be too recent to judge or still dependent on current government or political forces
- 3 =** Country meets most aspects of the indicator; implementation of the indicator has occurred over several years and/or through changes in government, indicating likely sustainability
- 4 =** Country meets the aspects of the indicator; implementation has remained intact over multiple changes in government, economic fluctuations, changes in public opinion, and/or changing social conventions

Through presidential decrees, new regulations, and politicized court rulings, the government steadily tightened restrictions on freedom of speech and the press (along with those on religious freedom, peaceful assembly, and movement). New draft laws on the press and on “informational security” were pending at year-end and were expected to further restrict the independent media.

Specific forms of repression included criminal prosecution of journalists for alleged slanders against Lukashenko and other officials; seizures of television cameras and equipment from regional television stations; warnings and orders suspending publication of five newspapers; seizures of several print runs of papers that had received official suspensions or that had angered local officials by reporting on corruption; and harassment and closure of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) providing assistance to independent media, including ordering the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) and Internews to close their programs and offices in Belarus. The government ordered the re-registration of all television stations, pressuring independent broadcasters to cede partial ownership to government officials under threat of closure. It ordered local governments not to grant new newspaper registrations and ordered all printing presses in Belarus not to accept any contracts from new newspapers, or from “dormant” newspapers that might resume publication under new management.

At the same time, the government announced the creation of a third national state television channel and began building a new regional network of state television and radio stations. It began systematically renovating state printing presses and increased assistance to the president’s newspaper, *Sovietskaya Belarussia*. Using the state-controlled press as its propaganda arm, the government also conducted cross-media campaigns with anonymous articles to foment baseless accusations against independent media, NGOs, or opposition politicians.

After two years of modest improvement in the various indices for media development, 2003 represented a sharp and severe setback on all fronts, with 2004 likely to bring further deterioration. With Lukashenko mulling a referendum to give himself an extra-constitutional third term in office, all indications are that his efforts to stifle the independent media will continue.

## Objective 1: Free Speech

**Belarus Objective Score: 0.54/4.00**

The Belarusian government’s attitude toward free speech was perhaps best summed up by Information Minister Mikhail Padhayny, who said in an interview with an independent Belarusian weekly that any articles published by independent media should be in line with the interests of the state, and warned independent media not to forget that. Panelists recalled this when registering a significant decrease in the protections for free speech and access to information during 2003.

While the Constitution of Belarus contains some norms on the subject, in practice government agencies often circumvent these by targeting critical stories, broadcasts, public demonstrations, or meetings. The court system, meanwhile, routinely violates constitutional guarantees by issuing politicized rulings that are clearly at odds with Belarusian laws, but that are in line

### Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information

<b>FREE SPEECH INDICATORS</b>	■ Legal/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 the offended party 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.

**“State media clearly receive preferential legal treatment, just as they do in every other way,” said one panelist.**

with the wishes of state prosecutors.

In recent years, Belarusian journalists had become more adept at defending themselves against government harass-

ment and intimidation, but the government struck back in 2003 with a barrage of orders, lawsuits, court rulings, and extra-judicial actions. It suspended the leading independent daily *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta (BDG)* and its supplement *DSP*, along with the newspapers *Predprinimatelskaya Gazeta*, *Ekho*, and *Navinki*, for allegedly violating the country’s press law. (*Navinki*, for example, was suspended for three months for printing a cartoon that poked fun at Lukashenko’s receding hairline.)

When *BDG* found various means to continue publishing (as a supplement within friendly papers, and then by printing in Russia), the government retaliated against anyone who assisted the paper. Police confiscated a print run of *BDG* in June, fired the director of a state printing house who had allowed an issue to be printed there, and punished papers that had helped *BDG* keep printing. For example, police ordered a government printing house to cancel its contract with *Mestnya Gazeta Shag*, in Baranovichi, and administratively closed the offices of the newspaper *Solidarnost* for alleged but unspecified violations of advertising regulations.

The government seized several print runs of the opposition newspaper *Novaya Gazeta Smorgon*, arrested its distributors, and then forced the paper to close over alleged licensing violations. When the newspaper *Den* announced it would reopen in June after its 2002 closure, government officials ordered or pressured every printing press in Belarus to refuse to print the paper. *Den* was still seeking a printing venue at the end of 2003.

