

**MEDIA**

**SUSTAINABILITY**

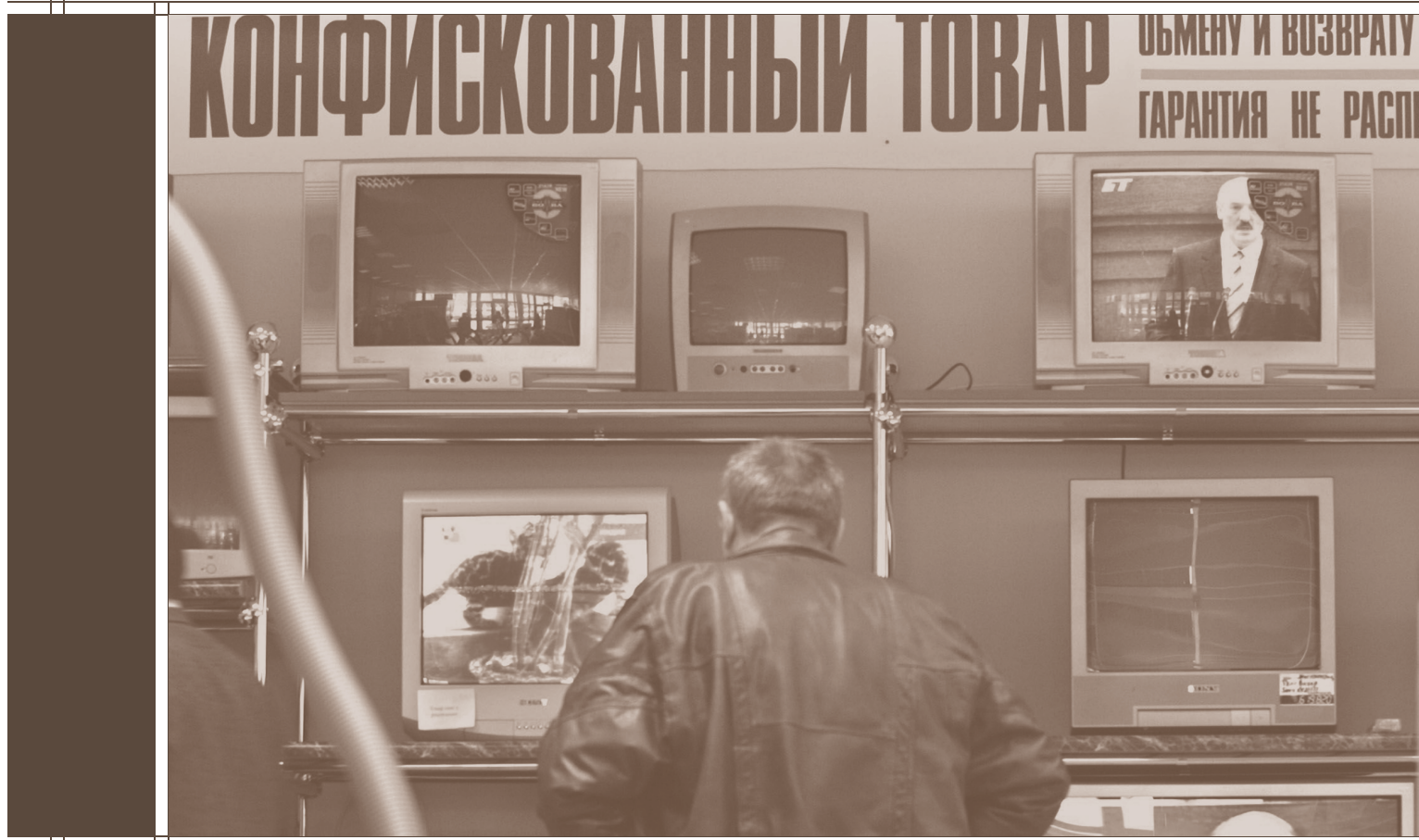
**INDEX**

**2004**



**IREX**

"THEY MAKE YOU SUBMIT YOUR BROADCAST CONCEPTS WHEN YOU APPLY FOR A FREQUENCY. KGB OFFICERS SIT THERE AND DECIDE WHETHER THEY LIKE YOUR PROGRAMS," SAID A PANELIST.



**T**hroughout 2004, the isolationist administration of President Alexander Lukashenko waged a systematic campaign to crush the independent media and monopolize the flow of information to Belarusians. These efforts peaked in October, when the country held parliamentary elections and a referendum to eliminate presidential term limits, and continued into 2005.

The elections—in which the government cemented its control of parliament and Lukashenko claimed a mandate to serve in office indefinitely—were roundly condemned as fraudulent by foreign observers and the opposition. The government responded to several days of protests, the largest of which brought 3,000 people to the streets of Minsk, by arresting and beating opposition leaders, reporters, and participants. Despite government harassment and interference, the surviving independent media and Russian television and newspapers, which are widely consumed in Belarus, covered the protests and government crackdown extensively. Thus, while the government's tactics quelled the protests, they also exposed many Belarusians to the degree of their own government's repressiveness.

The Belarusian economy depends heavily on subsidized energy from Russia, and on Russian investment. Small and medium-sized businesses form only a tiny part of the economy, as official policies, taxation laws, and bureaucratic regulations make it exceptionally difficult for entrepreneurs to operate both legally and profitably. Because of the complexity and draconian nature of regulations, essentially all private business run afoul of some law, resulting in heavy fines, "accommodations" through payoffs, or outright closure. As a result, one of the most active opposition groups in the months leading up to the referendum and election was an association of small-business owners. Widespread underemployment and inflation continue to make life difficult for the average citizen. Meanwhile, mutual ambivalence left very much up in the air the future of a proposed 2005 currency union with Russia, and an eventual economic and political union.

