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BELARUS

The media landscape in Belarus has seen little change as the country has retained its autocratic political system, which maintains control over civil and political life as well as freedom of speech. The government had long kept tight reins on traditional media and is moving to deploy stricter controls over the Internet. Cumbersome and loosely-worded registration and licensing requirements stonewall the print and broadcast media from presenting alternative points of view.

Menacing legal requirements remain in place under the pretext of creating responsible media and disciplining errant journalists. Libel remains criminalized and public officials enjoy greater protection from scrutiny by the media. As a result, the media are forced to continue practicing self-censorship. Barriers around accreditation prevent journalists from reporting on potentially sensitive topics such as corruption or the financial crisis. Meanwhile, division along ideological lines damages standards of accuracy and fairness.

The government controls around 75 percent of the GDP, composed mostly of unreformed state-run businesses that do not see a need to advertise their products or services. Nonetheless, the advertising market grew 6.3 percent to \$116 million over the past year. Meanwhile, the national government's direct funding of state-run media amounted to \$69 million in 2014. State-controlled media organizations also receive funding from the local government and other financial support via tax breaks and subsidized tariffs.

Although nearly 600 state-controlled media outlets present one point of view largely aligned with the government, public dissent nonetheless flourishes online. Around 64 percent of Belarusians use the Internet to receive news and analysis.

In the wake of the financial crisis, and ahead of presidential elections in late 2015, the government decided to tighten its grip on the Internet. Two weeks before the end of 2014, the authorities revised the existing media law to exert even tighter control over online media. Owners of websites will be held responsible for content posted by users on their websites, most notably information deemed to be extremist or capable of harming national interests.

Note: MSI panelists in Belarus agreed to participate only if they were not named publicly. The Criminal Code contains an article, "Discrediting the Republic of Belarus," which criminalizes providing "false information" to international organizations about the situation in the country. Human rights groups, both domestic and international, believe the article's vague wording makes it possible for the government to detain for up to six months anyone reporting negative information or to imprison them for up to two years.

BELARUS at a glance

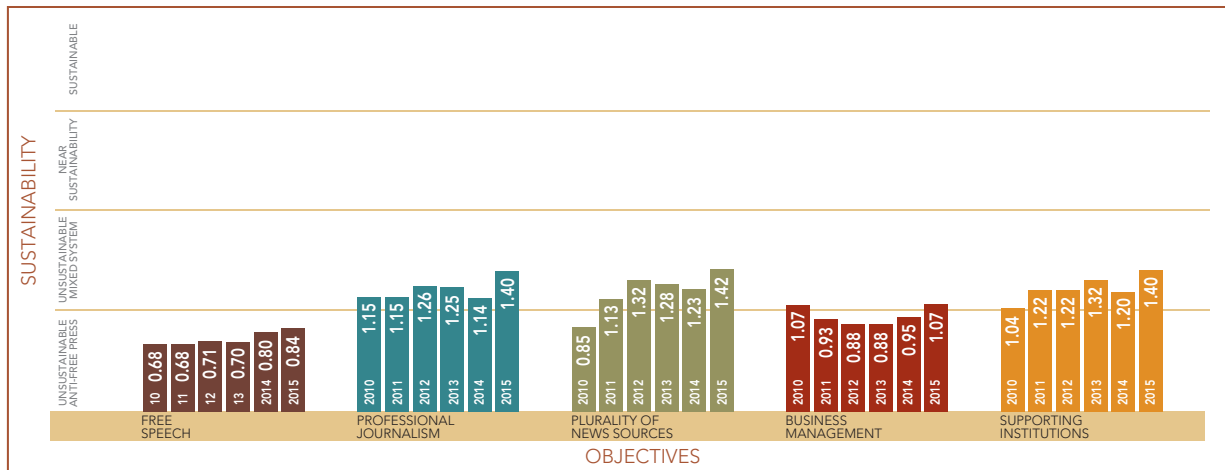
GENERAL

- > Population: 9,608,058 (July 2014 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Capital city: Minsk
- > Ethnic groups (% of population): Belarusian 83.7%, Russian 8.3%, Polish 3.1%, Ukrainian 1.7%, other 2.4%, unspecified 0.9% (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Religions (% of population): Eastern Orthodox 80%, other (including Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim) 20% (1997 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Languages (% of population): Belarusian (official) 23.4%, Russian (official) 70.2%, other 3.1% (includes small Polish- and Ukrainian-speaking minorities), unspecified 3.3% (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > GNI (2013-Atlas): \$63.68 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- > GNI per capita (2013-PPP): \$16,950 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- > Literacy rate: 99.6%; male 99.8%, female: 99.5% (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > President or top authority: President Alexander Lukashenko (since July 20, 1994)

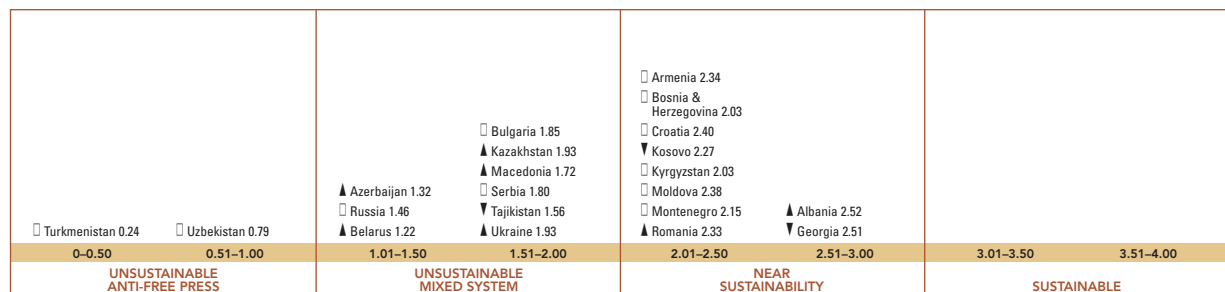
MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals: 1,846 (Newspapers: 712, journals and magazines: 804, radio stations: 172, TV stations: 93, bulletins: 42, catalogs: 12, information agencies: 9, almanacs: 2 (October 2014, Ministry of Information); Internet News Portals: 25 (2014, Gemius)
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: Top three by circulation *SB. Belarus Segodnia* (circulation 2,000,000, state-owned), *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* (circulation 436,000, private, Russian-owned), *Respublika*, (circulation 160,000, state-owned) (December 2014, Medusa advertising agency)
- > Broadcast ratings. Top three by share: NTV-Belarus—14.8%, ONT—13.97%, RTR-Belarus—13.27% (December 2014, GEVS)
- > News agencies: BelTA (state-owned), BelaPAN (private), Interfax-Zapad (Russian-owned), Prime-TASS (Russian-owned), Ecopress (private), Agentstvo Grevtova (private), Minsk-Novosti (state-owned), Registr Information and Legal Agency (private) (Belarus Ministry of Information, 2014)
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: \$116.3 million (\$62.4 million television, \$19.9 million Internet, \$10.5 million press, \$6 million radio) (Vondel Media advertising group, December 2014)
- > Internet usage: 5,204,685 (2013, www.internetworldstats.com)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BELARUS



