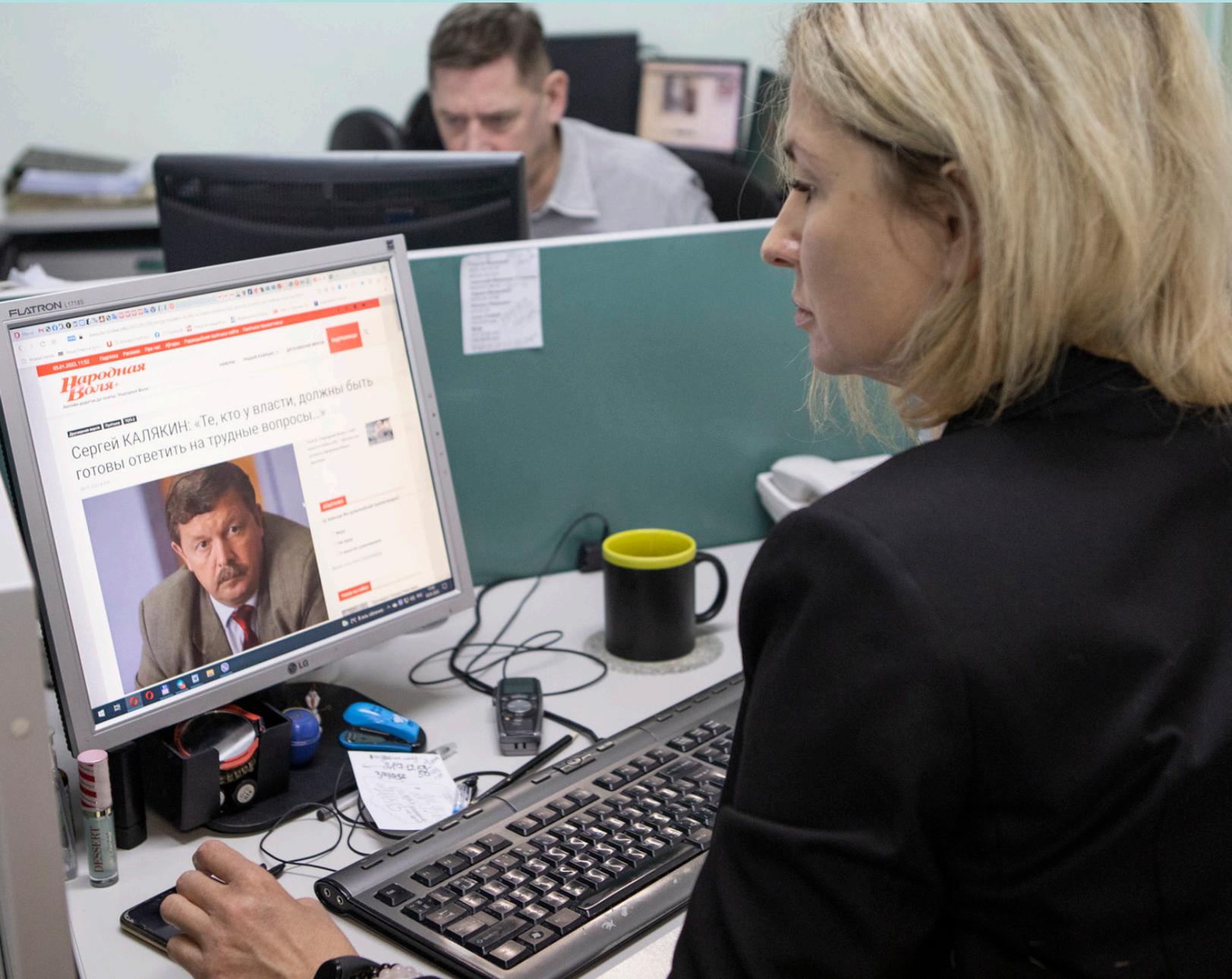
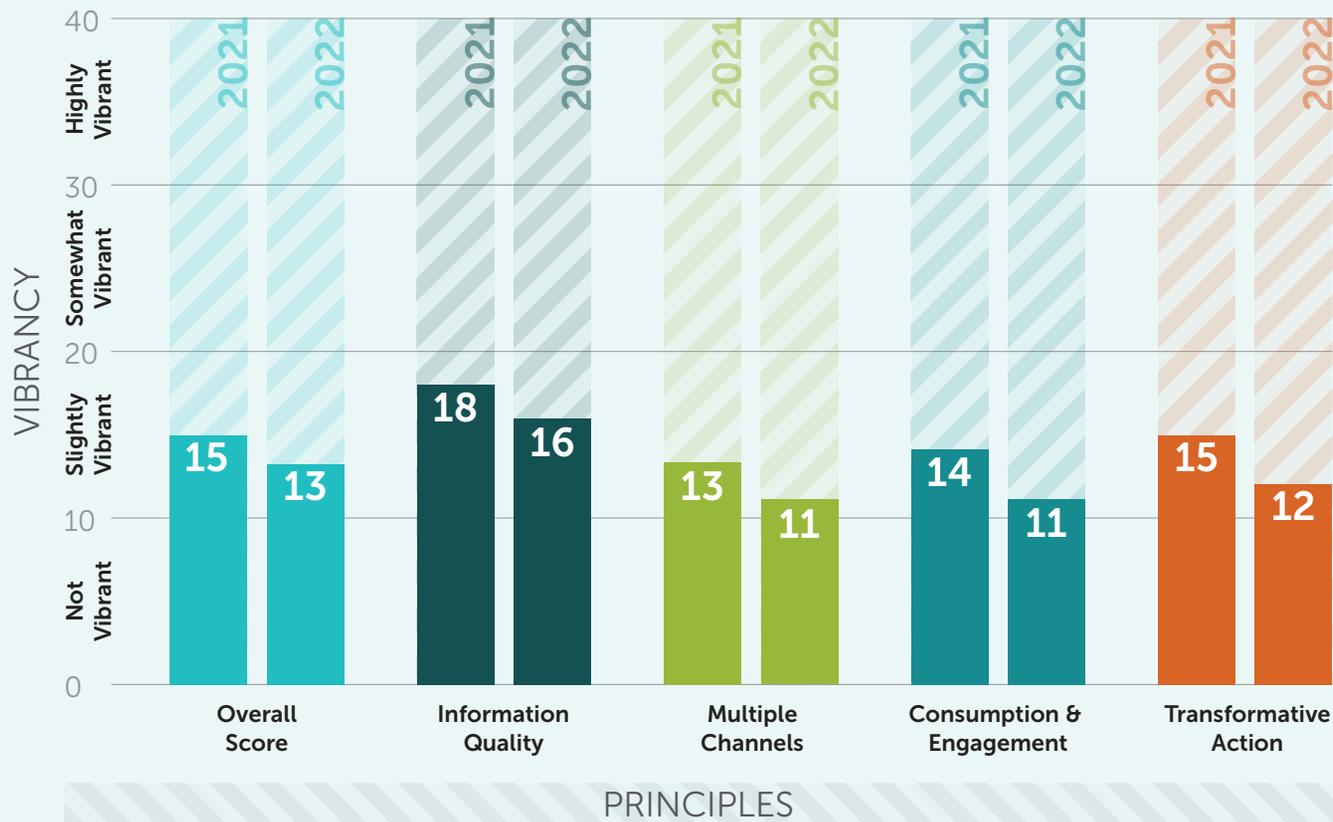


# BELARUS

## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2





**Highly Vibrant (31-40):** Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

**Somewhat Vibrant (21-30):** Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

**Slightly Vibrant (11-20):** Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

**Not Vibrant (0-10):** Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

13

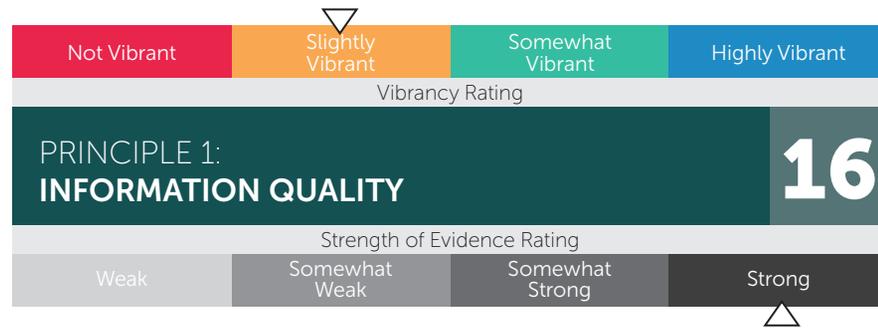
Repressions against journalists and media in Belarus intensified in 2021. The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) registered 113 cases of arbitrary detentions of journalists in 2021, 29 cases of administrative arrest, and four journalists received criminal sentences. Police and KGB officers performed 146 searches of journalists' houses, most often while investigating criminal cases under Article 289 ("an act of terrorism") or Article 342 ("organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order or active participation in them") of the criminal code. At the end of 2021, 32 journalists and media workers were behind bars either in pretrial detention, serving administrative terms, or serving prison terms on criminal charges.

In spring 2021, amendments to the law "On Counteraction to Extremism" introduced new grounds for making people liable for expressing their opinion. As a result, it became a common practice to recognize independent media as "extremist materials" or, in some cases, recognize media outlets as "extremist groups." Media were blocked or forced into exile through various repression tools.

Media law amendments in force since June 2021 ban live reports from events and hyperlinks to content prohibited by authorities or the mirror websites that host them. More state agencies, including prosecutors and the Interagency Committee on Information Security, got the power to block access to online information sources that disseminate content that the government calls "extremist" or harming national interests. Accreditation of journalists who spread what government officials deem "fake news" can be revoked at any moment.