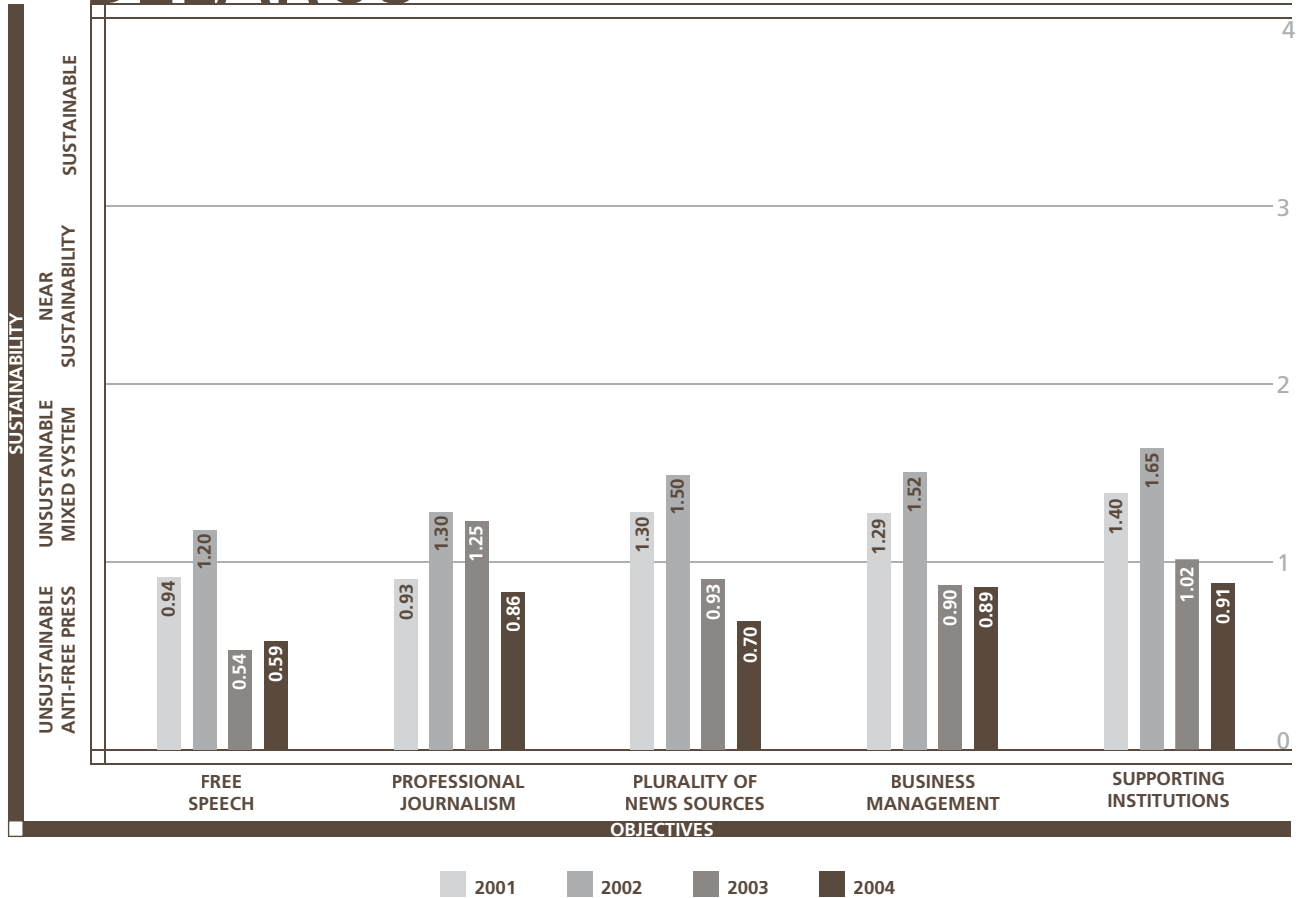
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*MSI panelists in Belarus agreed to participate only if they were not quoted by name. Some members of the 2003 panel declined to participate in 2004, citing concern about possible government repercussions.*

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## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

# BELARUS



**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.

The worsening media situation led to declines in almost every objective score in the 2004 Media Sustainability Index (MSI) for Belarus, following sharp drops in 2003. Expanding a drive begun in 2003, the government targeted specific outlets and journalists, MSI panelists said, launching dozens of spurious criminal and civil prosecutions for alleged libel and offenses against the honor and dignity of public officials. The Ministry of Information suspended 25 newspapers, in many cases for minor technical violations. Various authorities seized print runs of at least five newspapers. The government also adopted new regulations barring independent media and support organizations, such as the Belarussian Association of Journalists, from receiving foreign assistance.

Through presidential decrees, new regulations, and unofficial orders, the government moved to choke the ability of independent media to access and distribute news, and to operate profitably. On the news side, the central and local governments revoked or refused to issue accreditations to many journalists they considered troublesome. On the business side, the government imposed blanket denials of new newspaper registrations and unofficially ordered printing presses, all of which are state owned or effectively state controlled, not to print new newspapers or certain existing papers. This restriction forced several papers, most notably *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, to be printed in Russia. The government also ordered newspapers and the few independent distribution services to register their distribution departments and subscription services—and then rejected most applications; it eliminated the last three independent newspaper distribution services and pressured private stores and kiosks not to sell independent papers. It used re-registration orders to pressure most radio and television stations to grant partial ownership to local authorities, and to self-censor news coverage. For example, government officials threatened to de-register broadcasters that gave any coverage to or interviewed opposition parliamentary candidates. The government used threats of tax audits and other means to pressure independent businesses not to advertise in or subscribe to independent newspapers. And it ordered state bodies and employees not to advertise in or subscribe to independent newspapers.