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2015: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



CHANGE SINCE 2014

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

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

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

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

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

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

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Belarus Objective Score: 0.84

The Belarusian constitution and several laws, including the media law, as well as international treaties ratified by Belarus, guarantee the freedom of speech. Yet what the law actually says is less important than the arbitrary way in which it is oftentimes applied. “In real life, many of these democratic provisions are hardly enforced or ignored altogether,” noted one panelist.

Most notable are the hyper-strict regulatory environment and restricted access to official information. “Laws provide for no ways for a newsroom to file an official request for information, yet there are many situations when a media outlet can be punished for distributing certain information,” another panelist commented.

Moreover, the laws are kept menacing but vague. For example a media outlet may be punished by the government regulator, the Ministry of Information, over a minor technical mistake or for publishing information that turned out to be incorrect, even if there is no harm done.

One of the panelists mentioned yet another absurd case. In May 2014, the ministry issued a warning to the privately-owned weekly *Svobodnyje Novosti Plus*. The newspaper allegedly “harmed public interests” and “was

forming a negative attitude towards the World Hockey Championship.” The capital Minsk was hosting the tournament in May 2014. What the newspaper wrote was that the Russian national ice hockey team would have no players that had been part of its (presumably stronger) Olympic team earlier that year. The information was correct on the day the newspaper went to press. Yet on the following day, two more players—who happened to be playing for Russia at the Olympics—were added to the roster. It should be noted that the ministry might shut down a media outlet after giving two such warnings within a year.

Meanwhile in December 2014, the Belarusian parliament adopted amendments to the already restrictive media law that impose stringent rules on online media similar to those traditional media have had to abide by for many years. According to the vaguely worded provisions, any website that distributes information—including blogs and social networks—is considered to be a media outlet. Foreign websites will have to receive permission to be distributed in Belarus. Other provisions allow the ministry to block access to any website if it violates those or other requirements. The new law also bans the distribution of information deemed to be extremist or capable of harming national interests, defined in similarly vaguely a manner as in other laws.

It should be noted that amendments were rather hastily voted through the parliament. On December 18, 2014, the bill passed two readings in the lower chamber, was endorsed by the upper chamber on the following day, and signed into the law by the president a day later. The updated law entered into force on January 1, 2015.

In theory, journalists and the media have the right to seek protection in court, yet “There is an entrenched stereotype that Belarusian courts are far from being independent,” a panelist explained. As for public outcry, violations of freedom of speech in most cases go unnoticed: “The best there could be is some solidarity from the media community,” the panelist added.

Confidentiality of news sources is guaranteed by law, yet may be overridden by a court order or a request from an investigating authority as part of a court hearing or criminal investigation. The panel however failed to recall any cases where a journalist was compelled to reveal his or her sources.

The media law requires registration of traditional media (print, television and radio stations, and news agencies), which according to Western standards is already somewhat of a restriction of media freedom, a panelist noted. Both registration and licensing procedures remain cumbersome and politicized. Applicants need to provide numerous details on the would-be outlet, including topics to be covered, frequency, distribution area, as well as information about

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

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

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

“Foreign journalists are very restricted as far as their accreditation is concerned. There are a number of examples when a media outlet has not been able to receive accreditation for many years,” one panelist noted. “Those outlets that are lucky to win accreditation face a constant problem of whether accreditation of a certain number of their journalists will be extended.”

the sources of funding and the editor-in-chief. The latter should have a journalism diploma and at least five years of work experience as an editor. There should also be a company or a non-profit organization to act as publisher or a broadcaster.

On the positive side, amendments to the media law adopted in December 2014 exempt online media from registering with the government. Internet media nonetheless must abide by all other stringent regulatory requirements.

There is no equal access to the frequency spectrum, and state-owned media undoubtedly receive preferential treatment a panelist said, as the National State Television and Radio Company—a conglomerate of four television and five radio channels and five regional television and radio companies—as well as broadcasters founded by the president or the Council of Ministers—receive frequencies without a bidding process.

Meanwhile, in accordance with the law, frequencies are allocated via a tender administered by the Republican Commission on Television and Radio Broadcasting—the nine-member body of government officials headed by the Minister of Information. Applicants need to provide detailed information, most notably on what kind of programming the station will be offering. Successful bidders are then required to receive a license from the Ministry of Communications and Informatization to use that frequency. “Just to sum, all these licensing procedures are used to impose constraints [on the freedom of information]” a panelist explained.

With few exceptions, market entry for media outlets is the same as for businesses in other sectors. Most notably, the media law restricts foreign ownership of broadcasters and publishers to 30 percent. New amendments to the law

further lowered that cap to just 20 percent. Separately, publishers and broadcasters cannot be registered as sole proprietors. Media receive no tax breaks, although state-owned television and radio networks have been exempt from VAT and profit taxes for years.

Physical crimes against journalists remain rare. Just like previous years, panelists only spoke of cases of police interference with working journalists, usually during demonstrations. In a somewhat positive development, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, a domestic press freedom watchdog, reported about 29 counts of short-term arbitrary detentions of journalists in 2014, down from 45 a year earlier.