The State Control Committee investigated independent television stations, seizing equipment from stations in Gomel and Mogilov. The government expelled a reporter from the Russian broadcaster NTV in June and then ordered NTV to close its Minsk news bureau after the reporter covered the funeral of dissident writer Vasil Bykov, at which an estimated 50,000 people took part in an anti-government protest.

The government and government functionaries used Belarus’s press law to go after other media. That law, in violation of international norms, includes criminal as well as civil penalties for defamation and for

offenses against the honor and dignity of public officials. The editor of *Navinki* was fined \$700 for an article insulting the honor and dignity of Lukashenko. Leading opposition paper *Narodnya Volya* was fined nearly \$25,000 for defaming a state broadcasting official and was the target of two related defamation suits at the end of 2003. Enforcement of the press law is selective, with warnings and lawsuits almost exclusively targeting independent rather than state media outlets. “State media clearly receive preferential legal treatment, just as they do in every other way,” said one panelist.

While independent media outlets in many cases came to one another’s aid, and provided more coverage of free-speech issues than in the past, there was little public outrage at the government’s repression of the media. Belarusian society as a whole remains conservative, polite, and complacent.

Broadcast licensing remains problematic. The broadcast licensing commission is not independent, but rather controlled closely by the Lukashenko administration. Official procedures favor state media, and unofficial practices are used to make independent broadcasters censor themselves. In 2003, the government required all independent broadcasters to re-register and issued none-too-subtle warnings that broadcast outlets that stepped out of line could expect problems. According to one panelist, “Licensing of broadcasters depends on the political situation. The government has been engaged in ‘cleansing’ TV stations.”

In general, tax and regulatory procedures put independent media at a huge disadvantage, compared with state media. Local authorities routinely deny new licenses, making it increasingly difficult to start new news outlets; independent media are forced to pay far higher postage and distribution fees; and tax and other authorities selectively enforce regulations to put economic pressure on independent news outlets.

Crimes against journalists remained rare. The government preferred other means to stave off media investigations or to conduct reprisals against investigative journalists. One regional paper had its print run seized and was denied future access to the state distribution and postal systems after publishing an investigation of misuse of local public health funds.

While Belarusian law guarantees independent and state-owned media equal access to information, in practice that law goes completely unenforced. Government officials routinely deny independent media access to information or public meetings. And while many journalists have been trained on their rights, even those

journalists say that is of limited help when state officials know they will not be held accountable for refusing to comply with it. A panel member explained further, “The government is reducing access to information. Under Decree 300 official bodies have the right to classify their activities top secret, and that applies to the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Culture, other ministries, the oblast committees, and anything to do with the Chernobyl issue. They are clearly hiding public information.”

International news outlets (whether print, radio, or television) require the permission of the Ministry of Information to be distributed or aired in Belarus. Most media outlets have access to the Internet; Russian media are available throughout the country, and Lithuanian and Polish broadcasters reach northern and western Belarus. The limitations are financial. Most outlets cannot afford to subscribe to international news wires; most Belarusians cannot afford either the price of subscribing to foreign publications or of buying the satellite dishes or cable that give access to international broadcasts. However, with cable and Internet fees falling, and with greater access to both services in the regions, access to international information is becoming more possible. The state can and does interfere with international news organizations that report in Belarus, as shown by the ouster of NTV and the harassment of Radio Liberty.

Entry into the study of journalism is open to anyone, though the government closed the country’s only non-state journalism school in 2003. Students graduating with journalism degrees theoretically are subject to “distribution” laws that allow the government to tell them where they must work for their first two years; in practice, most can sidestep that requirement.

Journalists are not licensed. However, the government requires accreditation for many events, ranging from sessions of parliament to access to local government meetings. Investigative and opposition journalists have reported having their accreditations removed.

In late September 2003, the Ministry of Information drafted a new media law that it was expected to send to the Belarusian parliament sometime in 2004. Among other restrictive changes, the draft law would ban Belarusian media outlets from receiving donations or property from foreign donors outside Belarus. The law also would create a government-run “public advisory” council to control the media, though to what degree and in what form was unclear.