Nonetheless, as of the end of 2004, 17 independent television stations and some three dozen independent newspapers continued to operate in various regions of Belarus. There were no radio stations still broadcasting independent news. Television stations have managed to survive by picking their reporting subjects with great care and engaging in substantial self-censorship;

in most cases they face no direct competition and have a captive advertising market and small news staffs, so they can scrape by on relatively modest means. Newspapers in some cases have been forced to use printing presses in neighboring Russia, to develop distribution systems that are not approved by authorities, and to rely on outside assistance. An increasing number of underground publications—unregistered and with no advertising, small circulations, and free distribution—have begun to appear in Belarus in the past year.

Even as it ramped up the pressure on independent media, the government created a third national state television channel, began building a regional state television and radio network, and systematically expanded and upgraded key state publications such as the presidential newspaper *Sovietskaya Belorussia* by buying new full-color Web presses, upgrading computer and photography equipment, and so on.

With President Lukashenko expected to stage-manage a third term in presidential elections to be held in fall 2006, there seems every reason to expect that the media situation will continue to worsen. Draft laws being prepared by the government are expected to restrict access to the Internet and possibly to create a government-run “public advisory” council to control the media.

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH

**Belarus Objective Score: 0.59 / 4.00**

While the Belarussian Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, in practice authorities routinely punish speech that does not toe the government line. Panelists agreed that by every norm, Belarus fails to protect free speech and that the situation compared to a year earlier is worse. (The slight rise in the overall MSI score for the objective is attributable to the higher score for the indicator concerning free entry to the journalism profession, with the 2004 panel assessing the barrier as more economic—low pay—than formal.)

Panel members said that few free-speech laws or social protections exist, and that those that do are either not enforced or enforced unfairly. Tax, licensing, and commercial codes are politicized, and journalists have almost no access to information that by law should be public. State prosecutors wield criminal libel laws as poleaxes against journalists. The highly politicized courts offer almost no protections, often making rulings at odds with the law. Panelists noted that of the 25 newspapers suspended by the Ministry of

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

**FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:**

- > 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.

Information during 2004, only in one appeal—by the paper *Vremya*—did a court overturn a suspension. Very few judges will overturn a ministry decision, even when the law clearly favors a media outlet.

***“Enforcement is one-sided, suppressing everything that doesn’t fit the concept. It is the system itself—the existing political and ideological structure—that hampers the enforcement of laws,” noted one panelist.***

“Enforcement is one-sided, suppressing everything that doesn’t fit the concept,” one panelist said. “It is the system itself—the existing political and ideological structure—that hampers the enforcement

of laws.” When *Mestnaya Gazeta* editor Andrei Shentorovich launched a hunger strike to protest the suspension of his weekly paper, he was fined \$550 in court for conducting an unsanctioned protest—a week after he stopped his hunger strike.

Several panelists complained that ordinary Belarusians do not value freedom of speech.

However, one panelist noted that when the Ministry of Information suspended the Molodechno newspaper *Regionalnaya Gazeta* in late September, scores of readers wrote letters of protest and dozens even traveled to the ministry in Minsk to demand that the paper be allowed to come out again. “They put massive pressure on the ministry,” a panelist said. “And this wasn’t initiated by the newspaper—on the contrary, [the editor Alexander] Mantsevich, as a very cautious person, was afraid of further repercussions. When readers called him asking whether they could do anything to help the newspaper, he kept on saying: “No, thanks. We’ll wait through the suspension.” The ministry complied with readers’ demands and revoked the suspension on October 12.

Local and state prosecutors frequently issued warnings to papers for covering opposition political parties. On June 21, the Belarusian KGB deported *Vremya* journalist Mikhail Padalyak to his native Ukraine, accusing him of “destabilizing” the country by reporting critically on President Lukashenko. The next day, the government barred several correspondents from entering parliament, trying to stop them from reporting on a hunger strike by opposition members of parliament. On May 11, the KGB raided the independent weekly *Den* in Grodno and seized documents and four computers, purportedly as part of a probe into the distribution of leaflets criticizing President Lukashenko.

Meanwhile, broadcast media licensing is highly politicized, with official favoritism for state media. “They make you submit your broadcast concepts when you apply for a frequency,” said one panelist. “KGB officers sit there and decide whether they like your programs.” In violation of its own laws, the Communications Ministry in 2004 awarded radio frequencies to a state trade-union and to the Minsk regional executive committee without allowing competing bids. Independent broadcasters who would like to expand say it is hopeless to even try to get new licenses. “You need to swear you will have news only from select government sources and provide exclusive coverage of the executive committee,” said one panelist.

Regional television broadcasters report being threatened by local authorities with the loss of their license if they aired critical stories, covered opposition candidates, or accepted opposition political advertising. BUG-TV, in Brest, was menaced by the local executive committee for re-broadcasting news programs produced by Russia’s REN-TV.

The news media are more highly regulated than other private businesses, having to gain licenses from and get approval for their office locations from local executive committees, as well as being regulated by state communications and information ministries. The Lukashenko administration ordered local authorities not to register new newspapers in 2004, though some suspended newspapers, such as *Den*, circumvented this ban by having previously acquired defunct newspaper registrations. Media outlets can be suspended or closed down after receiving three warnings (in some circumstances two) from the Ministry of Information. Tax regulations restrict how much money businesses can spend on advertising (typically no more than 12.75 percent of revenue), but advertising in state media is exempted from this regulation.

Crimes against journalists are rarely prosecuted, and state security has been implicated in some cases, including in the beating of several journalists during the election period. A Russian ONT TV reporter was beaten in front of other journalists and then charged by police with assaulting the men who had beaten him. On October 19, police beat journalists from Russia's REN-TV and NTV and broke their cameras. After the referendum, various journalists reported being summoned to the state prosecutor's office and warned that they could be criminally punished for having written stories alleging electoral fraud. Reporters in Gomel and Grodno reported receiving death threats. When the caller in Gomel was caught, he was let go with a fine. A deputy editor at *Narodnaya Volya* sought asylum in Belgium in December after saying he, too, received threats.