One of the panelists referred to the blocking of several news websites critical of the government in December as a sort of cyber sabotage or crime. Two of the websites pulled are run by officially registered media outlets and hosted on servers inside Belarus. The state-owned telecom monopoly, Beltelekom, stated its infrastructure had come under DDoS attack on the day those website were blocked. The law enforcement agencies apparently failed to hold anyone accountable for these incidents. “There was a crime and there has been no investigation, at least at this moment,” added the panelist.

The law guarantees editorial independence of all media outlets, either private or state-owned (Belarus has no public media). The state-run media organizations however depend heavily on government paychecks and subsidized tariffs. More importantly, their editors are appointed by the government, with editors of key national outlets appointed by the president himself. Quite common are “coordination meetings” with editors of state outlets where they receive guidance on how certain affairs should be covered in order to maintain a consistent official line.

Libel remains criminalized in Belarus, punishable by up to six months in prison. Yet there were no reports of libel cases lodged against journalists or media outlets in 2014. Meanwhile every year Belarusian media face dozens of civil defamation suits. In such cases, a plaintiff does not have to prove actual damage to reputation and the burden of proof rests on the defendant. In cases our panelists were familiar with, plaintiffs sought around \$5,000 (the country’s average annual salary) in damages.

As noted above, the law does not hold government officials to a higher standard with regard to proving damages. According to Belarusian laws, “insult of a representative of the authorities” is punishable by up to six months in jail. The penalty for “insulting the president” is up to two years in

prison and “calumny toward the president” is punishable by up to four years.

In accordance with 2009 Internet regulations, publishers and hosting providers enjoyed protections that allowed them to avoid litigation if they took material down following an initial complaint. Those protections however were dropped in the amended media law adopted in December 2014. Even before those amendments many news websites adopted some sort of pre- or post-moderation policy to avoid potential legal implications.

The Belarusian government has sustained a culture of secrecy and many government agencies keep as much information as possible behind closed doors. Although the 2009 Law on information, informatization and protection of information guarantees access to, and distribution of, public information, it also allowed many exemptions. Almost 60 state agencies, regional governments, and state-run companies have the right to qualify their information as secret. Furthermore, government officials are only allowed to talk to the press after the go-ahead from their bosses. Government public affairs officers (in many cases still named ideology officers) have been imposing more barriers onto journalists’ reporting practices in recent years.

A journalist’s right to information is no different from any other citizen. Before 2009, media requests for information required a response within 10 days. After the revision of the media law, the only way to seek disclosure of public information is via the 2011 law on requests by individuals and legal entities. It requires an organization (or a government agency) to reply within 15 working days (30 days when additional inquiry is required).

Privately-owned media outlets, especially those that criticize government policies, have the most trouble receiving public information. In many cases government agencies refuse to release certain information (usually statistical data) on the grounds that it takes too long to retrieve it. Sometimes fees are charged for fulfilling an information request. Increasingly requests from private media are dismissed on the grounds that such information has already been given to state-owned outlets. A largely unregulated system of accreditation is another tool to keep critical reporters away: private outlets are sometimes denied accreditation on the grounds that a sufficient number of other outlets (in most cases state-run) have already received accreditations and can offer sufficient coverage.

The government does not restrict access to and use of both domestic and foreign news sources. Affordability is more of a limiting factor, especially using foreign newswire service,

the panel said. Copyright-wise, the 2011 law gives a vague definition of what is fair use of copyrighted materials. Many news organizations borrow stories from other outlets without even rewriting them, although in many cases credit is given to original sources. Use of pirated photos is widespread and poses a somewhat bigger legal threat. The panel however failed to recall any copyright infringement lawsuits against media outlets.

Entry into journalism remains unrestricted. Still, the media law defines a journalist as a staff member of an officially registered domestic news outlet. Citizen journalists, bloggers, and freelancers are considered non-journalists and lack those very few benefits their official status might have given them. One of those is fewer problems with law enforcement agencies during newsgathering. People using professional photo and video equipment in the streets might expect to have their press credentials checked by the police. Another is access to events that require accreditation, which one receives from an officially registered media outlet.

Reporting for a foreign news outlet requires accreditation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Foreign journalists are very restricted as far as their accreditation is concerned. There are a number of examples when a media outlet has not been able to receive accreditation for many years,” one panelist noted. “Those outlets that are lucky to win accreditation face a constant problem of whether accreditation of a certain number of their journalists will be extended.”

In April 2014, the Belarusian government moved to tighten its grip on journalists who work for foreign broadcasters. The Belarusian Association of Journalists reported that in 2014 eight journalists in different parts of the country were fined between \$250 or \$500 for 11 counts of “illegal production and distribution of media products.” Some of them were fined several times. Ales Zaleuski, who works for Belsat, a Poland-based satellite television channel that targets Belarus, received three fines. Andrei Mialeshka, a reporter with Poland-based Radio Racyja, was fined twice. Similarly, a fine was given to Aliaksandr Burakou, who works for German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle. He also had his apartment and his parents’ apartment raided by the police, who confiscated computers and flash cards. In an odd coincidence, the raid took place when Dunja Mijatović, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Representative on Freedom of the Media, was visiting Belarus. In her meetings with top government officials, including the Minister of Information, she pressed for liberalizing media-related laws and, amongst other things, scrapping stringent requirements for accreditation.

State journalism schools apply ideological vetting as part of the student application process. Yet panelists agreed that the process is more of a formality as there are almost no denials on the grounds of political loyalty. More importantly, Belarus still has a Soviet-style practice of obligatory job placement for university graduates. Graduates of tuition-free programs are required to work for two years wherever the commission of university and government officials sends them. Most of these positions are with small regional newspapers.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Belarus Objective Score: 1.40

The Belarusian media as a whole have failed to meet high standards of professional journalism. The main obstacles preventing journalists from producing quality reporting and carrying out their work includes restricted access to public information and a lack of human resources.

State-run outlets have long been swayed into toeing the government line and are allowed very little space to criticize the government's policies or to hold officials accountable. Private outlets are more likely to follow standards of fairness and accuracy.