On May 23, 2021, Belarusian authorities arrested blogger Raman Pratasevich (former coeditor of NEXTA portal) and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega after a forced landing of a Vilnius-bound Ryanair flight in Minsk. This incident led to the suspension of all European and U.S. flights in Minsk and a ban from European airspace for the state monopolist airline Belavia. Pratasevich, who was moved to house arrest later in 2021, appeared at several press conferences and a TV interview where he expressed support for Lukashenka.

While Belarus's VIBE scores have declined across the board since the 2021 VIBE study, Principle 1 (Information Quality) received the highest scores from the panelists, buoyed by indicators around quality information (primarily from online and exiled media) and diversity of content. However, panelists gave lower scores to indicators around harmful information and sufficient resources reflected Russia's role in spreading mal-information, as well as the financial pressures faced by nonstate media, respectively. Principles 2 (Multiple Channels) and 3 (Information Consumption) tied for the lowest scores of the 2022 study for Belarus, with indicators looking at rights to share, create and consume information, channels for information flow, independence of information channels, media literacy, and productive engagement with information receiving low scores. In Principle 4 (Transformative Action), higher scores were seen in indicators looking at individual and civil society use of information, while indicators on government's use of quality information, good governance, and democratic rights received very low scores.



Panelists scored indicators examining quality information and inclusive and diverse content, the highest within this principle. Despite increasing censorship, blocking websites, and pushing independent media into exile, independent actors were able to keep going and covered the news for the Belarusian audiences, both within the country and from abroad. The overall score for this principle is lower than in 2021, as the repressions that started after the 2020 presidential election never receded. At the same time, pervasive governmental and pro-Kremlin propaganda as well as hate speech were widely available and imposed on the Belarusian population, while income streams for nonstate media were even more scarce than before. Thus, indicators looking at fact-based information, information is not intended to harm, and sufficient resources scored lower.

### Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

Quality information is produced and disseminated first and foremost by nongovernmental media, predominantly online. Strong repression of the independent media sector has negatively impacted content quality and availability. Dozens of media outlets and their social media platforms were added to the list of media with extremist content or, in some cases, labeled extremist groups. Web users and other media quoting their stories were held legally liable even when reposted materials were from before the dates when media was declared extremist. This, combined with the persistent blocking of web resources by the Ministry of

Information, has significantly decreased Belarusians' access to fact-based quality information.

The government heavily regulates the broadcast industry and does not allow any independent broadcaster to get a license in Belarus. The print market has shrunk due to both global trends and post-presidential election repressions against independent publishers. As one expert said, "The infrastructure exists but it is not available to the majority of independent journalists or newsrooms. In that sense, it does not allow for the production of any varied content." Another expert claimed that the infrastructure was "de facto destroyed in 2021." The expert added, "Newspapers cannot publish, and websites are blocked inside and some outside Belarus. Many journalists had to leave and lost access to their sources. So, especially compared to 2020, there is no infrastructure anymore."

The quality of journalism education has further deteriorated, following the decline in academic freedoms all over the country. As Deutsche Welle reported, citing the educational office of Sviatlana Tshikhanouskaya's team, by December 2021, at least 150 professors and scientists were either fired or forced to leave<sup>1</sup> their workplaces because of their support of anti-violence messages back in 2020. In December 2021, Kseniya Martul, a professor at Belarusian State University's Faculty of Journalism, was arrested<sup>2</sup> while giving a lecture to her students and sentenced to 15 days in prison for her Telegram channel dedicated to gender issues. None of her colleagues publicly denounced her detention. Her coauthor, a Ph.D. in philosophy and a long-term professor from the same department, left Belarus.

While opportunities for informal education still exist, they are less accessible to people inside Belarus. After management was arrested, the Belarus Press Club had to move to Poland and did not restart in-

1 "Repressions in Universities lead to 'Degradation of the Academic Sphere' in Belarus," DW.com, December 22, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/repressii-v-vuzah-vedut-k-degradacii-akademicheskoi-sfery-v-belarusii/a-60226744>.

2 "In Minsk, Ksenia Martul, a Lecturer at the Faculty of Journalism of the Belarusian State University, Was Detained Right during the Couple. She Ran a Channel about Gender Issues," The Insider, December 14, 2021, <https://theins.ru/news/247153>.

country until after their release in August 2021. They offer online courses, as well as in-person masterclasses and meetings in Warsaw. Together with the Linking Media Foundation and the Dutch organization Free Press Unlimited, they launched a coworking space and meeting hub for Belarusian journalists in exile.

In August 2021, the court shut down the oldest independent journalism nongovernmental organization, the BAJ. Still, BAJ continued providing online courses for its members and reorganized in Lithuania and Ukraine. These educational efforts serve mostly the community of independent journalists and do not reach a wider population. “Despite having BAJ or regional centers of journalism education, one cannot expect that high school graduates will know about those educational opportunities,” said one expert, “If one goes behind their bubble, there is little information flow in the wider population about that.”

The proliferation of fabricated information, especially in state media, is evident. State-aligned outlets spread false information and propaganda about political opponents, independent media, or the situation at the Belarusian border with Europe. According to one of the experts, “Because the state punished independent media for any reason, without mentioning their possible violations of ethical and moral principles, those principles have become less important for media. Why bother to be always correct if you can be destroyed at any moment on any grounds?”

This lack of attention to standards has led to violations of them, mostly by state propaganda, although there were cases where independent media followed suit. “While pro-state media shared the pro-government Telegram channel ‘Zheltye Slivy’ (Yellow Plums/Yellow Leaks) and posts with the personal information of pro-democracy actors, some independent media outlets shared the so-called cyber-partisans dump of the personal data of Lukashenka’s supporters. The latter has not caused any discussions, and this is worrisome,” said one expert.

According to the same expert, the main ethical challenge in 2021 was the press conference of detained Roman Protasevich<sup>3</sup> and whether the media had a moral right to be at that press conference and ask questions knowing he may have been forced to speak. There was no consensus. Other experts noted that there were no professional ramifications for both state and nonstate media for posting any unethical content in 2021. The Ethical Commission of the BAJ did not work in 2021, partially because of the repressions against the organization. Another expert mentioned that the informal ramifications, such as loss of trust from audiences, are still present. “We have witnessed a drop in trust in state media while the nonstate media enjoy a higher level of trust,” the expert explained. This is supported by data from several audience surveys.

**“There is a nuance here, but for the majority of citizens, the boundary between high-quality and low-quality sources of information is poorly understood,” explained one expert.**

As a result of heavy repressions, content in the Belarusian media sector was limited mostly to political topics, similar to 2020. When the Belarusian government launched the migration crisis at its borders with the European Union (EU), there was media coverage, but because there were few opportunities for hands-on reporting, independent media often republished

official statements from Polish, Lithuanian, or Latvian authorities. State media, meanwhile, repeated the state narrative, which was far removed from reality.

As one of the experts said, “Throughout the whole barometer, one should bear in mind that nonstate and state media have a totally different approach to reporting in Belarus. State journalists have direct access to state press conferences and comments, while nonstate doesn’t. Yet, state journalists do not report fairly, while nonstate media, which do not have direct access report quite fairly.” But another expert argued, “Nonstate media were also often unfairly, reporting on government actors and were not able to hold them accountable.” These two observations rendered the score even lower.

<sup>3</sup> A Belarusian blogger and political activist who was arrested when his flight from Athens to Vilnius was diverted to Minsk in May 2021 because of a false bomb threat passed on by Belarusian air traffic control.

Nonstate media covers predominantly national current affairs. Initial reporting focused on a follow-up of the 2020 protests, but as the year progressed, the media turned to a wider range of topics. However, the government's gradual inclusion of nonstate media outlets into official lists of "extremist groups" led to a much narrower coverage with less access to sources, particularly evident in comparing December 2021 to January. The inclusion of the country's largest portal [TUT.BY](https://tut.by) into the list of extremists in July 2021 ended the portal's 20 years of operations on the Belarusian market. Its news service launched an alternative, [Zerkalo.io](https://zerkalo.io), which is blocked in Belarus but can be reached through a virtual private network (VPN). According to Similarweb,<sup>4</sup> by December 2021, [Zerkalo.io](https://zerkalo.io) managed to reach five million visitors monthly. As several hundred journalists had to leave the country in fear for their safety, fewer reporters were able to cover local or national news firsthand. Those remaining reporters get fined and searched by authorities for their professional activities. The arrest of Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi's Gennady Mozheiko and the accompanying political pressure led to the closure<sup>5</sup> of the organization's Belarus bureau and the subsequent liquidation of its paper version, which was one of the few remaining independent print outlets. Local media also had to change their coverage in order to report more original national content. "After [TUT.BY](https://tut.by) was closed and several other national media outlets were declared extremist, local media had to start writing national news for the first time in many years," said one expert.

The news content from state media follows the line of the state propaganda, while remaining independent news outlets attempt to keep their editorial independence. Still, there were cases of self-censorship from those journalists who decided to stay in-country.

The news coverage continues to be partially contextualized for Belarusian audiences but both state and nonstate media resort to republishing certain foreign content without adding context. Russian pro-Kremlin sources were republished mostly by state media, while

4 [Zerkalo.io](https://www.similarweb.com/website/zerkalo.io/#overview), <https://www.similarweb.com/website/zerkalo.io/#overview>.

5 "The Kremlin Does Not Protest against the Closure of Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus. Is It Weird or Logical?," BBC News, October 6, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-58815121>.

Russian or Baltic nonstate sources by independent outlets.