State-owned media receive a vast array of preferences compared with independent media: lower printing charges, lower distribution fees, lower postage rates, state-subsidized advertising, preferential advertising regulations, and preference or often exclusive access to information that in most countries would be considered public. Editors and directors of the main state media outlets are appointed directly by the president and the Minister of Information.

Belarussian law includes criminal penalties for libel and for offending the honor and dignity of public officials, and these options are used aggressively. Two businessmen received two-year sentences for distributing leaflets questioning presidential administration spending. The independent daily *Narodnaya Volya* paid \$30,000 in fines in two civil cases, BDG paid \$1,400 in another, and *Birzha Informatsii* editor Elena Ravbetskaya was fined \$600 for offending the honor of the president by writing an editorial

against the presidential referendum, among other examples. Belarussian libel laws do not include an "actual malice" standard, and the onus is on journalists and media outlets to prove the accuracy of any allegations. Truth is not a defense in offenses against the honor and dignity of public officials.

While Belarussian law guarantees independent and state-owned media equal access to information, in practice officials routinely bar independent media from access to public information and

meetings. While most journalists know their rights are being violated, there is no effective mechanism to make officials accountable. Ministry officials and oblast committees, among others, can and do classify almost any information as top secret. In early 2005, parliament was considering a law barring state officials from making comments to independent media.

International news broadcasts and publications can be distributed in Belarus only with the express permission of the Ministry of Information and through state-controlled channels. Most media outlets have access to the Internet, and Russian media are available throughout the country along with broadcasts from Poland and Lithuania in northern and western Belarus. However, the government censored various Russian broadcasts, claiming "technical problems" that happened to coincide with programs about Belarus, prohibited the Polish channel Polonia TV from being aired, and forced the Russian state broadcaster VGTRK to close its Minsk bureau after it reported on opposition protests. The government also has moved to limit foreign broadcasts, reducing the amount of Russian television airtime on state-controlled channels by 70 percent for the 18-month period until the end of 2004. Few news outlets can afford to subscribe to foreign wire services, and most Belarussians cannot afford access to the satellite dishes or cable television services that carry international broadcasts.

Anyone who wants to can practice journalism. Belarus does not license journalists. However, the government controls access by limiting accreditations and revoking them from troublesome journalists. There are no independent journalism schools in the country; and state schools must conform to propaganda decrees

***"You need to swear you will have news only from select government sources and provide exclusive coverage of the executive committee," explained a panelist.***

issued by the presidential administration. Two professors at the Institute of Contemporary Knowledge were dismissed in 2004 for not conforming to these teaching requirements.

**OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM**  
**Belarus Objective Score: 0.86 / 4.00**

Fear of government repression led to growing concerns over self-censorship and other professional compromises by journalists and news media, causing the score for this objective to fall substantially from 2003. Panelists were very mixed on the question of the level of professionalism of Belarussian journalists. All agreed that reporting at the state-owned media

***According to one panelist, "There is a civil cold war raging, so ethics are not a big value these days."***

outlets, especially on political and economic issues, failed to meet professional standards. Several panelists also felt that pressure

applied by the state increasingly has pushed journalists at independent media outlets into the position of the opposition; other panelists disagreed as to which was the cause and which was the effect.

**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).

In recent years, the standard of journalism at independent news media improved due in part to extensive training by US and European media-assistance organizations.

It has been increasingly difficult to conduct such training, as the authorities have forced all media-related nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) out of the country and have banned foreign assistance to the media. Most training is now conducted in neighboring countries such as Russia or Lithuania, or by the few remaining indigenous media NGOs. Nevertheless, most Belarussian journalists are aware of their ethical obligations to have multiple sources, check facts, and provide the public with objective information. Leading organizations, such as the Belarussian Association of Journalists, promote a code of ethics in line with international norms, and many leading independent media had been seen by the public as striving to be objective and to maintain high professional standards.

But panelists disagreed strongly as to whether enough of an effort is made to be fair, objective, and well-sourced. Some said regional newspapers have improved substantially; others argued that by comparison with reporters in more open neighboring societies, such as Poland and Lithuania, Belarussian journalists have fallen behind. Several panelists also felt that state repression of independent media was leading to a polarization that harmed ethical standards. "There is a civil cold war raging," said one panelist, "so ethics are not a big value these days."

Many newspapers publish paid advertising in the guise of news stories to appear to comply with the law that limits advertising to 30 percent of a newspaper's content. Panelists also said that journalists frequently accept bribes and gifts for favorable coverage, though they said they did not see this practice at media companies with their own ethic codes, such as Intex-Press. Given the severe economic constraints under which most outlets operate, and the abysmal pay levels (most journalists make less than \$50 a month), the financial temptation is substantial. Journalists also sometimes take payments not to cover a story.

Panelists also disagreed strongly as to the degree of self-censorship. Despite the certainty that doing so would provoke severe government reprisals, "this year some good papers published evidence of election fraud," noted one panelist, citing *BDG* and *Narodnaya Volya* as examples. Another noted that Belarussian reporters for Russian television networks such as REN-TV and TVC also report fearlessly. "They put themselves under real threat...these reporters are like kamikazes, but they do a great job," he said. But another noted



that fear made such courage the exception rather than the rule—especially in a year in the government suspended 25 newspapers. “The examples given by my colleague are real, but they don’t happen on a large scale,” said another panelist, citing newspapers that stopped covering stories about President Lukashenko, such as his visits to Austria, after the Information Minister threatened to close them.