"Integrity and objectivity are rarely making their way into state media reports. In most cases these outlets are just pushing propaganda," one panelist noted. Another expert

mentioned the problem of what he referred to as "barricade journalism," when ideological bias shapes the presentation of news stories and discourages criticism.

Attempts by private outlets to receive comments from government officials are essentially stonewalled. Sometimes, when a story requires several opinions, objectivity is simulated by providing quotes from several people who share similar views, rather than giving a different perspective.

Getting the right expert for a story remains a problem. Many outlets, especially smaller ones, are reluctant to seek such expertise to improve their reports. One of the panelists recalled being told at a regional newsroom that they only approach experts once or twice a month. Moreover, just like media, experts themselves have to cope with restricted access to information, especially with regards to politics or the economy. Furthermore, one of the panelists argued, in many cases journalists are unable to engage critically with experts and believe everything they are told.

Belarus has two professional associations of journalists: the state controlled Belarusian Union of Journalists and the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists. Both organizations have codes of conduct that are quite similar and seek to promote standards of accuracy and fairness. In general, the panel agreed, private outlets are more likely to follow these rules. Meanwhile, one of the panelists, an editor of a private newspaper, said her newspaper has strict reporting rules that require accuracy and ethical coverage. "Any mistake can invite fines, lawsuits, and warnings [by the Ministry of Information]," she added.

As a result, most outlets are essentially pressured into self-censorship, which remains entrenched across the industry. "In many cases it is justified, yet sometimes media are playing it too safe," a panelist commented. Even expatriate broadcasters follow suit for fear of losing accreditation for their journalists. The most taboo topic is the family of President Lukashenka. "You may write about his youngest son's success at school, or his granddaughter winning a musical contest, yet not about family's business interests," the panelist continued.

In general, state-run media have to follow government-mandated editorial guidelines or at least be selective about the topics they choose to cover. Therefore there is no positive coverage of the opposition. At the same time, state-controlled outlets might address social issues, even criticize certain problems and provide critical coverage about a local official. Yet they would never directly discuss weak laws or dysfunctional government policies.

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

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

The panelists argued that the coverage of a number of topics is orchestrated so that the public receives as little information as possible. The unfolding economic crisis is one example: on December 19, Belarus imposed a 30 percent tax on buying foreign currency given the close economic ties to Russia, which was undergoing turmoil. On that day, a number of state outlets mentioned the de-facto devaluation of the currency only in passing. On the following day, the Minister of Information invited editors of key private outlets to discuss their coverage of financial markets. That coverage, the minister said, was allegedly “provoking panic in Belarusian society and was running contrary to interests of the state.” Participants were briefed on the measures taken by the government and the central bank to stabilize the situation. The minister vowed that government agencies would report comprehensively on all of their subsequent steps. The media were asked to be “sensible in their coverage of the situation and keep national interests in mind.” Or else, she warned, outlets will be handed two official warnings at once. As noted above, the ministry might seek closure of a media outlet after it receives two warnings for violation of the media law within a year.

Regardless of the pressure, the panelists agreed that private outlets report on most issues, including the financial crisis. There could be differences in perspectives and the degree of criticism, yet major topics are being covered. At the same time one panelist said that with government being so secretive one could not be sure all important issues are making it to the media.

Meanwhile, the brief imprisonment of a military analyst impacted the coverage of national security issues. For example, Aliaksandar Alesin, who writes for the private weekly *Belorusy i Rynok*, spent two weeks in jail over charges of espionage and treason. He was detained while meeting with a foreign diplomat, and the national security service, the KGB, only informed his family several days after his arrest. Alesin was released from the KGB prison on December 10, but banned from travelling outside Belarus. The initial charges of espionage and treason against him, punishable by up to 15 years in prison, were amended to “cooperation with a foreign secret service,” which carries a prison sentence of two years. He also received a gag order, so it was unclear whether the investigation was related to his journalistic work. Alesin was also cooperating with several domestic and foreign think tanks. One of the panelists alleged that in his analysis, Alesin was relying information from open sources only, “yet security services insist that by analyzing open sources one can get information that might harm national security.” Still, Alesin

Meanwhile, one of the panelists, an editor of a private newspaper, said her newspaper has strict reporting rules that require accuracy and ethical coverage. “Any mistake can invite fines, lawsuits, and warnings [by the Ministry of Information],” she added.

explained in one interview that his imprisonment impacted the tone of his stories.

The panel failed to recall issues or events covered by citizen journalists and bloggers but not by traditional media. According to one panelist, bloggers provide opinion and assessment, yet “factual information is distributed by media outlets.”

Pay levels remain low, “sometimes significantly lower than in other sectors,” according to one of the panelists. “There are only a handful of outlets that pay the national average or a bit more,” another panelist added. There also remains a significant variation between national and regional media outlets, and in many cases between state-owned and private (the former sometimes pay twice as much). Those working for local private newspapers tend to be at the lower end of the pay scale. Reporters in regional outlets can expect around \$300 to \$400 a month and up to \$700 to \$800 in the capital, and editors earn 30 to 50 percent more. Meanwhile, the national monthly mean salary is \$600. Although journalists accept gifts, “It’s hard to imagine any corruption schemes related to the work of a Belarusian journalist,” one of the panelists said. In order to earn a livable amount of money, many journalists tend to work for multiple outlets or take part-time jobs in other sectors, most notably public relations and advertising. Some are leaving for other sectors, and very few outlets can afford to hire new staff as downsizing is not uncommon.

Regarding the levels of entertainment programming compared with news, the panelists agreed with this assessment from one of their colleagues: “FM stations offer almost no news, and entertainment does not surpass news on major television stations; their news programs are quite standard. State-run newspapers offer mostly news and information, and entertainment does not eclipse news in private outlets. Online outlets are easily accommodating both.” Meanwhile, in an independent opinion poll conducted in July, 72.3 percent of respondents said the main

role of the media was to provide news and only 5.4 percent mentioned entertainment.