### **Indicator 2. The norm for information is that content is based on facts.**

In general, independent journalists have limited access to information from state sources. "Moreover, there were cases of governmental bodies knowingly providing false and deceitful information to journalists. We learned about it from leaked wiretapped conversations of the police," claimed one expert. Journalists also received a draft version of the new Belarusian Constitution that differed from the one that was later published. "We don't know if this is due to the willingness to provide false information or because there were discussions inside the system and the text changed. In any case, the closed nature of the regime and the unwillingness of government institutions to provide information was a huge challenge for independent media," the same expert said. The panel added that the state media have opportunities to ask questions but avoid any uncomfortable moments.

Fact-based and well-sourced, objective information is an exception, mostly promoted by nonstate media and violated by the state outlets. One expert explained that state media used to simply present facts out of context or in a way to obscure the truth. Now, state media completely invents stories. The most notable recent examples include when alleged mass killings of migrants by Polish guards were "reported" (the so-called genocide) or the narrative about the forced landing of the Ryanair flight with Roman Protasevich. Specialized resources such as Media IQ are trying to raise attention to such cases, but they are read mostly by a narrow group of like-minded journalists. Because of the lack of access to information or in a struggle to win clicks, nonstate media often had to present their assumptions as facts.

Creating and disseminating false and misleading information is widespread among state-owned media. The late 2021 migrant crisis was caused by the Belarusian government enabling thousands of nationals from Middle Eastern and African countries to arrive in Belarus and the border with the EU. According to migrants, after unsuccessful attempts to enter the EU, the Belarusian border guards did not allow them to

return to Belarus or their homes but instead pushed them back into the woods. Many migrants fell ill and some died. But the Belarusian state propaganda claimed the state was taking care of migrants and that Poland organized their “genocide,” killing migrants en masse. Low access to information by nonstate media meant also a lower capacity to fact-check news they published. In one case, media published the sentencing of political activist Maryia Kalesnikava and defense lawyer Maksim Znak based on leaks that ended up being false. “In fact, there were still two weeks before the verdict, but for some reason, this news spread even in well-respected nonstate media,” an expert said. In general, the news offerings in the professional media has become narrow; media report on fewer topics due to lack of access to sources. Nonprofessional content providers sometimes used assumptions or rumors to attract more attention to their coverage. For example, NEXTA Telegram channel published the news about the arrest of several migrants in Hrodna, Belarus, writing, “While it is unknown what is the exact reason for that, most probably they robbed and looted the houses of Belarusians.”

In 2021, there were many examples of government agencies creating fake news with the help of state media. The migrant crisis was the one that reached its nexus, with pro-government “human rights defenders” promising to take the case to the International Criminal Court. Nearly every detention or arrest of independent journalists was accompanied by pseudo-investigative infographics about their alleged participation in criminal rings. However, there were no professional ramifications for this misinformation, except for the already mentioned lower trust in state media, though that was not specifically attributed to the false news they spread. However, nonstate media exposed this misinformation and cited data as to why it was false, according to one expert.

There are few fact-checking resources to help journalists or the public understand which news is false. Experts that were more involved in media literacy and fact-checking gave this subindicator a rather high

score but only because information can be verified with sources. “There are many primary sources where one can check facts and there are resources that can be trusted,” an expert said. However, there are not many fact-checking websites; Media IQ is one of the very few. “Formally, there are some resources, but it can be hardly said that they are widely available,” another expert said. A media lawyer among the group of experts noted that the state began limiting access to original sources, for example, statistics limited to foreign trade.

**“Before the 2020 crisis, some independent media received state subsidies and participated in tenders to cover topics ordered by the state. But now one cannot find their titles in the results of such tenders,” said an expert.**

Experts had differing opinions on whether mechanisms in place for moderating content reduced misinformation. Some gave this subindicator a high score, noting that things like content moderation are generally available, even if news outlets do not always use them. Others said they lacked information about how widespread practice of such moderation with the goal of reducing misinformation is; media may use these tools simply to avoid punishment

under the laws that limit freedom of expression, rather than to reduce misinformation.

**Indicator 3. The norm for information is that content is not intended to harm.**

One foreign government actively promoted mal-information: Russia. The experts did not notice attempts from any other governments. Russian disinformation was largely the same as what was used on Russian citizens to prepare them for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. All major Russian TV programs are available in Belarus as part of the basic “social” package of TV channels, so access to pro-Kremlin propaganda was unlimited.

The Belarusian government engaged in hate speech directly. “The day a special services representative was killed in the flat of IT specialist Andrei Zeltser during a raid, Major General Belokonev, former Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus, suggested killing 100

people in response,”<sup>6</sup> an expert recalled. Malicious information and hate speech often targeted EU countries. “The government and state-controlled media falsely depicted Polish border guards as ‘fascists’ and accused them of genocide of migrants. They also showed how the Belarusian state helps migrants, providing them with warm clothes, food, and a safe environment. But in fact, almost everything was the other way around. Migrants have stated how the Belarusian border guards beat them, confiscated warm things, and disallowed their return to Belarus to repatriate,” another expert said.

Officials were not pressured to apologize or resign based on any harmful content they said or disseminated. “It’s hard to determine whether they are losing trust based on those statements because there are no credible polls to measure it. But essentially, there are no negative public consequences for officials, and when it comes to losing elections, even if the results were fairly counted, we wouldn’t know what impact those statements had,” an expert said. The global tech companies, however, reacted to some state propaganda. Several times, Google removed ads from YouTube videos<sup>7</sup> spread by pro-government sources of forced confessions from protesters or journalists.

State-aligned media often tried to purposefully distribute harmful content. One example cited was the Order of Judas program, hosted by Grigory Azarenok, of STV. “It is not just trying to incite hatred; there are also multiple examples of dehumanizing people who oppose the authorities. All such cases remain unpunished,” an expert said. The hate speech in that particular TV program became the subject of the EU’s East StratCom Task Force’s review about disinformation:<sup>8</sup> “The dissenting Belarusians have been called, amongst others, ‘vile reptiles,’ ‘abominations of the human race,’ ‘inhuman,’ ‘parasites and idlers,’

6 “General Belokonev Offered to Kill a Hundred Belarusians in Response to the Death of a KGB Worker,” Belsat, October 1, 2022, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/01-10-2021-general-belokonev-predlozhil-ubit-sto-belorusov-v-otvet-na-gibel-rabotnika-kgb/>.

7 “YouTube Removes ‘Confessions of Detained Journalists’ Ad by Belarusian Authorities,” Gigazine, May 31, 2021, [https://gigazine.net/gsc\\_news/en/20210531-youtube-took-down-belarus-hostage-video/](https://gigazine.net/gsc_news/en/20210531-youtube-took-down-belarus-hostage-video/).

8 “Disinformation Fuels Hate on Belarusian TV,” EU vs Disinfo, June 28, 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-fuels-hate-on-belarusian-tv/>.

‘macaques,’ ‘rats,’ ‘jellyfish’ ‘corpse-looking witches.’ Disturbingly, such monikers are accompanied with implicit threats of violence: every edition of the ‘Order of Judas’ features a photo of a so-called ‘traitor’ with a noose displayed prominently.”

Although incomparable in scale with state media, nonprofessional content producers on platforms like YouTube, including political bloggers of Anton Motolko or Siarhei Kharytonau and NEXTA, also sometimes spread hate speech content. When a 31-year-old IT specialist Andrei Zeltser was killed in September 2021 during a raid by the State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus, killing one security official storming his apartment, those platforms demonstrated “outbursts of personal aggression” and “aggressive appeals for action,” according to one expert. The video of the standoff was widely spread by state media, but it was unclear<sup>9</sup> whether it was edited before distribution.

Again, there were no known cases of nonprofessional content creators losing credibility or standing for their content among their core audiences.

Self-regulatory mechanisms to reduce hate speech exist both on social media and on websites. Media disable comments to avoid responsibility for their content, imposed by Belarusian law, and help reduce mal-information and hate speech. Readers inform the platforms about behaviors they find suspicious by using Facebook’s feedback tools against pro-state propagandists.

Some of the pro-governmental Telegram channels aim to humiliate and deter citizens from expressing their views. These channels republish videos of forced admissions of guilt by protesters and add hateful commentary. “It is difficult to judge if all of them are coordinated by the state, as it is also possible that some of those initiatives come from pro-Lukashenka or pro-Putin supporters who coordinate online independently,” an expert said.

9 Furlong, Ray, “Gunfight in Minsk: Doubts Raised About Dramatic Video as Two Killed in KGB Raid,” RFE/RL’s Belarus Service, September 29, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/minsk-gunfight-kgb-video/31484513.html/>.

**Indicator 4. The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.**

Media publish in the Russian and Belarusian languages, while nonprofessional content creators mostly use Russian. Formats for news dissemination are limited, with YouTube gaining popularity among nonstate media, as it is harder to block, while the state cannot easily identify the names of viewers of its video content.

In general, the information sphere contains a wide range of opinions and ideological views. “There is a nuance here, but for the majority of citizens, the boundary between high-quality and low-quality sources of information is poorly understood,” one expert explained. There is a huge array of different information, but probably no single outlet that represents this wide variety of views. “Most of the media stick to specific political ideologies,” said an expert.

LGBTIQ topics are rarely presented in Belarusian media, and when they are, the coverage is rather patriarchal or lacks depth. The initiative Journalists for Tolerance<sup>10</sup> aims at uniting media professionals attempting to overcome this trend. According to the initiative’s 2021 research, every fourth publication about LGBTIQ subjects in the 36 samples from Belarusian media had signs of hate speech, while 62 percent of the studied media used correct language. The share of hateful or incorrect content increased with the increase of repression. As per the initiative, in the first half of 2020, this share was 10 percent and 20 percent in the second half, while in the first nine months of 2021, it reached 24 percent.