## Objective 2: Professional Journalism

**Belarus Objective Score: 1.25/4.00**

Concern about whether journalists and news outlets are practicing greater self-censorship in the face of government repression led to a decrease in confidence in the professionalism of journalism during 2003.

In general, the standard has been improving, with more journalists aware of their ethical obligations in providing information to the public and of the importance of having multiple sources and checking facts. To be sure, many opposition publications retain a strident tone. But the understanding of fair, objective reporting has improved, thanks to the efforts of international trainers and organizations such as the Belarusian Association of Journalists, which has promulgated a code of ethics in line with internationally recognized standards. Many of the country’s most popular independent newspapers are seen as striving for objectivity and a high standard of professionalism—including *BDG*, *Belarusky Rynok*, *Intex-Press*, *Gazeta Slonimskaya*, and *Brestsky Kurier*.

Few news organizations, however, have adopted their own codes of ethics, and it is still common in both the state and independent media to see single-source articles and overtly subjective reporting. Paid articles, in

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).

**“It’s harder and harder to maintain and upgrade equipment, as the economic situation keeps worsening,” said one panelist.**

which reporters or publications publish advertisements disguised as news articles, remain common. Political parties seek to buy favorable coverage in their fight against the Lukashenko

administration, and given the economic constraints under which most news outlets operate and the abysmally low salaries of reporters, it is easy to find a journalist who will slant a story to suit a patron. Journalists also sometimes take payments not to cover a story. One panelist observed that the market for paid stories was weak in 2003 because there were no national or parliamentary elections, and that in 2004 many more paid articles were likely to be published.

At a leading paper such as *BDG*, most journalists are paid the equivalent of \$50 a month; the pay is lower at smaller papers and at most regional papers and broadcasters. During *BDG*’s three-month suspension, several of its journalists left to take higher-paying jobs at state newspapers. The editor of *Intex-Press* in Baranovichy noted that the local state paper pays double the salary he can afford for reporters—and the state paper gets more advertising, since state subsidies allow it to charge a much lower rate. Especially in the regions, low salaries often drive promising reporters to leave the profession and encourage the practice of selling coverage to supplement incomes.

The profession as a whole remains sharply divided between the state and non-state media. State-owned media remain overtly propagandistic and do not provide coverage that could be considered critical about anything having to do with the government, its policies, or societal problems. At the same time, state journalists enjoy higher pay (thanks to subsidies for state media, which do not have to seek a profit), better benefits, better access to information, and often a higher social status. “The local state-owned paper pays double our salaries, though we have much higher circulation and more advertising,” said a panelist working for a non-state outlet. As a result, many of the journalists at independent publications either are younger and less experienced or view themselves as foot soldiers in the fight against an authoritarian regime. Either case works against a standard of fair and professional reporting.

Several panelists cited the government’s aggressive attacks against independent media, particularly the many warnings issued by the Ministry of Information,

as leading to greater self-censorship. In the previous two years, the independent press had begun to cover stories such as strikes, protests, investigations of government services, and so on more aggressively than at any time since before the 1999 presidential election. In 2001 and 2002, news media that covered such topics responsibly largely avoided any problems. But in 2003, writing fair and responsible stories did not protect news outlets against government reprisals. The courts also offered no protection, with politicized judges almost uniformly ruling in favor of the government, regardless of the facts of the case. “I don’t remember ever saying to a journalist, ‘Don’t publish,’ but there is pressure,” said one panelist, an editor.

Under the press law, any outlet receiving three warnings (and in some cases, two warnings) can be summarily suspended or closed. The fact that outlets—such as *BDG*—that did not self-censor were repaid with warnings and suspensions led many news organizations to be far more cautious in their coverage of anything that could offend the government.

Regional publications and broadcasters, in particular, saw themselves as vulnerable to political reprisals; they also were more wary of writing stories that might drive away any of their small base of advertisers.