Media organizations have no problems with basic newsgathering equipment, although many newsrooms are still using old computers and voice recorders. “You can’t say that equipment is modern and efficient, yet it is sufficient enough for journalists to do their job,” a panelist explained, adding that most of the work can be done on smartphones or tablets that are widely available and affordable. Professional photo and video equipment is too expensive for most outlets. At the same time, some journalists, especially those working without press credentials, are using smaller and cheaper video equipment due to risks that the equipment may get confiscated, according to one panelist. Meanwhile the use of pirated software is common, leaving media organizations susceptible to all kinds of legal risks.

As most outlets face greater financial pressures, niche journalism is somewhat shrinking. The panel mentioned a marked rollback in the quality and depth of specialist reporting in mass media in the past few years, most notably economic and business reporting. “Underpaid journalists are either leaving for other jobs or coming up with stories that are just barely passable. Restricted access to information and inability to consult proper experts is also to blame,” a panelist commented. Besides economic reporting, the panel said there is specialized coverage of politics, sports, and local journalism. Investigative journalism has essentially gone extinct. There are very few examples, most notably by Euroradio, which is based in Poland but has reporters active in the country and targets a Belarusian audience.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Belarus Objective Score: 1.42

By and large, Belarus is well-served by various types of media. Yet not all of outlets are producing their own news or unique content, and thus the quantity of outlets does not translate into a variety of viewpoints offered within the Belarusian media landscape. In addition, the quality and depth of reporting are affected by commercial imperatives.

According to official data, Belarusians are exposed to a multitude of media voices. A country of 9.5 million people has almost 1,900 “traditional” media outlets. As of October 2014, there were 712 domestic newspapers, 804 magazines and journals, 42 bulletins, 12 catalogues, 93 television stations, 172 radio stations, and nine news agencies,

according to the Ministry of Information. Moreover, over 4,000 foreign newspapers and magazines as well as 180 foreign television channels are distributed throughout the country. There are hundreds of online media organizations that are exempt from official registration with the government, therefore there is little data on the number of these organizations.

According to an opinion poll conducted by SATIO, a market research company, an average Belarusian is watching seven television channels, accessing five websites, reading three newspapers and listening to three radio stations. Television remains the most popular source of news, with 84.9 percent of those polled saying they are using it to receive news and information. That is, however, 7.7 percent less than in 2013. Online media yielded 64.5 percent (2.4 percent more than in 2013). Newspapers and radio are less popular as sources of news, with 32.6 and 29.4 percent respectively. Furthermore, both demonstrated a huge decline (41 and 34.3 percent respectively) compared to 2013.

Regardless of the increase in private ownership—almost 67 percent of all registered outlets are privately-owned—state-run media organizations dominate the market in terms of audience. In many cases, the terms of registration with the government for private outlets requires these outlets to offer entertainment content and practical information, but very little or no news and analysis.

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE, OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

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

“There is a choice of information sources. If need be, you can find alternative sources almost anywhere in the country—either in the form of newspapers, online media, social networks or TV channels (via IPTV or satellites),” one panelist explained. Another panelist added that the choice is still restricted by factors such as affordability and government control of media distribution channels. As detailed in previous reports, the government has been denying for years access to press distribution channels by newspapers critical of its policies.

The editorial policies of most newsrooms leave very little room for diversity of opinion. “There is still that us-against-them mentality,” one panelist asserted. And yet, some private outlets are offering a variety of viewpoints, most notably TUT.by, one of Belarus’s largest online portals. It aggregates news from a multitude of sources, both state-owned and private. TUT.by is reaching over 40 per cent of Belarusian Internet users, according to Gemius, an Internet research company.

Access to both domestic and foreign media is not restricted by law. However, in order to be distributed in Belarus, foreign outlets or their distributors require permission from the Ministry of Information. Installing a satellite dish requires a permit from local housing authorities, yet that is a mere formality, the panel agreed. Besides, as Internet access is getting faster and cheaper, more people are choosing IPTV over satellite television. Overall, one of the panelists said, the development of Internet and telecommunications technologies has improved the availability of domestic and foreign news sources. Other experts, however, argued that the affordability factor is coming into play, as there are an increasing number of foreign media organizations employing a paywall systems and geo-location restrictions to withhold content from non-subscribers. Domestically, as press subscriptions are getting less affordable, more people are defecting to online media. People in rural areas tend to have access to a narrower selection of news sources, in most cases state-controlled television and radio, less so state-owned newspapers.

The government still maintains a blacklist of around 80 websites banned in government offices, schools, and libraries. The list of allegedly extremist and pornographic websites remains classified. Yet it also includes pro-opposition news websites, most notably charter97.org and belaruspartisan.org, according to several reports. Although these websites are supposedly not blocked for the general public, their availability in Belarus is unreliable. Meanwhile, on December 19, several more news websites

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with independent outlooks, including two run by an officially registered news agency, were blocked for all Belarusian Internet users.

“All state-controlled media stick to the common editorial policy of supporting the incumbent government and excluding any possibility to transmit any other viewpoints,” one panelist explained. It should be noted, however, that in a July 2014 opinion poll by SATIO, both state and private outlets received similar scores (3.8-3.9 out of 5.0) for perceived audience trust.

Nine media companies are registered with the government as information agencies, yet only four of those companies—BelaPAN, BelTA, Interfax-Zapad, and Prime-TASS—sell newswire services to other media. BelTA and BelaPAN are domestic media organizations, while Interfax-Zapad and Prime-TASS are Russian-owned.

There is no discrimination on the part of news agencies in supplying news to media organizations, yet state-controlled outlets rely on services provided by BelTA, the official agency of the Belarusian government, and sometimes Interfax-Zapad. Private outlets are more likely to choose BelaPAN, a privately owned agency, since it offers more balanced coverage with alternative opinions. Only a handful of large media can afford the services of international news agencies like the Associated Press, Reuters, and AFP. At the same time, the pirating of their photos is quite common, according to a panelist.

On average, domestic news agencies charge approximately \$300 per month for daily news updates and twice as much for real time/hourly news alerts. Still, according to a panelist, many news outlets, especially smaller ones, choose to rely on stories that are available for free on the Internet. Apart from

newswire services and news websites, BelaPAN and BelTA offer photos, multimedia stories, and infographics. BelaPAN sells specialist analytical reviews on a variety of topics. BelTA, publishes a weekly newspaper and an economic journal, as well as building and maintaining websites for local media outlets and government agencies.