The question of self-censorship connects directly to the degree to which journalists cover key events and issues. “Everything related to important decision-making in the country, to the distribution of material welfare, to corruption, is forbidden” by the authorities, said one panelist. Another noted that any news outlet that covers key events knows there will be consequences. “Tax inspectors may come—and that’s the least of it,” said one panelist, adding, “A journalist may get his face smashed in...a newspaper may be refused printing.” Under the press law, any newspaper receiving three warnings (or two warnings under certain provisions) can be immediately suspended or closed. The courts offer little protection, with most judges meekly ruling in favor of the government regardless of the facts.

Significantly higher pay at state media also hurts efforts at economically pressed independent media to retain journalists and prevent corruption. A typical journalist at a national independent paper might earn \$150 a month, versus \$300 at a state paper. The presidential administration newspaper *Sovietskaya Belarussiya* pays large salaries, especially to reporters in the regions. “You can very well go against your conscience for that money,” said one panelist.

While entertainment programming predominates—especially Russian entertainment programs—news and information on independent television stations continues to increase. Regional stations that used to broadcast news once or twice a week have gone to daily shows and have increased newscasts from 15 minutes to half an hour. However, independent radio news broadcasts all but disappeared in 2004, with the few independent stations dropping newscasts under unofficial threat of losing their licenses.

Lack of adequate technical facilities also poses a problem for all independent media. “We do not have a single paper where there is a complete and functional local computer network,” said one panelist, referring to the independent press. Most reporters do not have computers, and many television stations have only one or two video cameras for both field and in-studio work. Most news outlets rely on foreign donors to provide

them with Internet access. Except when donors provide them, most news outlets lack laptop computers, digital cameras, digital recorders, and other standard equipment. New government regulations bar media from accepting foreign assistance, and maintaining existing equipment is a constant challenge under severe budget constraints.

***“They put themselves under real threat...these reporters are like kamikazes, but they do a great job,” said a panelist.***

Newspapers rely on state-controlled printing houses and, in most cases, on state-controlled distribution, sales, and postal systems. Many newspapers made strides in recent years in developing independent means of distribution, but in 2004 the government undercut these efforts by adopting new laws requiring newspapers to get licenses for subscription and self-distribution. The Ministry of Information has refused to grant such licenses to many newspapers and has issued others with severe restrictions. The new laws effectively prevent independent newspapers from legally creating combined distribution networks.

Meanwhile, by contrast, government spending on state media rose dramatically during 2004. The government spent millions of dollars buying state-of-the-art television production facilities, improved printing equipment, and other technical upgrades, opening a significant technological advantage over independent news outlets.

***According to one panelist, “Everything related to important decision-making in the country, to the distribution of material welfare, to corruption, is forbidden.”***

Some high-quality niche reporting and programming exists, particularly at some of the national and larger regional newspapers, which continue to cover such topics as business, the environment, housing issues, education, local government, and so on. But increasingly, news outlets that engage in good reporting find themselves targeted for reprisals. Panelists disagreed about the extent of niche reporting, with some maintaining that few publications offer it because the insular Belarussian public does not demand it.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Belarus Objective Score: 0.70 / 4.00

An aggressive campaign by the Lukashenko administration to suspend or close independent newspapers, restrict independent broadcasting, limit Internet access, and eliminate most Russian news from cable, satellite, and broadcast television led for the second straight year to a sharp drop in the availability and variety of news sources in

***“Most editors and journalists at state media openly admit they are a propaganda arm of the regime,” noted a panelist.***

Belarus, panelists agreed. The average Belarussian can afford a television and can buy at least occasional copies of independent newspapers, but that does not

equate to access to a plurality of news sources. The three national state television channels, the state radio network, and state publications all speak essentially with a single voice. The government subsidizes subscriptions for workers and retirees to state publications, which also strictly follow the government’s propaganda line.

**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.

Under threat of losing their licenses, FM radio stations around the country stopped broadcasting independent news and now only read reports by the government’s information service, BelTa. Internet cafés, also under government order, routinely block access to websites with political news, such as the sites of Radio Liberty or the human-rights group Charter 97. One panelist noted that Internet cafés also register visitors by name and log for authorities the sites each user visits.

Meanwhile, the government routinely censors Russian RTR news programs such as “Zerkalo” and “Vesti Nedeli,” replacing them with the Belarussian STV program “Expert” whenever they cover Belarussian political or economic issues. One panelist noted: “Television viewers don’t even know they’re not getting the right programs, because it’s designed to look just like RTR.” Similarly, most news programs on the Russian channel ORT are replaced with state-produced Belarussian content. Cable operators, too, must get authorization from local authorities for all channels and programming they air.

In the past year, the Ministry of Information suspended 25 newspapers, forcing some to close and in other cases drastically reducing their reach once they resumed publication. The state often censors or confiscates independent publications. For example, on May 26 a Minsk-based state printing house said it would not print that week’s issue of the paper *Mestnya Gazeta* from the Grodno region unless it could replace an article on corruption at the local tax inspectorate. When editor Andrei Shantarovich said the space should be left blank so readers would know it was censored, the printing house cancelled its contract to print the paper. At least three times during 2004, police seized entire print runs of newspapers, including 5,000 copies of the newspaper *Den* on April 7. That issue carried an interview with the head of an entrepreneur’s association discussing a planned May 1 rally. The police said the seizure was based on the “dissemination of information on behalf of unregistered organizations.”

The government also pressured sales outlets not to carry independent newspapers. On August 23, seven Minsk-based supermarkets began refusing to sell leading independent newspapers, including *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, *Belorusskaya Gazeta*, *Belorussky Rynok*, and *Narodnaya Volya* via their newsstands. Supermarkets managers said they were following verbal “recommendations” by the Minsk city administration.

While the media law theoretically allows the free circulation of international media, in practice they are not widely read and few Belarussians can afford

foreign publications or satellite receivers. In Minsk, cable operators in 2004 stopped carrying CNN and BBC, leaving only Euronews available.