At the same time, the quantity and frequency of news broadcasts by independent television stations increased, as has the quality, particularly in the regions. Several regional broadcasters won international awards for documentary news productions in 2003. The technical facilities at most news outlets remained problematic. Reporters must share computers, and some have no computers. Except as provided by foreign donors, most outlets lack digital cameras, laptop computers, digital recorders, and other reporting equipment that is standard in the West. Many television stations have a single digital camera—and no vehicle with which to travel to gather news. Most outlets rely on foreign donors to afford Internet access. “It’s harder and harder to maintain and upgrade equipment, as the economic situation keeps worsening,” said one panelist.

Newspapers depend on state printing houses and, to a large extent, on state distribution and postal systems; the exorbitant fees they must pay make it difficult for them to operate profitably. Some newspapers have developed extensive self-distribution systems, but most are still heavily dependent on state-controlled distribution.

Some high-quality niche reporting is done. In particular, several national newspapers provide comparatively good business and economic coverage, thanks to reporters and editors who have received specialized training from international media assistance organizations. Such organi-



zations are the only source of such training; state journalism schools remain mired in Soviet-era approaches and do not provide practical journalism training.

### Objective 3: Plurality of News Sources

**Belarus Objective Score: 0.93/4.00**

A comprehensive effort by the Lukashenko government to suppress the independent media and to monopolize information channels to put out a single, state-controlled message contributed to a dramatic drop in the sources of news available in Belarus, panelists agreed.

While the average Belarusian can afford to buy newspapers and has access to television, that does not necessarily translate into ready access to a plurality of news sources. Two state television channels and a state radio network cover the entire country, but under the tightened control of the Lukashenko administration, the broadcasters speak with a single voice. Two Russian channels are available across most of the country, but they offer little Belarusian news. Most Minsk residents do not have access to the capital’s only independent broadcaster, Kanal 8. When this station became a significant source of independent news in 2001, with a potential reach of 3.6 million people, the state took away its

frequency. Though Kanal 8 came back on the air with a new transmitter, its power is low and its reach very limited. The state will not allow Kanal 8 to be carried on cable.

The situation is somewhat better in the regions, where 17 independent television stations, all with news broad-

casts, potentially reach about 80 percent of the regional population. But those stations focus primarily on local, rather than national, news. And in response to government pressure, almost all became very cautious in their news coverage in 2003. One panelist noted that constant checks by the Ministry of Information effectively intimidate many outlets into curtailing potentially risky news coverage. FM radio stations throughout the country offer very limited news coverage, and that, too, has become more circumspect under pressure from the state.

Many independent newspapers continue to publish and are readily available on both the national and regional level. And while many leading papers are working to create their own systems of distribution, the reach of the national newspapers in the regions remains spotty. The state uses its near-monopoly of distribution channels and sales outlets to limit the reach of independent national newspapers. Also, state newspapers receive subsidies and pay far lower printing, postage, and distribution fees, allowing them to sell for half or less what independent newspapers must charge to survive.

As a result, Minsk residents enjoy the greatest access to independent news sources, followed by residents of the regional capitals. Belarusians in remote regions, on rural farms, and in small villages sometimes have no access to independent print, television, or radio.

Internet use continues to grow slowly. Its reach follows the same pattern as the other media, with access declining the farther one lives from Minsk or the regional capitals. Fewer than one in 10 Belarusians report having ever used the Internet, and only a small percentage of them say they use it regularly. So far the government does not block access to Internet news sources, but Lukashenko has ordered the Ministry of Information to develop tighter regulations on the medium.

**“Is information available on who owns what newspaper? The average news consumer can’t tell how objective the information in a medium is without knowing that.”**

#### 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.

Few legal restrictions exist on access to foreign news sources; rather, the obstacles are economic. Cable is relatively affordable and available in Minsk but less so outside the capital. (Then, too, few Belarusians speak or understand English, which makes the availability of news sources such as BBC and CNN on cable of limited utility.) Few Belarusians can afford their own computers or Internet access, and the number of Internet cafés or free resource centers remains small.

No “public” media exist in the Western sense. The government uses state media almost purely for propaganda, including smear campaigns against other sources of information. State media are closed to alternative views or comments, with coverage of the opposition limited to partisan attacks against them.