Although the Ministry of Information has over 1,200 private outlets in its registry, few of them produce their own news or information content. Most magazines and newspapers offer entertainment or practical advice on things like cooking or gardening. Private broadcasters also supply entertainment content with current affairs constituting a very small proportion of their overall output, in most cases restricted to local non-political news, sports, accidents, and weather. Radio stations are music-based and television stations rely on entertainment and other programming provided by Russian television networks.

Still, there are several dozen private newspapers, both local and national, that cover current affairs and offer independent outlooks on current affairs. They are more likely to offer unbiased coverage and alternative viewpoints to those touted by state-run media organizations, one panelist explained. He added that some of those outlets are largely focusing on attacking government's policies. Reliance on stories syndicated from other sources is widespread, especially amongst online media; and not infrequently with disregard to copyright issues.

Private media ownership is not concentrated, however media as a whole are largely in the hands of the government, which controls more than 600 outlets. Foreign ownership remains insignificant, with Russian companies owning two popular newspapers, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Byelorussii* and *Argumenty i Fakty*, two news agencies, Interfax-Zapad and Prime-TASS, and VTV, an entertainment television channel. The media law forbids foreign citizens and companies from holding more than a 30 percent stake in Belarusian media businesses. Amendments to the media law that will come into effect in 2015 further lowered that cap to just 20 percent.

The media law also requires disclosure the owners of founding companies behind traditional media organizations. "Theoretically, a request can be filed with the government's records office and anyone can get the names of beneficiaries of these companies. Yet hardly anyone seems to care about interests of these people or how these interests could influence editorial policies," argued one panelist.

Most minority issues like ethnicity, religion, and gender, receive very little media coverage in mainstream outlets. "Most media [outlets] are sticking to a somewhat 'traditional' agenda on religion, ethnicity, gender, and LGBT issues. Quite possibly, media have very little interest in these topics or these minorities are just shunning media attention themselves," one panelist posited. Another panelist added that reporting on the LGBT community usually provokes dozens of critical comments from the readers and even accusations of "gay propaganda." In most cases minority-oriented content is supplied by the community in question and minority-related concerns addressed by minority-owned websites. Some religious communities and ethnic minorities (most notably Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish) run their own newspapers with small-circulations.

Belarusian media mostly focus on the domestic agenda and many outlets cover local and international affairs, yet to varying degrees. Local media organizations tend to concentrate on local and regional news, and also report extensively on national ones. Their international perspective is rather limited and in many cases neglected. National outlets mostly offer a mix of national and international news and analysis and their coverage of regional and local news remains scant. At the same time aggregation of news from other outlets is quite common across the sector.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Belarus Objective Score: 1.07

Media can hardly be referred to as efficient and profitable businesses, given the political climate, tiny advertising market, and unfavorable economic conditions, the panelists explained. At the same time, no media outlets disclose their financial status. Even the government, the biggest media owner, is reluctant to report on how it manages public assets. In an attempt to streamline the business model and save costs, the government consolidated national state-run newspapers into two media holdings. One of them brought together five key newspapers that report on politics and social issues plus six other smaller niche titles. Another company consolidated nine Belarusian-language newspapers and magazines that mostly cover lighter issues like culture. Both holding companies are self-sustainable. The minister of information said in an interview in April 2014 that 70 percent of regional and local state-run newspapers are self-sustaining. That is essentially the

only information the public has received on how the state-owned press is doing financially.

Elsewhere, most media companies are at best breaking even, panelists agreed. “Even if they are making a profit, return on investment is much better in other sectors,” one panelist noted. Many media companies conduct basic business planning. Yet given the turbulent economic environment, even short- and mid-term budgeting is problematic.”

Having certified accountants is a legal requirement. Most companies also hire dedicated specialists to supervise advertising sales. Issues like finance, marketing, and personnel management are in many cases dealt with by the director of a media company, who is also oftentimes the editor-in-chief. That is especially common for smaller outlets. Some media organizations are more willing to hire lawyers to be certain about where they stand legally. Yet very few can afford even part-time lawyers to take care of compliance with numerous regulatory requirements.

Most outlets have several sources of revenue. The government essentially bankrolls media organizations it owns, the panelists said, including both direct funding and below-the-line support like tax breaks and subsidized rent, noted one panelist. State-imposed press subscriptions underpin the circulation of many state newspapers. At the same time many government-owned outlets also depend on advertising revenue; their subsidized status allows for them to undersell their privately owned competitors.

MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED ENTERPRISES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

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

“Even if they are making a profit, return on investment is much better in other sectors,” one panelist noted.

Advertising sales are essential for private outlets and newspapers also depend on copy sales. Many local media organizations also rely heavily on publishing personal messages like birthday greetings. In some cases, outlets depend on the owners’ revenues from other businesses or have to be sustained by grants from foreign donors. Other sources of income remain scant: “The media cannot earn anything outside of advertising and copy or subscription sales,” one panelist said.

Overall, one panelist argued, “The inefficient economy captained by big state-owned businesses cannot create decent conditions for the development of media.” The advertising market showed 5.7 percent growth against 2013 according to the advertising group Vondel Media. Online advertising grew by almost 25 percent, television by 4 percent, with radio remaining unchanged. Print advertising revenues suffered a decline of 12.5 percent. The advertising market remained consolidated and positions of key players were entrenched. Television, and first of all big state-owned television networks, received 54 percent of total ad spend. Multinational corporations like P&G, Unilever, and Nestle, as well as domestic mobile phone operators, banks, and retail networks, remain the largest spenders. International brands accounted for 50 percent of money spent on television and 40 percent online, according to a panelist. He went on to state that their reliance on television was additional proof that the advertising market remains undervalued, as advertising rates happen to be several times lower than in neighboring countries.