The migrant crisis of late 2021 was a missed opportunity for Belarusian citizens to learn more about people from different ethnic or religious backgrounds from both nonstate and state media. Nonstate media took a critical stance toward large groups of migrants, spreading stereotypes instead of helping to overcome them, often categorizing these groups as “illegals.” The state media, while demonstrating how the authorities presumably help migrants, demonstrated a lack of knowledge about cultural or religious differences, for example, praising an Orthodox

Christian nun, who is also a staunch supporter of Lukashenka, for giving out presents to Muslim children and “baptizing” them with a large cross.<sup>11</sup>

Underrepresented or vulnerable groups are formally represented in the professional media sector, but the coverage is often overly formal and lacks depth. As one expert pointed out, “An independent media outlet would run a story about people with disabilities and then use it in a report to funders as human rights story, but the quality of this coverage doesn’t give the audience an understanding about real needs or concerns of this group of people.”

Political opposition is the largest marginalized group that is using alternative methods to express its views. It operated a variety of online platforms, including websites, YouTube channels, and Telegram channels. Other groups could use those channels, but they often lack funding, human resources, or political support to become noticed by Belarusian society.

Gender balance is yet to be achieved not only in content but also in the management structure of the media, including nonstate outlets. “Despite us talking about this for a long time, we have a gender composition that favors men in management while women stay in lower positions. No matter how hard we tried, making additional efforts to promote women to leadership positions, this did not change in 2021,” a representative of one of the media associations said. The expert also observed that female employees tend to stay in the independent media, which experience repressions, while many men simply change jobs to more profitable ones.

The situation is even worse among nonprofessional content producers. “The middle-aged Russian-language men have flooded the Belarusian top of nonprofessional platforms,” said one expert, “A typical popular YouTube profile would be a 30- or 40-year-old man broadcasting his opinion or interviewing others.” When it comes to selecting experts, there is a myth about the lack of professional female speakers. There

10 <https://j4t.info/>.

11 “Abbess Gabriel Came to the Migrants with a Cross,” Blog Grodno [S13.RU](https://s13.ru/archives/gavriila-24), November 17, 2021, <https://s13.ru/archives/gavriila-24>.

was a discussion between well-known independent media figures Dzianis Dudzinski and Aksana Zaretskaya<sup>12</sup> on whether sexism is the norm among video bloggers in Belarus. Regarding the nonurban population, there is only one popular blogger, Pan Usialan,<sup>13</sup> who attempts to comment satirically on the daily life of Belarus from the rural perspective.

### Indicator 5. Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Since many nonstate newsrooms were forced to move abroad, or exist in several countries, they have additional expenses, though their in-Belarus incomes were mostly enough to cover operational costs. Many had their media businesses destroyed and were forced to start new projects from scratch, the most salient example being the portal [TUT.BY](https://tut.by). In some cases, like that of [TUT.BY](https://tut.by), [BelaPAN](https://bela.pan.by), or [Nasha Niva](https://nasha-niva.com), the management was arrested and the editorial teams had to learn business operations anew. “This did not allow them to invest into improving the quality of the information they produce,” an expert said. By 2022, it also became clear that the state could not satisfy the appetites of pro-governmental media with lavish subsidies, which had reached an annual figure of around \$60 million in previous years. Thus, a new decree in early 2022 taxed advertising and internet usage to direct these funds to state media.<sup>14</sup>

Public funding continues to be available largely for state media. Private funding in-country that used to support some of the nonstate media has significantly declined with businesses being afraid to fund blocked websites. Foreign donor funding continues to be available for nonstate media, and its share has grown in 2020 and 2021 to compensate for the increase in repressions, but this may change because of the war in

12 “We All Blame the Blue-Fingered, but Ourselves?” As a TV Presenter, His Wife and Ex-Investigator of the Investigative Committee Argued about Harassment Invisible in Belarus,” KYKY, May 6, 2021, <https://kyky.org/pain/my-vse-penyaem-na-sinepalogo-a-sami-kak-televeduschiy-ego-zhena-i-eks-sledovatel-sk-posporili-o-nevidimom-v-belarusi-harrasmente>.

13 Mr. Usyalian, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnSq4OAa8hdwAtxUB83ZVFA/videos>.

14 “Aleksandr Lukashenko Signs Decree on Mass Media,” President of the Republic of Belarus (website), May 31, 2022, <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:iNFhRP6PWuYJ:https://president.gov.by/en/events/aleksandr-lukashenko-signs-decree-on-mass-media+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=pl>.

Ukraine and a potential redistribution of funds.

Being stripped of traditional advertising channels, some media, like the Village Belarus, have turned to donations via Patreon, a membership platform that provides tools for content creators to earn funds from subscriptions.<sup>15</sup> Other Belarusian media, including Zerkalo (formed by [ex-TUT.BY](https://ex-tut.by) team) and Euroradio, also use Patreon, but it is not enough to cover their monthly costs. There was also a brief period when traditional channels of income grew in significance. For instance, many independent newspapers saw their subscriptions increase in August 2020 after the election. “Belarusians subscribed not only to receive information but also to demonstrate their solidarity with the independent press,” an expert said. This nearly came to an end by late 2021, as the government denied printing or distribution to the majority of formerly print media outlet. “If we evaluate 2021 not as a process, but a result, then we must admit that most print media have simply lost the opportunity to publish. So, there are no more traditional sources of income for them. Those regional newspapers that continue to publish are also losing advertising,” another expert added.

Since October 2021, the government has been regulating<sup>16</sup> the content of display advertising, which has reduced volumes and delayed advertising campaigns. In general, online advertising was the only advertising sector that grew in 2020 (4.6 percent) while ads in all other sectors experienced drops<sup>17</sup> ranging from 7 percent in some to 19 percent in others. The statistics for 2021 are not yet available. The distribution of state subsidies and advertising contracts was transparent but independent media rarely, if ever, receive them. “Before the 2020 crisis, some independent media received state subsidies and participated in tenders to cover topics ordered by the state. But now one cannot find their titles in the results of such tenders,” an expert said.

15 The Village Belarus, <https://www.patreon.com/thevillagebelarus>.

16 “It’s Not Fun in ‘Outdoor Advertising’: The Advertising Market Is Faced with the Consequences of the Introduction of Layout Coordination,” [Marketing.by](https://marketing.by), October 15, 2021, <https://marketing.by/novosti-rynka/v-naruzhke-neveselo-reklamnyy-rynok-stolknuhsya-s-posledstviyami-vvedeniya-soglasovaniya-maketov/?mobile=N>.

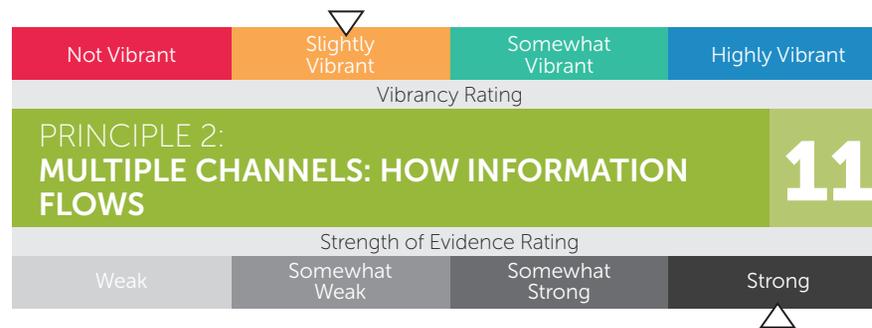
17 “Global Advertising Spending Is on the Rise. How the Advertising Market Behaves in Belarus,” [etvnet.com](https://etvnet.com), June 20, 2021, <https://belmarket.by/news/news-46175.html>.

The distribution of state subsidies for advertising contracts significantly distorts the market. The state is entitled to publish “social advertising,” which is recognized by law as the governmental one. It was largely used in 2020 and 2021 to advertise against supporters of political change.

For nonstate media, operational conditions have worsened, leading to lower salaries or, if salaries stay the same, lower quality of life for independent journalists. “As many journalists were forced to leave, or, if they stayed in Belarus, to work for a publication that is completely underground and recognized as extremist, there are two problems related to their salaries. If they moved abroad, then their previous salaries are not enough, as their costs of living have increased. So, they have to work at several jobs or for several media outlets to make ends meet,” explained one expert, “For those who stayed in Belarus, there is always a question about safety and transferring funds in the country as the very fact of this income is an opportunity for further persecution.” If someone is caught receiving abroad funding from someone who is considered “extremist” (and most independent media are), the very fact of receiving money from such an actor makes a person “recipient of extremist money” and thus subject to criminal persecution.

Advertising placement is extremely politicized. “State enterprises will place ads in state media, not in nonstate media. Also, with many independent websites being blocked or included in the list of extremist resources, nonstate businesses avoid placing advertising there,” an expert said. Another expert mentioned that the politicization of ad placement is also related to foreign businesses receiving criticism for continuing to sponsor state media in Belarus. “We saw protests near the offices of foreign advertisers who placed ads<sup>18</sup> in Belarusian state media and some of them gave in to public pressure,” he said.

18 “Rights Group Urges Western Firms to Stop Belarus TV Ads,” AP News, August 4, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-business-belarus-6025a48e2f4baf832058c9de30c992d8>.



Principle 2’s average score is a result of a significant gap between the more highly scored indicators that describe the information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure--especially adequate access to channels of information--and those lower scored indicators that describe a lack of equality in access to and the distribution of information between independent and governmental media or limitations in rights to create, share, and consume information.

**Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share, and consume information.**

Experts discussed whether any legal protections for freedom of speech or freedom of press continue to exist in Belarus. For one expert, the fact that they “are spelled out in the Constitution, they are actually spelled out in laws” was enough to give a rather high score. But he added that in 2021, a “legal default” took place in Belarus in which protections are not applied, and they are used exclusively to suppress freedom of speech in Belarus. Another expert added, “Let’s leave aside such a philosophical question as to whether those norms that cannot be applied in any way can be called a legal mechanism. Over the past year, even these sluggish legal mechanisms have been very seriously weakened due to changes in legislation, including laws on countering extremism.” The change in legislation allows the government to move straight to blocking access to media at the sign of any criticism of its action, thus effectively censoring media.

All ICT providers have to follow the regulations that prescribe blocking

access to the media the state considers dangerous.

The new rules influence the editorial choices of nonstate media regarding self-censorship. There is no consensus on whether the titles or links of so-called extremist media can be quoted. Many regular (“nonextremist”) media, while using their information, do not quote them, citing fear that readers could be arrested or fined if caught with such links on their phones. Also, when employees of certain media stay inside Belarus or in jail, those who have fled abroad tend to exercise caution in covering political topics no to worsen the situation. Another example of self-censorship in 2021 was the change to the web portal Onliner’s editorial policy. “One of the most popular news resources remaining in Belarus completely abandoned the sociopolitical agenda and turned off comments on their site. Wanting to save the business, they chose to write about cats and dogs,” said an expert.

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Journalists continue to be harassed for doing their jobs and in a variety of ways, including searches and confiscation of equipment, bullying both online and via telephone, and public hate speech by state media actors. In 2021, Reporters Without Borders labeled Belarus the most dangerous country in Europe<sup>19</sup> for media workers. In research<sup>20</sup> for International Media Support, female journalists shared the harassment they had to endure for their professional activities. Larysa Shchyrakova, a journalist from Homiel, said, “There were various forms of psychological pressure, including via social media, where my appearance was criticized and they used derogatory words. I got threats that my son would be taken away from me. They also discussed my personal life and published a

19 “Belarus,” Reports Without Borders, n.d., <https://rsf.org/en/country/belarus>.

20 “‘Multiple Risk’: The Safety of Women Journalists in the Eastern Neighborhood Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan: A Six-Country Review,” IMS, August 2021, [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/SAFETY-OF-WOMEN-JOURNALISTS-in-Belarus-Moldova-Ukraine-Armenia-Georgia-Azerbaijan\\_RU.pdf](https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/SAFETY-OF-WOMEN-JOURNALISTS-in-Belarus-Moldova-Ukraine-Armenia-Georgia-Azerbaijan_RU.pdf).

lot of untruthful information. ... In 2020, I was detained in presence of my underage son. It was a huge stress for him and now, if I am offline for more than two hours, he is nervous and starts calling everyone.” In 2021 alone, authorities searched Shchyrakova’s house and confiscated her equipment multiple times. She has announced that she is quitting journalism.

According to BAJ, four journalists were convicted of criminal charges in 2021. Katsiaryna Barysevich from [TUT.BY](https://tut.by) received six months in prison for “disclosing medical secrets, which entailed grave consequences,” while Katsiaryna Bakhvalava (Andreeva) and Daria Chultsova from Belsat TV got two years for “arrangement of actions that grossly violated public order.” These convictions were related to their reporting of postelections protests in 2020 and

the death of protester Raman Bandarenka. Later in 2022, Bakhvalava received another eight years for “state treason” in a closed process. Courts sentenced Siarhei Hardzievich of the regional portal [1reg.by](https://1reg.by) to 18 months in prison for “insult to the President of the Republic of Belarus,” “slander,” and “insult to a government official” for his postings on the platform Viber. Criminal trials were also held against opposition bloggers, most of whom were detained during the 2020 presidential election campaign. They received graver<sup>21</sup> sentences than the professional journalists. Uladzimir Niaronski, Siarhei Piatrukhin, Aliaksandr Kabanau, and Vadzim Yermashuk received three years sentences, while courts sentenced Pavel Spirin and Eduard Palchis to 4.5 and 13 years, respectively. A Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe consultant, Ihar Losik, got 15 years in a maximum security prison.

The level of state repression is so high that other forms of retribution for speaking or writing about potentially controversial or sensitive topics

21 “E-Newsletter ‘Mass Media in Belarus.’ Monitoring Report 2021,” No. 1(67), Belarusian Association of Journalists, February 2, 2022, <https://baj.by/en/analytics/e-newsletter-mass-media-belarus-monitoring-report-2021-0>.

are quite rare, though sometimes occur for things like condemning the violence of police forces. They mostly take the form of nonextension of work contracts at state enterprises.

“The only laws that protect the confidentiality of sources in Belarus are the laws of physics: when data is destroyed on a flash drive, they cannot be intercepted or used by the law enforcement authorities,” an expert claimed. The forced admissions of guilt, published widely by law enforcement agencies on social media, were accompanied by people being forced to give up their passwords and links to the chats and personal data of the members of various online forums and discussions. Authorities used intimidation and torture to force people to give up this info, some accounts of which made it into the media. At his July 2021 trial, political activist and blogger Mikalai Dziadok detailed he was suffocated with a pillow<sup>22</sup> and had a bottle forced into his mouth during his arrest to make him disclose his passwords.

Laws not directly related to media were widely used to persecute journalists and common Belarusians for both news coverage and openly expressing opinions. “For example, the laws related to extremism were amended in April 2021 in order to mostly use them against journalists. The same law that allows you to recognize the whole newsroom as an extremist group. While such laws existed before, they were not used explicitly against media and journalists until 2021,” an expert explained. According to Viasna Human Rights Initiative,<sup>23</sup> in 2021, courts fined people for spreading “extremist” content from independent media outlets at least 43 times while police detained people at least 104 times. More than 450 web pages and social media accounts are banned on “extremist” grounds. Some cases are meant to intimidate the larger population. For example, since July 2021, authorities detained spouses Siarhei Krupenich and Anastasia Krupenich-Kandratsieva nine times in a row for privately messaging each other news from “extremist” Telegram channels. They spent more than three months in prison on

administrative charges. The couple left Belarus in November 2021 shortly after their release.

### **Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.**

Technically, infrastructure allowing access to information exists and the price of internet access is rather accessible. A 100 megabytes per second WLAN package combined with the TV access costs \$15.35 per month. Unlimited mobile internet by the provider A1<sup>24</sup> costs from \$7 to \$9 per month. “From a technical point of view, in principle, the situation in our country is quite good, and I know that in many countries in Europe, it can be much worse. But the political situation limits our citizens in many ways,” an expert said.

According to the monopolist state provider Beltelecom, socially vulnerable groups can have unlimited access to the internet for one-third of the cost.<sup>25</sup> This includes families with disabled children under 18, families with three or more children, or the elderly population who survived World War II. Other ways of accessing information, such as TV and radio, are available for people who are less literate, but the government does not allow any independent radio or TV stations to broadcast inside the country. Their programs are available either on satellite from abroad (e.g., Belsat TV) or from near-border FM towers (e.g., Euroradio, Radio Racja). After jailing<sup>26</sup> prominent Polish-language journalists and activists, there is even less available information in the Polish language. No Ukrainian sociopolitical TV channels or media are allowed to broadcast in Belarus.

The transition from terrestrial to digital radio and TV services in all

22 “Choked with a Pillow, Put a Bottle in His Mouth. At the Trial, Political Prisoner Dziadok Spoke about Torture and Beatings,” Spring96, January 7, 2021, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/104085>.

23 “Human Rights Situation in Belarus in 2021 Policy Brief,” Spring96, January 5, 2022, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/106328>.

24 A1, <https://www.a1.by/ru/plans/c/b2ctariffs>.

25 “Overview of Beltelecom Internet Tariffs in 2022,” Finbelarus, April 27, 2022, <https://finbelarus.com/tarify-beltelecom-na-internet/>.

26 “Belarus Authorities Bar Polish Diplomats from Seeing Jailed Activists Andzelika Borys, Andrzej Poczobut,” Belsat, September 28, 2021, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/28-09-2021-belarus-authorities-bar-polish-diplomats-from-seeing-jailed-activists-andzelika-borys-andrzej-poczobut/>.

parts of the country finished before 2021. Because not every household reconnected to the state media, the government is trying to stimulate reconnection by offering special programs. The program announced in 2016 that provided people with visual disabilities free radio receivers experienced significant delays. The digital TV boxes were not subsidized.

The prices for access to TV and internet are affordable for Belarusian households. The minimum wage in 2021 amounted to 417 BYN (approximately \$127), while average salary by December 2021 before tax was 1675 BYN<sup>27</sup> (approximately \$513). The interactive TV platform ZALA by state monopolist Beltelecom has 2.2 million<sup>28</sup> subscribers among Belarusian households, while the overall number of households in Belarus is 4.3 million.<sup>29</sup> According to TV ranking company Medialzmeritel, 58 percent of Belarusians<sup>30</sup> watch television daily, while 93 percent watch it at least once a month.

There is nearly no discrimination against specific subgroups in accessing existing channels of information; instead, the limitations are imposed nationally. However, prisoners and people in pretrial detention are a large exception. “Many people in jails used to receive printed versions of the independent newspapers Novy Chas or Belgazeta, but both have been forced to stop publishing,” one expert noted. Multiple witness accounts from political prisoners describe how detention centers or prisons broadcast only government radio or television. Internet access is not allowed, and correspondence with relatives and friends is heavily censored and often disappears on the way to the recipient. “This was very one-sided news, but now I know how the state propaganda works.