Panelists uniformly agreed that state media do not reflect the views of the entire political spectrum. “Most editors and journalists at state media openly admit they are a propaganda arm of the regime,” noted one panelist.

Three independent news agencies exist in Belarus: BelaPAN and the Russian-owned Interfax-Zapad and Belarus Prime-TASS. The leading agency, BelaPAN, has come under intense pressure for its independent reporting. The government prohibits state media from using BelaPAN and bars its reports from being broadcast on radio. “Most private media are too poor to afford BelaPAN,” said a panelist. BelaPAN said it has only 10 domestic news-media subscribers, and as a result also is under increasing financial pressure.

Despite the obstacles, Belarus has 15 independent television stations, and they have steadily been increasing their news production. By 2004, 11 stations were producing daily newscasts, up from just three stations in 2001. Four stations (in Orsha, Vitebsk, Borisov, and Polotsk) use high-speed Internet links to exchange news video packages and advertising on a daily basis, vastly increasing their ability to present regional news to their viewers. According to Novak Market and Opinion Research, these news stations reach 2.5 million viewers. However, several panelists noted that regional television stations frequently self-censor. “Sometimes they make great newscasts, and then they receive a phone call from the local executive committee saying [they] should not air [them] and they don’t, so there is little independence,” said one panelist.

Aside from the state, media ownership in Belarus is not concentrated; there are no media conglomerates. However, ownership is not transparent. Many nominally independent media are in fact owned by state or local government entities. For example, the management of the nominally independent broadcasters STV and ONT are appointed by the presidential administration. Several panelists noted that while ownership information is readily available, media outlets are sometimes held by shell companies or in the names of individuals whose connections are not apparent, making it difficult for the public to judge the objectivity of the news.

Meanwhile, it is increasingly difficult and risky for independent media to cover the full spectrum of social interests, panelists said. The state restricts access to information or data that might present officials in an unfavorable light, whether with regard to

contamination from the Chernobyl disaster, high rates of HIV/AIDS, or other concerns. There are few minority-language publications, and panelists noted that those—such as the Polish-language *Glos*

*Znad Neimna*—do

not cover politics or social issues. There is almost no coverage of marginalized communities, such as the Roma. And coverage of religious topics remains sensitive. Orthodox Christianity, the dominant religion, has a special legal status in Belarus; the government restricts the religious freedoms of other faiths, and several publications have reported being attacked for covering them.

***“Sometimes they make great newscasts, and then they receive a phone call from the local executive committee saying [they] should not air [them] and they don’t, so there is little independence,” said another panel participant.***

#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

**Belarus Objective Score: 0.89 / 4.00**

Ever more aggressive interference by the state made it all but impossible for independent media to operate as profitable, legal businesses in Belarus, continuing a decline that began in 2003 after several years of steady improvement. In previous years, thanks to extensive business training by international assistance organizations, many leading media outlets made strides in improving their accounting, advertising sales, planning, distribution, marketing, and other practices. But panelists agreed that state-imposed obstacles on advertising, printing, broadcasting, circulation, distribution, and other areas have succeeded in making even the best-run news businesses economically vulnerable.

For example, the newspaper *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, one of the most respected and successful papers in the country during the previous five years with paid daily circulation nearing 70,000 at its peak, was targeted in 2003 through politicized court rulings, fines, and suspensions. It was denied access to printing presses, the state-controlled distribution system, and many sales outlets. State officials threatened the paper’s advertisers with tax inspections and other reprisals. Now the paper is printed in Smolensk, Russia, has almost no advertising, and has lost 75 percent of its circulation because it is so difficult to get copies to readers. Journalists in Belarus widely perceive that

**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.

the paper was targeted precisely because it was seen as perhaps the most balanced, independent, and trustworthy national publication. “BDG used to be the best example for the newspaper business in Belarus,” said one panelist. “Look at them now; and that is all the result of the efforts of the authorities.”

**“BDG used to be the best example for the newspaper business in Belarus. Look at them now; and that is all the result of the efforts of the authorities,” noted a panelist.**

The state owns or indirectly controls every printing press in Belarus. In addition to *BDG*, newspapers that have been driven to print in Russia include *Vremya*, *Solidarnost*, *Mestnaya Gazeta*, and *Den*.

Independent papers that have access to printing houses in Belarus pay higher printing fees that must be paid in advance, while state papers may pay several months afterward.

In 2004, the government imposed new distribution-licensing laws and then denied licenses to the three independent news distribution services in the country as well as to many newspapers’ self-distribution systems. This left two alternatives: rely entirely on the state distribution and postal systems, which charge

independent newspapers triple the fees charged state papers, or distribute illegally.

At the start of 2004, the government granted state news agency BelTa exclusive rights to television listings in Belarus. BelTa promptly notified independent newspapers that to publish the listings they would have to pay about \$2,100 a month, compared with \$50 a month charged state papers for identical material.

Independent media rely on advertising, subscriptions, and sales as their main sources of revenue. But the advertising market is a shambles, stunted by a weak economy and government policies that smother small and medium-sized businesses that are mainstays of local advertising. Unlike in the west, advertising is not a tax-deductible business expense, and businesses that operate in the country’s large shadow economy do not advertise. State subsidies let state-owned newspapers charge artificially low advertising rates. The government further restricted advertising in 2004, ordering state entities not to advertise in independent media and strictly enforcing regulations limiting advertising in newspapers to less than 30 percent of content. (By comparison, US and European publications typically contain 60 to 70 percent advertising content.) Regional broadcasters, too, face artificially low competition from state broadcasters that charge as little as \$25 a minute for advertising.

Advertising agencies and related industries do not meaningfully support a strong advertising market, as they themselves are subject to state pressures and interference. The result, panelists agreed, is that advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is far lower than it would be in a normal economy.