Among the independent media, there are opposition newspapers that criticize the state just as stridently as the state media attack the opposition. But many independent outlets strive to be nonpartisan, and are seen by the public as such.

The leading independent news agency, BelaPan, came under tremendous pressure from the state in 2003, with the government ordering state media to drop BelaPan and rely exclusively on the state news agency, Belta. BelaPan could not compensate by raising its rates, as all but the largest independent news media already only could afford to subscribe with the help of foreign assistance. At the end of 2003, BelaPan faced an uncertain future.

Television broadcasters were faring better. In 2003, independent broadcasters had increased their production of news programming by 74 percent over two years earlier, with 10 of the 17 independent regional stations producing daily news, compared with just three in 2001. With the help of high-speed Internet links, four stations (in Orsha, Vitebsk, Borisov, and Polotsk) were exchanging video news packages and advertising on a daily basis, further increasing their ability to provide local viewers with regional news.

Media ownership in Belarus is not concentrated or controlled by a small number of conglomerates. However, ownership is not transparent. According to one panelist, “Is information available on who owns what newspaper? The average news consumer can’t tell how objective the information in a medium is without knowing that. We can’t say who owns ONT or STV; they’ve been declared as ‘independent,’ but their directors are appointed by the president.” The structure of ownership and limited access to information obscures the true control of many independent news media. This allows rumors (about Russian ownership, for example) to affect the credibility of some newspapers. Some city and local

governments have gained minority interests in local television, using shell companies to hide their ownership. Several panelists, however, noted that Belarusian consumers can tell who owns a media outlet (or at least with what interests the owner is affiliated) based on the outlet’s content and coverage.

While most Belarusian independent media do cover social issues, their efforts are limited because relatively few regional reporters have received adequate training, and the state severely limits access to information or statistics that might cast Belarus (or local governments) in a negative light. When broadcasters report aggressively on social problems (as with stories in 2003 by Skif-TV in Orsha on heating and water supplies and abandoned children, and stories by Intex-TV in Baranovich and Nireya-TV in Gomel about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster), local authorities focus on silencing the reporting rather than addressing the issues raised.

The greatest sensitivity in covering minority issues has to do with coverage of religious topics. Orthodox Christianity dominates in Belarus and has official legal status. Several regional journalists who covered other “sects” reported being harassed by local officials and Orthodox Church leaders. Minority-language media, such as those in Polish in western Belarus, can publish without special restrictions.

## Objective 4: Business Management

**Belarus Objective Score: 0.90/4.00**

Aggressive state interference made it increasingly difficult for media outlets to succeed as businesses during 2003, reversing more positive assessments for the past two years that had reflected significant management improvements made by many outlets.

International organizations provided extensive business training to media outlets, with corresponding improvements in accounting, business planning, marketing, advertising, and other business practices. But the obstacles, especially with regard to printing and distribution, also grew. The state owns or indirectly controls every printing press in Belarus. While even opposition papers such as *Narodnya Volya* had been able to print on state presses (albeit for far higher fees than state papers paid), the Lukashenko administration began more directly using its control of the presses in 2003. The director of one state press was fired after he allowed an issue of the suspended newspaper *BDG* to appear under the flag of another newspaper. And presses throughout

the country were ordered not to print certain newspapers (*Den*, *Mestnya Gazeta Shag*, and *Pagonya*, for example), and not to print either new newspapers or any dormant papers that were reactivated. While the newspaper *BDG* solved this problem by finding a printing press in Russia, other newspapers could not afford the higher shipping cost. The government also requires presses to reserve the use of four-color printing for state publications, and independent newspapers must pay print costs in advance while state papers can pay up to months afterward.

Distribution, too, is largely state-controlled. The only way in much of Belarus to provide home delivery is through the state postal system, which charges independent newspapers triple the fees it charges state papers. Independent papers must pass on the cost to readers, and publishers say independent newspapers' fees are used to subsidize the cost of delivering state papers.

Meanwhile, the state distribution system, which delivers to state-owned kiosks and sales outlets, also charges a huge price differential to independent newspapers. As with state printers, both the postal system and distribution company refused in 2003 to carry various newspapers that had been suspended or warned by the Ministry of Information—even after those suspensions ended. A panelist explained that “national and local authorities strongly interfere in printing and distribution.