27 “Nominal Accrued Average Wages of Employees of the Republic of Belarus,” Belgosstrakh, n.d., <https://bgs.by/insurance/177/7878/>.

28 “Beltelecom Upgraded ZALA Interactive Television Platform and Introduced New Features,” Beltelecom, January 22, 2021, <https://beltelecom.by/en/news/main/beltelecom-upgraded-zala-interactive-television-platform-and-introduced-new-features>.

29 National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, “Number and Composition of Households in the Republic of Households in the Republic of Belarus: Statistical Bulletin,” CIS STAT, 2021, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/[http://www.cisstat.org/census/Number\\_house\\_Belarus2020.pdf](http://www.cisstat.org/census/Number_house_Belarus2020.pdf).

30 Shavela, Olga, “How Many TV Viewers Are There in Belarus and What Do They Watch,” Belarussians and the Market, February 11, 2022, <https://belmarket.by/news/news-49575.html>.

It wasn’t just news; there were also different opinion programs running on state TV. And sometimes, the authors of these programs would give up the information about the way things really were, information about real events. So, we also used that to gather information,” said former director of the Belarus Press Club Yulia Slutskaya in an interview<sup>31</sup> with Helsinging Sanomat after her release.

In general, access to information is heavily limited because of both blocking of websites and repressions. “There is no normal access. Belarusians who need to find any information must find creative ways to overcome the blocking of websites that are considered extremist or are under some other kind of crazy repressions. They have to use VPNs and other censorship circumvention tools. And it is not because, as in Europe, they are worried about getting extra advertising or sharing too much personal data. They don’t want authorities to track anything that they read for political reasons,” an expert said.

While systems are in place to provide other information systems or other devices in case of a disruption to telecommunications, not all experts agreed that it was a good solution for Belarus. Since many of the state TV channels’ websites spread false news and hate speech, some argued the interruptions would be good because they would disconnect people from state media. Another expert noted that both state TV and radio stations participate in exercises to prevent a total shutdown in case of natural disasters or war.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

The right to information remains limited. “The right is guaranteed by law, and it is a declaration by law. It is only necessary to say that, unlike practically all European states, in Belarus, there is no special [act] on access to information, and there is a constitutional provision, which limits the right of citizens to access information that does not concern them personally,” an expert said. Since such laws do not exist, the

31 Koskinen, Ronja, “Yuliya Slutskaya Interview: ‘Despite Everything, I’m Optimistic,’” International Press Institute, September 27, 2021, <https://ipi.media/yuliya-slutskaya-interview-despite-everything-im-optimistic/>.

expert said, it is not possible to study their compliance with any norms. Another expert argued that some rules on access to information are embedded in the legislation on mass media or in the activities of the state organizations, but they do not meet international standards.

Mechanisms to access or influence government policy or decision-making became less accessible in 2021. The website [Petitions.by](#), which collected various petitions from Belarusians and sent them to state officials, was declared “extremist” and blocked in August 2021,<sup>32</sup> along with [Change.org](#). At the same time, ministries and state institutions have rubrics on their websites that allow electronic appeals or petitions.

Before [Petitions.by](#) was shut down in August, the website had at least 300,000 registered profiles, indicating that it was widely known by Belarusians. Despite the original address URL being blocked, the website continued working under a new one, [Petitionsby.win](#), and by early 2022 had more than 4,000 petitions, many of which elicit reactions from local or national authorities.

Experts asserted that although there is no available polling data to support it, Belarusians are afraid to interact with authorities on topics that can be classified as political. “I can’t give a specific example, but I have an inner feeling that citizens have become afraid to request information from state organizations,” said one expert.

In general, when it comes to restrictions on access to information, political prisoners stand out. “These people have no opportunity to receive the information they want because they are surrounded by Belarusian state television and cannot subscribe to the newspapers that they want. This is a purposeful restriction of people who became political prisoners,” an expert said. Another expert added that a pretrial

32 “[Petitions.by](#) and [Change.org](#) Websites Blocked in Belarus,” Belsat, August 7, 2021, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/07-08-2021-v-belarusi-zablokirovali-sajt-petitions-by/>.

detention center changed procedures; while previously a third party could subscribe a prisoner to a publication, now it can be only done by the prisoner himself.

Government agencies have press secretaries and press centers but getting accredited to attend press conferences is difficult for nonstate media. “More than that, there are rules according to which certain officials do not have the right to provide information without coordinating it either with the head of the respective state bodies or with these same persons responsible for working with information,” an expert said. In this way, press services don’t assist in informing the population but present a certain barrier to receiving official information.

“The work of press secretaries and information officers today is more about limiting the spread of unauthorized information from government agencies than an attempt to improve the awareness of citizens or organizations,” another expert said. Telegram channels like the pro-government “Yellow Plums” sometimes serve as the government’s “spokespeople” but distort and riddle the

official information with hate speech. On the other hand, nonpoliticized information is still being delivered by state agencies—mostly through state media.

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

Laws regulating domestic and foreign ownership of media are in place. Moreover, there is no law that would regulate the concentration of ownership in media companies. “There are a couple of rules, but they do not concern either cross-subsidization or cross-ownership of television broadcasting, newspapers, or the ownership of mass media by state bodies,” an expert said.

Not all state-run competitions that regulate access to the broadcasting market are known to the public, and when the contests happen, there is no clear explanation regarding the choice of winners. Radio frequencies

“The only laws that protect the confidentiality of sources in Belarus are the laws of physics: when data is destroyed on a flash drive, they cannot be intercepted or used by the law enforcement authorities,” claimed an expert.

are distributed by the open competition but are never given to those commercial broadcasters that would pursue a different angle than the government's line in their current affairs coverage. "If a competition is held, the competitors must present some kind of concept but we never hear about it," an expert said.

No special laws require transparency in media ownership. Monopolization of channels of media distribution takes place at the state level. While nominally Belarus has more than 1,000 nonstate media, there is no independent broadcaster registered in-country. Belarusian exiled broadcaster European Radio for Belarus (Euroradio) and its content has been declared extremist, while the only external Belarusian TV channel, Belsat, was labeled an "extremist group." Establishing a media outlet requires registration, and there are strict rules for the qualifications the editor-in-chief of a registered media outlet must have.

All experts agreed that there is no public service media in Belarus.

Internet service providers have not changed their approach since 2020 when the connection was cut for several days. They follow the government's rules regarding restricting access to content.

#### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

The ownership influences the editorial content of both state and nonstate media outlets. State media exclusively provide the government's point of view. Nonstate media are dependent on managements' decisions on behavior and publication under government repressions. For example, when authorities declared BelaPAN, the oldest independent news agency, an extremist organization, its owners decided not to issue any new content under its brand. "Another example is two websites, one in Homiel and the other in Mahilou, associated with the same editor," an expert explained, "When the legal entity that founded one of the websites was liquidated, the owner decided to continue updating the social media." According to another expert, "[Some media] have not fundamentally changed their editorial policy, but they have become very restrained. And they were allowed to stay, which shows this is purposeful in order to maintain advertising and keep legal status

inside Belarus."

Regarding advertising revenues, experts noted that the government discourages both state and nonstate media from placing advertisements in nonstate outlets. Still, some advertisers continue to place ads in these outlets, especially local ones. "I know at least one media outlet that keeps advertising partners despite being recognized as extremist, as they still serve as an important source for their community," an expert said.

State media receive most of the subsidies. "They are directed not according to any specific principle, but solely with the aim of supporting these media. And it is obvious that they affect the editorial independence of the newsrooms because only those media that express the state policy are supported," said one of the experts. Another expert mentioned that nonstate media had received such subsidies as well, but it has since stopped. "I would say that the picture is complicated," one expert said, "In the past, one of the few but large independent media outlets that used to participate in tenders and received state funding was *Komsomolskaya Pravda*." But, the expert noted, it did not receive funding in either 2020 or 2021, following the political crisis. "Does this affect editorial policy? It is quite possible that it does because there are special projects dedicated to, say, the Brest Fortress, which would otherwise not appear there," the expert continued.

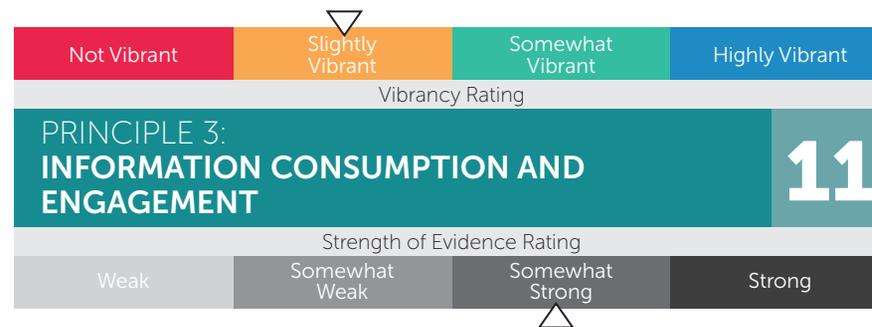
The distinction between newsroom operations and business management is still lacking. Because of shortages in human resources caused by repressions and resulting economic disadvantages, the same person often serves as editor-in-chief and director at the same independent media outlet. This is especially true for smaller regional media. For national outlets, such as [Zerkalo.io](https://www.zerkalo.io) (formerly [TUT.BY](https://www.tut.by)), Nasha Niva, or Euroradio, these roles are separate.