The state also interferes in subscription—again, requiring and denying licenses to newspapers’ own subscription services—and in sales. Authorities in most regional capitals continued a campaign begun in 2003 to eliminate independent sales kiosks. State kiosks are often ordered not to sell specific independent papers, and not to display prominently those they do sell.

Some panelists noted that the government subsidizes and controls media outlets that present themselves as independent, such as *Kravaznauchava Gazeta* and *Golas Radzimy*. Another noted that the paper *Obozrevatel*, nominally independent but controlled by a close ally of the president, is pro-Lukashenko and receives government help in exchange for attacking independent media. One said the independent television station in Mogilov accepted a grant from the local government to produce a news program.

A few independent newspapers conduct their own market research regularly and use that information to formulate strategic plans, tailor their advertising, and otherwise better target their audience. However, most outlets lack the know-how to do such research effectively and cannot afford to pay for market research.

Meanwhile, there are no reliable independent broadcast ratings—a fact that leads the few large advertisers to rely on market-research firms for such information. But independent broadcasters cannot afford to buy such ratings information, panelists agreed, and ratings do not affect programming in any meaningful sense. Radio stations do research their audiences, “but as of January 2005 they will be made to air 75 percent Belarussian music,” regardless of public tastes, noted one panelist.

The only circulation figures available are those compiled by the Ministry of Information, which are highly suspect. There are no independent newspaper-auditing firms. The Ministry of Information figures report the number of copies printed rather than the number sold or distributed, with the result that the circulations of state papers tend to be exaggerated and not reflective of actual readership.

#### OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

**Belarus Objective Score: 0.91 / 4.00**

Ongoing government attacks on NGOs, professional associations, trade associations, and other organizations led for the second straight year to a substantial decline in support for the independent media. Various trade associations exist for regional newspapers, television stations, and cable-television operators, but panelists agreed that they are underdeveloped, generally provide limited services, and are ineffective in protecting their members against the government. “I think we cannot talk of any lobbying of government structures at all,” said one panelist. Another noted that in the face of government pressure on their members, organizations such as the Television Broadcast Network, an association of regional television managers, and BANT, the cable-operators association, have reduced activities. The Foundation for the Development of the Regional Press, an organization of regional publishers, primarily acts as a bulk purchaser of newsprint for its members.

There is one notable professional association: the Belarussian Association of Journalists (BAJ), which in 2003 won the World Association of Newspapers Golden Pen award for defending press freedom, and in 2004 was awarded the European Union’s Sakharov Prize for

#### 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.

Human Rights, previously won by Nelson Mandela. BAJ brings journalists together to defend press freedom through lobbying, legal work, and monitoring. It also works with international organizations to provide training to its growing membership. But as the only meaningful professional association, it is often stretched impossibly thin. And it, too, has been subjected to harassment, including tax audits and other government investigations, having its officers questioned by the Belarussian KGB, and being denied official permission to accept a €50,000 award that accompanied the Sakharov Prize.

***“I think we cannot talk of any lobbying of government structures at all,” declared a panelist.***

Several human-rights groups and other NGOs, such as the Belarus Helsinki Committee, Vyasna, and the Union of Entrepreneurs, also involve themselves in supporting independent media by monitoring and publicizing violations of free-speech rights. When the national daily paper *Narodnaya Volya* was fined more than \$30,000 in two cases and appeared to face closure, several of these groups helped organize a large public protest in downtown Minsk in June.

These groups themselves are under government pressure: The Belarus Helsinki Committee, for example, was fined \$177,000 by tax authorities and nearly shut down before succeeding in getting the fine overturned in court. The government shut down at least 52 indigenous NGOs during the year, forcing many of them to work underground.

Several panelists noted that some NGOs actually harm independent media. They said that Charter 97, a human-rights watchdog, takes BelaPAN reports without paying for them and posts them on its website, without attribution, for use by Belarussian and international media. This undercuts BelaPAN's efforts to maintain its subscriber base. Charter 97 continues this practice despite repeated requests to desist. Other panelists noted that the postings on that website are frequently slanted and altered for antigovernment propaganda purposes, putting publications that use such reports at risk.

There are no independent journalism degree programs in Belarus, the last one having been closed by the government in 2003. Belarus State University and other state universities that teach journalism (in Grodno, Vitebsk, and Gomel, among other places) do not provide any practical experience and are so outdated and Soviet-style in approach that even the government ordered audits this year to address the "unsatisfactory level of graduates' knowledge." The few progressive faculty members who were trying to teach more modern journalism practice were fired this year in an ideological purge. Reports in *BDG* suggested that the presidential administration considered journalism faculties, along with the law and history faculties, to be the most "politically unreliable." President Lukashenko himself ordered universities to impose new required ideology courses in all faculties.

Training programs for journalism students are also limited. The government has blocked most study-abroad programs, including those in Moscow. And those students who graduate with any skills find that pay levels and opportunities are much greater in nonjournalism fields, such as public relations.

Short-term training opportunities for working journalists still exist, primarily funded or conducted by international media-assistance organizations in cooperation with local media outlets or associations. But efforts by international donors are hampered by increasing government restrictions—including a new law in 2004 that barred all foreign assistance to media organizations. Media outlets, meanwhile, are often reluctant to send journalists to be trained because their newsrooms are so short-staffed.

Printing facilities in Belarus are without exception controlled by the state, operated for the benefit of state papers, and used to censor and restrict the ability of independent papers to report news and reach the public. At least eight newspapers seen as troublesome were entirely denied access to printing in the country in 2004. While newsprint is still generally available—though expensive and imported—the government also uses its monopoly on distribution to punish independent papers, limit their reach, and in many cases try to destroy them. The government denied distribution licenses to some papers with the most extensive self-distribution systems, such as *Intex-Press* of Baranovichi. It forced the closure of all three of the country's independent newspaper distributors. And it arrested dozens of individuals for illegally selling or distributing copies of such newspapers as *BDG*, *Den*, *Vremya*, *Vybor*, and others. As for other channels of distribution: "Kiosks, transmitters, Internet—all these means are controlled by the government," said one panelist.