The panel differed on whether advertising agencies support the media sector. Most of the lucrative advertising accounts are managed by a handful of international advertising agencies. Overall, they tend to work with media that reach larger audiences, both in traditional media and online, one panelist noted. Other agencies work with different kinds of outlets and across various platforms. Yet it is not uncommon for smaller media organizations, especially regional ones, to rely on their own advertising sales teams and revenues from small private businesses. In some cases, the media are reluctant to offer discounts on their headline prices to advertising agencies, although that is a common practice.

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As noted above, advertising sales are important for many media organizations, especially those that are not secured by government funding. Most notably, private newspapers have experienced withering circulations and advertising sales, while production and distribution costs have soared. Many had to cut back on the number of pages and thus were losing advertising slots. Some owners opted for price increases, yet are finding it hard to compete for copy sales and advertising budgets with other titles, foremost the subsidized state-controlled publications. One of the panelists, an editor of a regional newspaper, said at least 60 percent of his revenues come from advertising sales.

Although many owners feel pressure to sell more advertising, the law restricts the amount of advertising to 30 percent in newspapers and magazines (25 percent in state-owned titles) and 20 percent on radio and television (including 30 percent during primetime). To accommodate more advertising, some newspaper owners also publish freestanding non-news titles that are not subject to an advertising cap. Those titles are usually distributed as inserts in the newspaper. And still, the panelists said, there is a limit to how much advertising those media organization can sell.

Meanwhile, none of the media outlets are able to introduce viable digital subscriptions or paywalls to monetize their content, another panelist argued. Only large web portals like TUT.by or Onliner.by are able to offer e-commerce services that help monetize their existing online traffic.

Government subsidies continue to distort the media sector by propping up hundreds of state-owned outlets. The national budget alone provides for \$69 million in direct funding to state-run media, including \$56 million for state-owned radio and television. In comparison, national ad-spend totaled \$116 million in 2014, with television earning around \$62 million and radio \$6 million. State-controlled outlets also receive funding from regional government budgets. On top of that, state-controlled media enjoy indirect subsidies in the form of discounted newsprint, printing, and postage fees, lower rent, etc. The three

biggest state-owned media companies, television networks ONT and STV and the National State Television and Radio Company, have been exempt from value-added and income taxes for several years.

The government and state-controlled companies buy very little advertising, yet both state and private businesses have been under pressure for many years to not place advertisements in outlets critical of government policies. The law also requires businesses and non-profit organizations to publish their legal notices in certain state-owned newspapers.

By and large, market research does not influence the operation of media organizations outside of informing advertising sales, according to the panelists. State-run media, for example, do not feel the need to adjust their editorial policies or strategic goals, according to one panelist. Some professional research is being contracted though, usually commissioned either by advertising agencies or large media companies. In most cases, media organizations do not have access to their results. And even if they did, the media would be unlikely to utilize the results. Surveys usually research the national market leaving smaller outlets, especially regional outlets, with little information to inform editorial policies or pass on to potential advertisers. According to one panelist, the results of such polls in most cases are somewhat skewed, as pollsters do not go beyond small towns. As a result, certain rural areas are not researched at all.

Some media companies occasionally run their own in-house surveys, usually via online or paper questionnaires. In order to tailor their content and lure advertisers, many outlets rely on the likes of Google Analytics to track traffic on their websites.

Several private companies produce broadcast ratings, press readership data, and Internet statistics. GEVS offers television ratings (obtained via Peoplemeters) and also measures radio and press audiences via phone interviews. In 2014, GEVS was chosen as a provider of television ratings by the biggest advertising agencies and television channels. Similarly, Internet research company Gemius was the go-to place for Internet statistics. It uses a combination of website counters, online panels, and offline research and offers both usage statistics and demographic profiles. Many outlets with an online presence rely on basic data provided by the online counter Akavita, in most cases to keep track of competing outlets. Meanwhile, advertisers rely on stated print-runs from newspapers and magazines, as there is no audit of circulation.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Belarus Objective Score: 1.40

Trade associations of newspaper publishers, television broadcasters, and cable operators as well as print distributors exist in Belarus. United Mass Media represents 13 regional newspaper publishers in central and western Belarus. The Telecommunications Industry Union has almost 100 members, mostly local television stations and cable operators. The Union of Publishers and Press Distributors serves the press distribution industry. It has eight full members (state-owned press distribution companies) and 17 more affiliated members (mostly printing houses, yet also several newspaper publishers). All of those organizations have hardly had any role in shaping the way their industry works. They mostly provide networking and learning opportunities for their members, attempt to sell advertising in bulk, and purchase newsprint and programming rights. “They are promoting yet not protecting the interests of their members [on regulatory and policy issues] as there is no practical way to do that, mostly because the government does not view them as influential players,” one panelist explained. One of the panelists said however, that the press distributors union was allowed to participate in the planning of amendments to the media law.

There are no trade unions for journalists in Belarus, yet media workers have two professional organizations

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

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

to choose from. The Belarusian Union of Journalists (BUJ), the “official” organization for journalists, brings together around 2,000 media professionals employed by state-controlled outlets. Conversely, the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) has more than 1,000 members, mostly from private outlets. Both organizations vow to promote quality journalism and have developed ethical codes that members are obliged to follow.

The panelists agreed that BAJ is much more active in protecting the rights of journalists and the freedom of speech in general. In addition to providing legal assistance to its members, BAJ monitors and publicizes information about violations of free speech. At the same time BUJ is, according to one panelist, said to be “steering clear of protecting the professional rights of journalists and remaining subservient to the government.” Separately, BAJ runs several professional development programs. The BUJ, according to a panelist, has only recently started one such project—to train young reporters in the basics of journalism—after a several year hiatus. As in the case with trade associations, there is no room for professional organizations to influence the government’s policy on media regulation. And yet, on the day the draft media law was unexpectedly introduced into parliament, a press release was published on the BUJ’s website saying its board had approved the government-proposed amendments a week earlier. Meanwhile, while the BUJ mostly cooperates with its counterparts from the former-USSR countries, BAJ has closer connections with international press freedom and media development organizations.