The government agencies overseeing frequency allocation or telecoms are not neutral. The market entry and tax structure for media remain unfair compared with other types of companies, and independent media face more disadvantages than state media. Unlike other businesses, media newsrooms cannot have their offices in residential homes,

and individual entrepreneurs are not allowed to publish any media, including online outlets. An editor-in-chief of a media outlet who applies for registration is required to have at least five years of media management experience. A broadcast media editor-in-chief must pass a special exam on broadcast law knowledge, the technical settings of radio and television broadcasting, and advertising law for his or her outlet to receive a dissemination license. Such licenses are not given to independent broadcasters, like Euroradio, Radio Racja, or the television channel Belsat TV (all of which are run from Poland).

Arbitrary rules are applied to limit access of independent media to information as compared to the access afforded to state outlets. “I personally encountered situations where state media are accredited to attend an event at state bodies, while nonstate media are not accredited. Allegedly, this was because state journalists did not suffer from COVID, while nonstate journalists had to follow all COVID restrictions,” an expert said. Another example of unequal conditions is the exclusive status of the news agency BELTA to exclusively disseminate information about state institutions. “Some state structures, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and some law enforcement agencies, simply leak information to certain TV channels or Telegram channels while denying any access to independent media,” another expert added.

The members of regulatory bodies do not act apolitically. On the contrary, they allow themselves to make political statements. The Interagency Commission on Informational Security includes editors of state-owned media who openly denounce independent media and support the government on-air and online. This same commission is allowed to limit access to any media outlet they deem as harmful to state security.



Within Principle 3, panelists scored highly the indicator related to Belarusians’ ability to safely use the internet and circumvent censorship, and they gave a relatively high score to the indicator on engagement with audience needs. The indicators on media literacy and productive engagement with information were scored the lowest. All panelists marked the indicator related to local community media as not applicable.

### Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.

The new law on personal data protection,<sup>33</sup> adopted in May 2021, improves the security of the personal data of Belarusians. However, the behavior of law enforcement against politically active citizens demonstrates the opposite principle. People, particularly activists, are forced to reveal the data of correspondents in chats, their own passwords, contacts, and the private data of email interlocutors.

The list of agencies that can classify information is long in Belarus. According to the “list of state bodies and other organizations entitled to classify information as state secrets” (enforced by the President’s Decree dated February 25, 2011), there are around 60 organizations that can

<sup>33</sup> “Belarus,” DLA Piper, February 21, 2022, <https://www.dlapiperdataprotection.com/index.html?t=law&c=BY#:~:text=The%20fundamental%20legal%20act%20regulating,of%20personal%20data%20protection%20issues.>

restrict<sup>34</sup> access to information as a state secret, including the Belarusian State Concern of Food Industry, the State Inspection of Protection of Flora and Fauna, and the National State TV and Radio Company. “The same information may be regarded as classified for nonstate media and later appear publicly in state media,” an expert said.

Digital security training and tools for Belarusian media are mostly available online. Several offline specialists in digital security had to emigrate due to political pressure. “Not all digital knowledge is transferrable online. Before 2021, many local newspapers received individual visits to their newsrooms to have their devices checked. Now it is virtually impossible,” an expert said.

“Any platforms for public debate that existed in-country before 2021 cease to exist,” an expert said.

Media outlets’ digital hygiene practices have strengthened since 2020 due to constant pressure from authorities. Many independent news outlets have moved at least one person from their social media and/or web team abroad and secured mirror websites in preparation for eventual disruption of access. They are also connected to international actors, such as “Access Now,” to deal with the consequences of possible distributed denial of service or other types of attacks. “Media that appear on the so-called extremism lists are using dynamic IPs and domain addresses to avoid direct links with the banned content. This is true for Radio Free Europe, Zerkalo, Nasha Niva, and many others,” said one expert.

It is still possible to use VPNs in Belarus, and the government has not applied any punishment for this technology, despite introducing a formal ban back in 2015.<sup>35</sup> Among the most popular applications<sup>36</sup> are Psyphon, Surfshark, Proton, and NordVPN. “Despite initial setbacks in traffic caused by website blocking, we were able to quickly see the return

34 “Access to Information,” Belarusian Association of Journalists, n.d., <https://baj.by/en/content/access-information>.

35 Lokot, Tanya, “Belarus Bans Tor and Other Anonymizers,” Global Voices, February 25, 2015, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2015/02/25/belarus-bans-tor-and-other-anonymizers/>.

36 Chester, Dean, “The Complete Guide to Using a VPN in Belarus in 2022,” Cool Tech Zone, January 4, 2022, <https://cooltechzone.com/vpn-belarus>.

of visits to our website,” an editor said.

There is little evidence to indicate Belarusians know well how algorithms work or other ways tech platforms use personal information. However, the government widely spreads information about how it is using such information obtained from people’s devices and chats, and this motivates people to better protect their details. “There are fewer group chats than before. Many Belarusians prefer sharing sensitive information in one-on-one conversations. Even if one person gets caught and arrested, they will be able to disclose only one member of the chat, not the whole list of participants as before,”

said one of the experts.

#### **Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.**

Media literacy is included as an extracurricular activity at schools, but it is not actively promoted by the government. Instead, the government promotes pseudo-fact-checking done by pro-state media actors.

The media and information literacy and critical thinking trainings used to be offered by nonprofit initiatives, most of which had to shut down in 2021 as part of the comprehensive crackdown on civil society.

There is little evidence of people using special tools for fact-checking or debunking disinformation. The nonpublic research that became available for the authors of this study however demonstrates a self-proclaimed willingness to check news from various sources and a low trust in state TV channels.

“One recent poll demonstrated that Belarusians prefer the trustworthiness of journalists when they choose to financially support independent media,” an expert said. This may indirectly demonstrate the ability, or at least the willingness to distinguish high-quality news from poor quality. The limitations that are in place for independent polling do not allow experts to explore this hypothesis in-depth.

While the data refers to early 2022, Chatham House polling showed that despite massive pro-Kremlin propaganda only 3 percent of Belarusians support the country's involvement in the war with Ukraine. This might be interpreted as a sign of rather strong media literacy when compared to Russia.

### **Indicator 13: People engage productively with the information that is available to them.**

Freedom of speech and the right to information were severely repressed in 2021. With more than 50 journalists and bloggers behind bars by the end of the year, there was also an unprecedented closure of the state authorities to independent media. "The information requests are not coming through. We are denied access even to Zoom press conferences," an editor said.

The situation is not better for the general population. Belarusians continue getting prison sentences for comments left on social media that could be interpreted as their dissatisfaction with the authorities. In November 2021, a 69-year-old woman was fined €375 (\$380), sentenced to 1.5 years of house arrest, and had her mobile phone confiscated for one comment against a policeman made on the social network [OK.RU](#) in 2020. There were more cases where defamation laws were used against the general population. Between January and November 2021, the human rights organization Viasna recorded 104 cases of criminal punishment for offending authorities and judges (Articles 369 and 391 of the criminal code) and 32 for insulting the president (Article 368). "The pro-government Telegram channels and TV programs make sure to speak publicly about these cases. They want to showcase the punishments so that people stop commenting, even if they are dissatisfied with something," said one of the experts.

**“There are fewer group chats than before. Many Belarusians prefer sharing sensitive information in one-on-one conversations. Even if one person gets caught and arrested, they will be able to disclose only one member of the chat, not the whole list of participants as before,” said one expert.**

After [TUT.BY](#) was shut down in mid-2021 and its content declared extremist, around four million users in Belarus lost their daily source of independent news. The new resource, [Zerkalo.io](#), set up by the former [TUT.BY](#) team from exile, has yet to reach the same level of popularity. "It is unclear where the audience of [TUT.BY](#) went for news. None of the portals saw a massive increase in daily visits. There were some aggregators that became more popular, including Russian Yandex services," an expert said. Over several months, other independent media noticed a growth in visits on social media, especially on YouTube, which allows certain anonymity for its users. But as YouTube indiscriminately suggests independent news alongside partisan content or propaganda, it is difficult to assess if most Belarusian viewers interact with independent news at least weekly. The same is true for Telegram, where media with editorial values and ethics have to compete with bloggers who often propose an extremely politicized interpretation of events.

"Any platforms for public debate that existed in-country before 2021 cease to exist," an expert said, an opinion shared among all interviewed respondents. While there was an attempt to demonstrate public discussion about the development of a new Constitution (the referendum on the matter took place on February 27, 2022), these were "staged shows in the worst traditions of Soviet propaganda."

The proliferation of disinformation and mal-information, as well as hate speech by state actors and sometimes by their political opponents, on social media was noted already in other indicators. Still, the general public largely adheres to the norms and standards of an online community, and it frequently reports hate speech or misinformation on platforms. "Some media encourage their followers to report any irregularity on social media in order to deprive hate speech and disinformation actors a platform," an expert said. This is supported by political initiatives, such as one from exiled the office of opposition

leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, which took the initiative to work with big tech to remove Belarusian state propaganda from advertised and promoted content. Because of the office's efforts, Google removed advertising from Belarusian law enforcement that distributed videos of tortured protesters.

There are no public councils or ombudsmen to address most of the complaints about the media. "The media are reactive to specific situations. If someone complains, the newsroom can decide to remove the story or write a correction, but they are guided by intuition, not procedures," an expert said.

#### **Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.**

Independent research in Belarus in 2021 is very limited. However, since a lot of research can be done online and from abroad, media are able to access some of the studies, either because the data is public, like Chatham House, or shared confidentially by international media development organizations, such as Internews or Free Press Unlimited.

As the blocking of web access intensified, the reliance on online quantitative data from social media platforms grew. But some of the new platforms provide few tools for in-depth analysis. "Several media outlets made their debut on TikTok in order to attract younger audiences," said one expert. "But TikTok is not too keen to share any significant audience data." Because of sanctions and distrust of investors in the market, it is also challenging to conduct any marketing research.