Some television and radio transmitters are still in private hands, but both the national and local governments use registration and licensing laws to force broadcasters to self-censor, particularly in radio. The government also directly controls Internet access. While interference has been relatively limited to date, the government has been moving to restrict Internet access more systematically, and in 2005 was expected to adopt a comprehensive set of Internet regulations and restrictions.

## Panel Participants

**Leonid Mindlin**, correspondent, WEN-TV, Minsk

**Sieva Rahoisha**, board member, Foundation for Development of Local Press, Minsk

**Andrei Bastunets**, vice chair, Belarussian Association of Journalists, Minsk

**Piotr Martsev**, editor-in-chief, publisher, *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, Minsk

**Sergei Kuziomenskiy**, director, SKIF-TV, Borisov

**Ales Lipai**, director, BelaPAN Information Company, Minsk

**Anna Gerasimova**, print project coordinator, Mass Communications Foundation, Minsk

**Paulyuk Bykowski**, political editor, *Belorusskiy Rynok*, Minsk

## Moderator

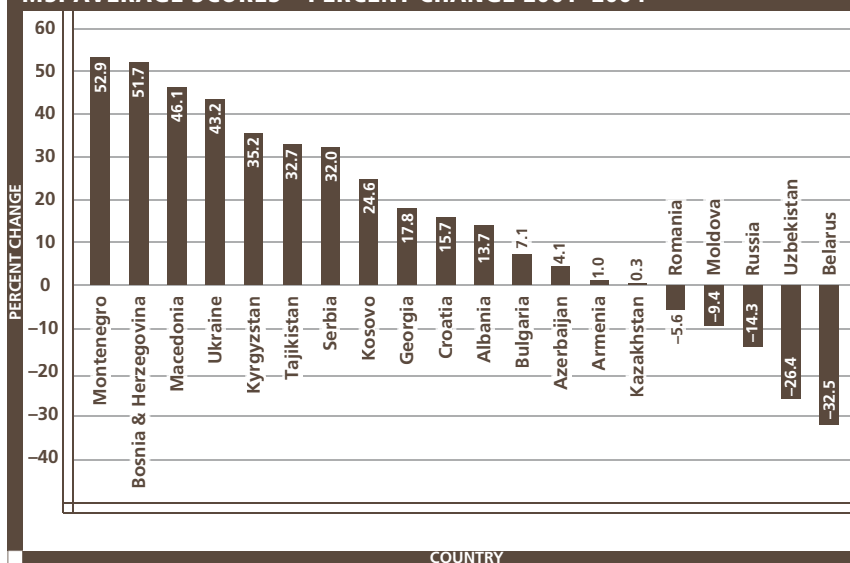
**Vadim Losev**, production manager, Zdorovje Publishing House, Moscow (Russia)

# BELARUS AT A GLANCE

## GENERAL

- **Population:** 9,812,900 *Belorussky Rynok, 2004 data*
- **Capital city:** Minsk
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Belarussians 81.2%, Russians 11.4%, Poles 3.9%, Ukrainians 2.4%, other 1.1% *1999 official population census*
- **Religions (% of population):** Christianity officially comprises 50%.<sup>1</sup> Of that 50%, 73% are Russian Orthodox, 14% are Catholics, and 2% are Protestants.<sup>2</sup> Non-Christian religions make up the other 50% (data not available from official sources).
- **Languages (% of population):** 73.7% of the population considers Belarussian their primary language; 24.1% consider Russian their primary language. *1999 official population census* However, only 36.7% speak Belarussian on a daily basis, while 62.8% speak Russian.
- **GDP:** US\$17.45 billion *World Bank*
- **GDP/GNI per capita:** \$1,590 *World Bank*
- **Literacy rate (% of population):** 97% *1999 official population census*
- **President or top authority:** President Alexander Lukashenko
- **Next scheduled elections:** September 9, 2006

## MSI AVERAGE SCORES—PERCENT CHANGE 2001–2004



## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Newspaper circulation statistics (total circulation and largest paper):** *Sovietskaya Byelorussia* is a state-owned daily with an official print run of 506,948 copies per issue and a weekly circulation of 2,534,740. *Belarussian Ministry of Information*
- **Broadcast ratings (top three ranked stations):** First National Channel of Belarussian Radio is broadcast throughout Belarus—in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Its daily share is 40.7%. FM station Russkoye Radio (Russian Radio) in Belarus has a daily share of 9.1%.

Radio BA, the oldest FM station in Belarus, has a daily share of 7.4%. *2004 data from Novak Laboratory*

- **Number of print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** There are 1,255 print outlets, nine information agencies, 54 television stations, and 136 radio stations. *Belarussian Ministry of Information*
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** US\$40 million in 2004 (including advertising in the press, on television, radio, Internet, and outdoor advertising) *Hepta Group Publicis advertising agency*
- **Number of Internet users:** 14.3% of population *I/SEPS News – Analytic Bulletin of Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, #3, October 2004*
- **Names of news agencies:** BELTA, BelaPAN, Interfax-West, Prime-TASS, Ecopress, Grevtsov Agency, Minsk-News, Financial News Agency, Television News Agency (Belarussian State TV and Radio Company), Register Information and Legal Agency

<sup>1</sup> *Interfax-Zapad* news agency referencing the Institute of Sociology at the Belarussian Academy of Sciences, 2001

<sup>2</sup> From an interview with Stanislav Buko, chair of the State Committee on Religions and Nationalities at the Council of Ministers, April 11, 2003. This is the newest information on religion in Belarus.

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BELARUS