Domestic NGOs remain weak. There are no organizations—other than BAJ—dealing specifically with issues related to free speech. Under its mandate, however, BAJ is only allowed to protect its members. Elsewhere, human rights groups and think tanks sometimes deal with such issues. Most notably, Viasna and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee react to violations of freedom of expression by providing legal defense and publicity. One of the panelists argued that a media outlet should be critical of the government in order to receive assistance from such organizations. Although several think tanks have projects aimed at liberalizing the media environment, the government disregards their initiatives.

Several universities offer journalism degrees; most notable is the Journalism Institute at the Belarusian State University in Minsk. The institute offers courses in print, broadcast, and online journalism, as well as editing, media management, and international journalism. It has 1,500 students. The panel traditionally criticizes the curricula and the quality of

One of the panelists added that those institutions have few practicing journalists among the faculty and sometimes lectures and master classes are led by press secretaries and ideologists, thus blending in journalism and propaganda.

training as “overly theoretical.” As a result many graduates are not job-ready. Similar training is offered by state universities in Brest, Homiel, Hrodna, and Viciebsk, as well as several private institutes in Minsk. One of the panelists added that those institutions have few practicing journalists among the faculty and sometimes lectures and master classes are led by press secretaries and ideologists, thus blending in journalism and propaganda.

Amongst foreign opportunities most notable is the European Humanities University (EHU). Once a Belarusian university, it has been operating in exile in Vilnius, Lithuania. EHU has several hundred students divided among four relevant majors; mass communication and journalism, visual culture (cinema, television and Internet), design and visual media, and new media. Though the education they offer is definitely more liberal, and modeled on Western rather than Soviet standards, panelists also felt that practical training opportunities there are lacking.

Employment prospects for graduates are gloomy, one panelist argued. Although a number of newsrooms are understaffed, they are also underfunded. Many graduates choose other sectors, most notably public relations and advertising. As noted above, graduates of state journalism schools who receive their diplomas for free are subject to mandatory job placements. They have a choice of working either wherever the government would send them or reimbursing the cost of their tuition. Usually, most of these job placements are with small newspapers run by local governments, with salaries up to \$200 per month, according to a panelist.

Short-term training opportunities are plentiful. “A media organization would find itself rolling in different options, both short and long-term, either to send their staff for trainings or have trainers sent to their newsroom,” one panelist noted. Numerous training courses are offered for free by both domestic and foreign media development organizations as well as professional and trade associations.

Formats vary from one-day webinars and master classes to workshops, long-term distance learning, and mentoring. Most training opportunities still target newsroom staff. Finance, marketing, and advertising departments are somewhat neglected, the panelists said. Many newsrooms also require trainings for web editors/website managers and those responsible for social media marketing. One- or two-day training sessions, webinars, and online courses, as well as in-house training and mentoring by visiting practitioners are most useful, according to the panelists.

Access to printing plants and sources of newsprint remain politicized and strictly controlled by the government. Most printing houses are state-owned and only three private companies are licensed to print newspapers. The law holds owners of printing facilities responsible for the content of printed materials they produce, “so any story can be pulled at the stage of printing,” one panelist explained. The panelists mentioned one case when Plutos-Market, a privately-owned print house in the capital, refused to print the private weekly *Svobodnyje Novosti Plus*, citing equipment failure. The newspaper had to switch to a state-owned print house. Overall, most newspapers are printed domestically and at state-run printing plants. Panelists said that price discrimination against privately-owned newspapers is a common practice. At the same time some glossy magazines are printed abroad, in Ukraine, Lithuania, or Latvia.

Similar to printing facilities, press and broadcast distribution channels are controlled by the government. Most news is sold via Belsajuzdruk, a state-owned network of around 1,500 newspaper kiosks. Press subscriptions are mostly handled by state postal monopoly Belposhta. The panelists noted that both companies charge exorbitant fees for their services. Around a dozen private regional newspapers have been denied access to either one or both of those distribution systems since 2006. They have relied on their own distribution systems ever since, as well as sales at private shops. The panelists also mentioned caps at state-owned distribution networks on how many copies of certain private newspapers they are allowed to sell. Digital subscriptions remain insignificant. Most television and radio broadcasting equipment is state-owned; few independent transmitters are controlled due to strict licensing and compliance procedures. Many cable networks are owned by private companies, yet local governments approve the list of channels that are included in the packages.

The panelists had mixed views on Internet and telecom infrastructure. Internet penetration has reached 71 percent

(among those aged 15-74) and 61 percent of Internet users surf the web every day. Internet subscriptions are quite affordable, the panel agreed, and with the exception of less populous rural areas, the country is rather well served by both mobile operators and Internet service providers (ISPs). Online media remain the least regulated of all and offer a variety of viewpoints. Websites critical of the government, for example Charter97.org and Belaruspartisan.org, are usually blocked during opposition rallies or while covering news that might undermine the government's agenda. Most notable was the blockage of seven news and opinion websites on December 19 in an attempt to stop a run on banks amid the unfolding currency crisis. "On the one hand, everything works most of the time. There are independent sources of news on the Internet, but they are being shut down when they are needed most," according to one panelist.

Although Belarus has several points of entry for international Internet connectivity, almost all of the traffic in and out of the country flows through systems owned by the state monopoly Beltelecom. All ISPs are required by law to filter websites added to government-compiled blacklists, described above.

Meanwhile, the Belarusian government looks to practice "Internet sovereignty," requiring all websites selling goods or services (even those running banner ads) to use Belarusian servers, which means higher fees and servers that are oversold or overloaded, according to one panelist. Separately, the government also has control over national .by domain names. In a likely attempt to curb panic around the fluctuation of the currency, the authorities on December 20 withdrew the domain from Onliner.by, one of Belarus most popular e-commerce websites. Onliner.by also offers non-political news and runs popular discussion boards, reaching approximately 30 percent of the Belarusian Internet audience, according to Gemius.

List of Panel Participants

Note: MSI panelists in Belarus agreed to participate only if they were not named publicly. The Criminal Code contains an article, "Discrediting the Republic of Belarus," which criminalizes providing "false information" to international organizations about the situation in the country. Human rights groups, both domestic and international, believe the article's vague wording makes it possible for the government to detain for up to six months anyone reporting negative information or to imprison them for up to two years.

The panel discussion was convened on December 26, 2014.