While media accept and publish letters to the editors, many of them had to close their comment sections due to laws making newsrooms liable for content in the comments. Belarusians became more cautious in providing feedback for fear of political repression. "We as media are required to be responsible not only for our staff and sources but also for people who comment in our chats or under our articles. But this is difficult, as there is no technical solution to anonymize everyone," an expert noted.

Before the crackdown, many media actors organized public events in Minsk and regional cities. The most noticeable were from the Belarusian Press Club, but there were also various open lectures, workshops, and meetings between journalists and the public all over the country. Now, these are held in virtual spaces or in exile (e.g., in MediaPort hubs in Warsaw and Bialystok), leaving people inside Belarus with less access to journalists. On top of that, the inclusion of media outlets on lists of extremists has forced the media inside Belarus to anonymize their authors and sources. "There's a tendency to publish fewer and fewer author names, show less information, and have less direct communication and fewer meetings, including readers' clubs," an expert observed. This may play a negative role for the time being. "The trust in independent media that was high after the 2020 election may erode over time, as outlets have to hide their contributors' names, and reporters are not able to ask questions publicly," one of the experts said.

Some common challenges and problems have a positive effect on independent media. "For the first time, we can say that we, independent content producers, do not compete. Newsrooms and journalists work together and promote each other's content. This is something we could not imagine before," an expert said. Another expert noted that while there are good examples of collaboration between independent media, the links between less professional content producers and traditional newsrooms are still weak. "They talk about each other but not with each other, and there is no agreed professional standard," she noted.

#### **Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.**

Community media as commonly understood does not exist in Belarus.



Indicators under Principle 4 are the most polarized in the 2022 study of Belarus. On one hand, the indicators relating to individuals, civil society, and (mostly independent) media, received scores of between 15 and 20. However, indicators relating to government use of quality information to make public policy decisions, along with good governance and democratic rights, received scores of less than 10.

**Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.**

There was a discussion between the experts on whether self-censorship and avoidance of political topics in fear of backlash can be considered “nonpartisan news.” According to some, the very lack of political coverage, like the news site Onliner, means that large audiences interact with nonpartisan information. But others argued that Onliner’s decision to preserve its position inside Belarus and limit coverage is a deeply political step. “One does not change overnight into a lifestyle media outlet without a reason,” an expert said. Some regional media outlets also choose to follow the “nonpolitical” approach, concentrating on urban issues or history. The editors of blocked media set up separate lifestyle web pages so that they can continue to engage in journalism.

While there is evidence of the existence of multiple types of media with

**“There are so many platforms, so many ways to receive news, that we cannot be sure if the bases for those discussions are trustworthy news sources,” said an expert.**

varied ideological leanings, there is little data on whether Belarusians are reading beyond their bubble. Everyone in the country is exposed to state views, as most of the socially important information is delivered through state media. But when it comes to other political views, there is little intersection between the opposition and their sources of information and supporters of the current regime.

Since 2020, there have been no street protests, and there are few opportunities for people of opposing views to directly engage at other meetings. “In the first months of 2021, such events could still happen, but after May, we lost those opportunities,” an expert explained. This is reflected in the digital space as well but to a lesser extent. “There are a lot of critical comments under both pro-government and pro-opposition publications. But it is difficult to judge whether people aim to exchange information or just to attack opponents,” an expert said. The most noteworthy discussions are happening on platforms where people can speak out anonymously like on YouTube channels.

Open and constructive discussions may happen online, but experts were not sure how to measure whether they are informed by quality news and information. “There are so many platforms, so many ways to receive news, that we cannot be sure if the bases for those discussions are trustworthy news sources,” an expert said. Often, the mass exile of the middle class abroad becomes a topic of such discussions, with people trying to weigh the pros and cons of leaving Belarus for more democratic environments.

Media continue to be trusted by most Belarusians, according to available polls. “Nongovernment media have been gaining trust for the last 20 years and still have quite a lot of it, but it can slowly decrease under conditions of censorship,” said one of the experts.

**Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.**

There is little evidence about what type of content informs people’s

views on political or social issues. “When it is nearly impossible to get a representative audience survey in Belarus, the scrapes of data we get do not provide enough information,” an expert said.

There are no avenues for direct dialogue with politicians. In 2021, the government decided to delay local elections one year, from 2022 to 2023. This has shrunk the already narrow window of opportunity for citizens to engage with their current or potential deputies, as any such communication beyond the framework of campaigns may be considered too dangerous.

There was also little interaction when it came to verifying the health claims of authorities. The government’s neglect of COVID-19 resulted in the majority of Belarusians ignoring the World Health Organization’s recommendations, something the state sometimes supported. President Alexander Lukashenka personally removed the requirement to wear masks in public spaces in Belarusian cities; subsequently, the announcements the need to wear masks were torn off and disappeared from public display. “Many people are led by emotions in their health-care decisions, and emotions are rarely based on information. With COVID-19, it was also difficult to determine which recommendations were fact-based and which were not, as there was contradictory research data,” an expert said. Still, independent media tried to steer interest to topics like vaccination and disease prevention. “Fifteen regional media outlets engaged in the campaign, discussing pros and cons of various vaccines. They had a lot of engagement from people, which demonstrates the appetite for such information,” another expert said.

False information was actively used by pro-state media to create sentiment against the political opposition in Belarus in 2020 and 2021. But it is unclear whether this inspired a significant number of people. The actions in support of Lukashenka were not numerous, and there were no massive citizen attacks on opposition figures.

### **Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities.**

Many civil society organizations (CSOs) in Belarus had to shut down in

2021 due to repressions. Still, they continue to exist in the informational space. In some cases, they rely on quality news producers; in others, they have transformed into media outlets. For example, the website and social media of [Spring96.org](https://spring96.org) from the human rights center Viasna have become a kind of news agency on political prisoners for many professional media outlets. “There is a deficit of information coming from inside Belarus; therefore, press releases and publications about human rights defenders enjoy high popularity among the remaining independent media,” an expert said.

There were no known incidents of CSOs spreading mis- or mal-information to their constituencies in Belarus in 2021. In general, civil society actors attempt to spread information responsibly.

CSOs’ work to reduce the spread of mis- and mal-information is noticeable but there are doubts about its efficiency. “I gave this subindicator a rather high score because I can see how much effort NGOs make to denounce and address misinformation. But then we see another government source spreading absurd allegations, and it seems that it will never stop,” an expert said.

Media outlets attempt to engage with civil society, but the uncertainty about being included on the list of “extremists” make these collaborations difficult. Topics that do not attract too much attention from authorities are usually apolitical. “In 2021, we ran a contest for the best environmental story, and we realized that real coordination between civil society and media is rare. Media take on the topics themselves. In only two instances did they ask environmentalists for comments. However, there were also positive cases, where a platform was given to an organization that protects animal rights,” an expert said.

Among nonprofessional content producers, the most engaged with civil society is Mikita Melkaziorau with his YouTube show, *Zhizn-Malina*. This show, along with human rights defenders, prompted discussion around the topic of capital punishment in Belarus. The think tank community also actively interacts with media, both traditional and nonprofessional. This is especially true of the BEROC initiative, which supports the online media outlet [Thinktanks.by](https://thinktanks.by).

Yet all the efforts of civil society in 2021 did not lead to any policy or legislative changes in Belarus. “Indirectly, we can say that civil society has improved conditions for Belarusians who have moved into exile. Due to the lobbying, volunteer work, and activism of Belarusian CSOs in Poland, the exiles there received special treatment from the Polish government. The situation is similar in Lithuania,” an expert said.

### **Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.**

Press conferences exist but are mostly open only to pro-governmental media. As one of the experts noted, sometimes organizers quote COVID-19 regulations to limit independent media access, while state media are allowed in.

Political discourse from the state media often uses misinformation and mal-information intentionally. While political opponents attempt to use facts, access to information is increasingly difficult. One of the most striking examples of historical revisionism informing political decisions surrounds the “genocide of the Belarusian people” during World War II, which, according to state officials, is purposefully not recognized by the West. “The government tried to make the map of villages burned during World War II and failed, and it tries to manipulate the facts about who burned those villages. It removes any mentions of guerilla fighters or Soviets igniting villages and leaves only statements about Germans or their supporters. As a result, even villages that were never burned appear on that map,” an expert said.

Government actors refer to state broadcasters and officials when explaining their decisions and ignore content from quality media or information from civil society. They are likely to use misinformation and to misinterpret the facts leading to their decisions. “They stated that people who helped pay fines for victims of repressions who were punished for their participation in peaceful actions were sponsoring terrorism, that journalists who livestreamed protests were coordinating them and therefore have to be punished,” an expert said.

**“Nongovernment media have been gaining trust for the last 20 years and still have quite a lot of it, but it can slowly decrease under conditions of censorship,” said one expert.**

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

Most subindicators in this indicator received extremely low scores. The only exception was the subindicator on civil society and media exerting pressure on the government to stop violating civil liberties. This is done through the publication of news, reports for national and international stakeholders, and communication with advocacy groups and international rapporteurs. However, there is no significant evidence of the success of such efforts in 2021. “Perhaps the only exception was the attempt of authorities to declare the white-red-white flag a Nazi symbol. A petition launched in April 2021 against this attempt gathered more than 100,000 signatures, the biggest petition in [Petitions.by](#)’s history. It caused a

huge reaction, and in the end, the flag was not targeted by authorities,” an expert said.

*A partial panel was held virtually, and some experts were interviewed individually. IREX protects the identity of the panelists who agreed to participate in this study. Amendments to the criminal code include an article titled “Discrediting the Republic of Belarus,” which provides for criminal liability for giving international organizations “false information” about the country.*

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