*BDG* isn't the only example. *Den* can't get a printing house; *Mestnya Gazeta Shag* couldn't find a place after it helped *BDG*.”

Meanwhile, apparently under orders of the central government, the Minsk city government closed all independent sales kiosks in central Minsk during 2002 and 2003. The Minsk

suburbs and the oblast capitals began following suit in late 2003. In 2003, the government also adopted several new laws that require the licensing of distribution and sales points, giving the government a tool to block the creation of alternative distribution schemes.

There are existing alternative distribution companies—Roszerk, which primarily distributes magazines, and BelKP Press, which publishes the Belarusian edition of Moscow's *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and distributes it and several other papers to the regions. But both said they would not carry newspapers suspended or banned by the state. Meanwhile, many newspapers, including *Intex-Press*, *BDG*, *Brestsky Kurier*, *Brestskaya Gazeta*, *Kurier iz Borisova*, and *Mestnya Gazeta Smorgon*, among others, developed extensive self-distribution systems through which they delivered at least half their circulation (with that figure reaching 80 percent for *Intex-Press* and, before its forced closure by the government, 100 percent for *Mestnya Gazeta Smorgon*). How much further this admirable development can go, though, remains to be seen, since the Lukashenko government appeared to be moving to regulate and restrict independent distribution.

The sources of media financing are varied, but not entirely healthy. Due to the weak economy and government policies that strangle small and mid-sized businesses, Belarus has a stunted advertising environment. The many businesses that operate in the shadow economy do not advertise, for obvious reasons. In addition, unlike in the West, advertising is not considered a tax-deductible expense, and government regulations limit the amount that can appear in a newspaper to no more than 30 percent of its space. By comparison, European and US newspapers routinely carry 60 to 70 percent advertising. Most business enterprises, meanwhile, can

**“National and local authorities strongly interfere in printing and distribution. *BDG* isn't the only example. *Den* can't get a printing house; *Mestnya Gazeta Shag* couldn't find a place after it helped *BDG*.”**

**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.

spend no more than 2 percent of revenue on advertising. In addition, state media enjoy an enormous advantage in competing for what advertising is available, using their subsidized status to offer far lower rates than the independent media. Also, the government forbids state enterprises, which dominate the economy, from advertising in independent media.

This forces independent media to rely on subscription and sales. Here, too, the government intervenes, using regulations to keep prices—and revenue—artificially low. Regional broadcasters, facing an even leaner advertising market, rely heavily on the sale of private messages (birthday greetings, for example). Although regional broadcasters have a rudimentary network, they have not been able to agree on a common broadcasting schedule that would allow them to compete with the state channels for national advertising. They, too, face competition with artificially low advertising rates charged by the state channels (as low as \$25 a minute).

As a result of all these constraints, independent media tend to be very vulnerable to pressure. Political parties and businesses buy space and favorable coverage. When international donors provide assistance, they must beware of a tendency on the part of media outlets to tailor coverage to please their sponsor. Many newspapers depend on outside assistance to survive and develop, even though those sources are not sustainable. This is less true among regional television stations, having received less donor assistance. Radio stations, with lower operating costs, are more easily able to operate profitably but have been less significant as a source of news.

Market research firms do operate in Belarus, but mostly for the benefit of the government or the few international companies that advertise in Belarus. Their services are beyond the means of media outlets, except when international donors subsidize such research. Surveys funded by international assistance organizations provided outlets with some information, and many have developed in-house, albeit less sophisticated, research efforts to be able to provide advertisers with information about their readership or viewing audience. “It’s a dream to use annual marketing research,” said one panelist. Circulation figures in Belarus remain suspect, as there are no independent outside auditing firms. The Ministry of Information performs audits, but independent newspapers do not trust the results, which focus on print runs rather than copies distributed. As a result, many state papers show circulations that appear to be much higher than their actual readership.

There is no independent means through which broadcasters can assess their viewership. Some firms

conduct surveys and ratings research, but independent broadcasters cannot afford to access that information and instead rely on their own amateur surveys. As a result, ratings do not drive editorial or broadcast policies to any significant degree.

## Objective 5: Supporting Institutions

**Belarus Objective Score: 1.02/4.00**

A sustained government attack on NGOs, professional associations, and other assistance organizations produced a significant decline in support for independent media.

There are underdeveloped trade associations in Belarus, including the Foundation for the Development of the Regional Press, an organization of regional publishers and editors, and the Television Broadcast Network (TBN) for regional television managers. In practice, these organizations provide few benefits to members and rarely work collectively. TBN, for example, theoretically runs a central office to buy programming collectively and to gain national advertisers for the regional stations. But due to poor management, it provides meager sales and revenues. The foundation, meanwhile, primarily gains a volume discount for its members on newsprint purchases

### 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 private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

and provides some training, but it has not been effective at advocating for its members against state repression.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), which in 2003 won the World Press Association's Golden Pen award for defending press freedoms, brings together independent journalists and attempts to protect their rights through lobbying, legal assistance, and training. But while BAJ works effectively, its resources are stretched to the breaking point by the challenges its members face. Internal differences sometimes hamper the association's effectiveness, and it, too, has been investigated and harassed repeatedly by the government. Some journalists will not join the association, considering it politicized. Human-rights groups such as Charter 97 and the Belarus Helsinki Committee monitor press freedom, publicize violations, and are accessible to journalists throughout the country. The government shut down several indigenous human rights organizations in 2003. The Ministry of Justice ordered all Belarusian NGOs to provide copies of their registrations and lists of all their grant sources, employees, and planned events in an apparent prelude to a "cleansing" of NGOs seen as linked to the political opposition or the independent media.

One difficulty for groups supporting independent media is that the government is indifferent to its international image. For example, when the government drafted a new press law, it refused to make copies available publicly, even to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, as required by its membership in that organization. While BAJ obtained a leaked copy, it is unclear whether that draft reflected the version the government was preparing to pass. Article 19, an international NGO that monitors freedom of expression, took an active role in analyzing the draft and bringing its shortcomings to international attention.

During 2003, the government closed the only independent journalism degree program in Belarus. While state universities offer journalism degrees, their programs largely follow the Soviet model and do not meaningfully prepare students to practice journalism in the Western sense. In addition, the dwindling number of international assistance organizations has eliminated training programs offered to journalism students. The US-funded Muskie program has produced some practicing journalists, and some students study in Moscow. Overall, though, panelists said programs abroad offer only a trickle of trained young journalists. There are enough media outlets to absorb graduating journalism students. In fact, the problem is that there are not enough well-trained journalists to go

around, and many promising performers leave the field in search of better-paying professions.

For practicing journalists, substantial short-term training opportunities still exist, mostly run and funded by international agencies. Some have sought opportunities to provide more support in response to increased repression, but obstacles have been raised by the government, including new restrictions barring news media in Belarus from accepting foreign grants.

As discussed previously, printing facilities in Belarus are controlled by the state, favor state papers, and are used as weapons against independent papers. Similarly, the state predominantly controls distribution channels, manipulating them to limit the reach of independent media—and in some cases to destroy them.

While some radio and television transmitters remain in private hands, the government uses licensing and registration procedures to limit broadcasters' independence. Internet access also is controlled by the government, and while interference with access to information on the Internet has been sporadic, all signs point to the likelihood of more systematic approaches soon. One panel member asked, "Will we face more severe controls? Both local authorities and the Ministry of Information interfere, and I see more difficulties ahead with licensing and distribution."

## Panel Participants

**Andrey Bastunets**, attorney, Law Center for Media Protection, Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ)

**Zhanna Litvina**, president, Belarusian Association of Journalists

**Vadim Losev**, board member, Foundation for Local Press Development

**Pyotr Martsev**, publisher, *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta*

**Leonid Mindlin**, television consultant, board member, Belarusian Association of Journalists

**Robert Ortega**, resident advisor, IREX/ProMedia Belarus

**Vladimir Yanukevich**, director, *Intex-Press* Publishing House, Baranovichi

## Moderator

**Andrei Vardomatski**, director, Novak Market and Opinion Research