

BELARUS



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

2018

Tracking Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
Around the World



BELARUS

AT A GLANCE

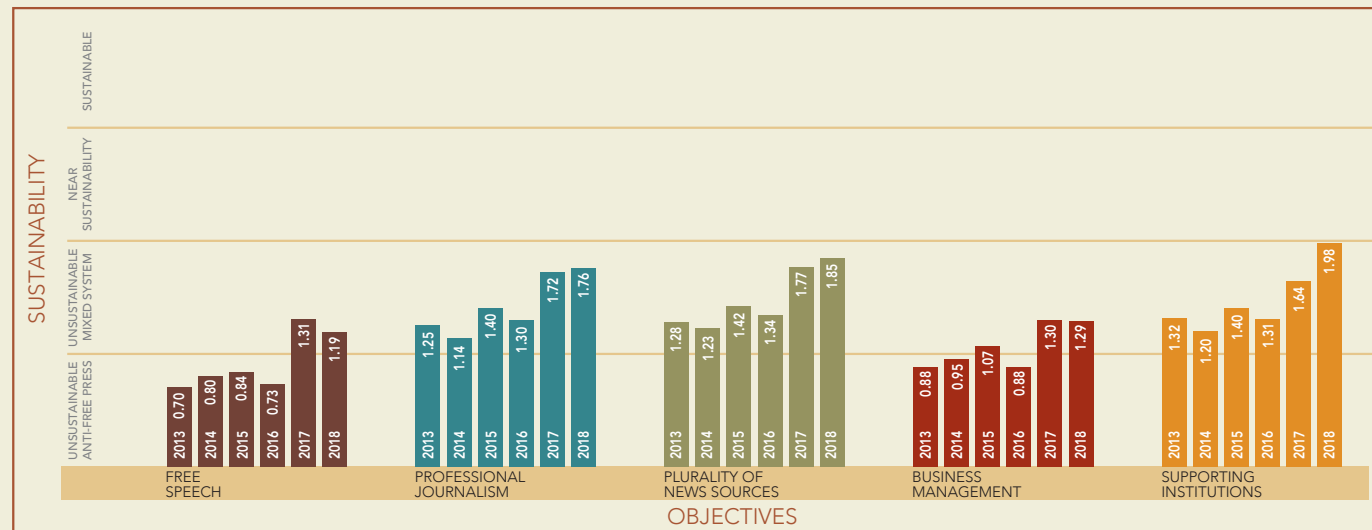
GENERAL

- ▶ **Population:** 9,549,747 (July 2017 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):** Orthodox 48.3%, Catholic 7.1%, other 3.5%, nonbelievers 41.1% (2011 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 (2015-Atlas):** \$61.42 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- ▶ **GNI per capita (2015-PPP):** \$16,920 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- ▶ **Literacy rate:** 99.7 %; male 99.8 %, female: 99.7% (2015 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- ▶ **President or top authority:** President Alexander Lukashenka (since July 20, 1994)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- ▶ **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals:** 752 domestic newspapers, 869 magazines and journals, 103 television programs, 176 radio channels/programs (including 30 FM stations). More than 30 Internet news portals.
- ▶ **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: Belarus Segodnia, Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii (Megapolis Media advertising agency, 2017), Respublika, (advertising departments, 2017)
- ▶ **News agencies:** BelTA (state-owned), BelaPAN (private), Interfax-Zapad (Russian-owned), Prime-TASS (Russian-owned), Ecopress (private), Agentstvo Grevtsova (private), Minsk-Novosti (state-owned), Registr Information and Legal Agency (private) (Belarus Ministry of Information, 2017)
- ▶ **Broadcast ratings:** NTV-Belarus (14.8%), ONT (13.97%), RTR-Belarus (13.27%) (December 2014, GEVS)
- ▶ **Internet usage:** 5,786,572 (data from 2016, based on Elaboration of data by *International Telecommunication Union (ITU)*, *World Bank*, and *United Nations Population Division*.)
- ▶ **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** 90 mln USD (AMG-Consult)

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SCORE KEY

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.



Despite the increase in the overall score to 1.61 there are still many alarming threats to media freedom. The freedom of speech objective dropped from 1.31 to 1.19 as anti-government protests erupted and resulted in the detainment of 167 journalists covering these events. The improvements in the media sector are largely due to the increased access to higher quality journalism programs, which rose the supporting institutions objective by .34 points, almost to the near sustainable threshold.

Crackdowns against journalists intensified in Belarus in 2017 amid mass protests. Detentions of media workers and fines increased tenfold. The authoritarian government has not given the media any more freedom. It is now preparing a new edition of the mass media law, without consulting independent professional media bodies. While the country's constitution guarantees the freedom of expression and the right to receive, store, and disseminate information, the criminal code in Belarus still contains provisions on defamation, libel, and insult.

Since 2014, online media outlets have been subject to the same restrictions as traditional media. In the case of a suspected violation, the Ministry of Information has the power to limit access to websites, without a court ruling—which it exercised in blocking the Belorusskiy Partizan website for several days, before it returned online with a new Belarusian hosting. The appointment of a new information minister in September 2017 did not bring significant improvements to the media sphere.

Economic discrimination continues to place independent media at a disadvantage as well. They are subjected to unequal distribution and production conditions, not to mention the \$57 million annual state subsidies to the pro-governmental press. The country's MSI score has moderately improved over the previous year, but not enough to lift Belarus up from the mixed unsustainable systems category.

Although laws limiting freedom of speech remain, the state's

treatment of several nongovernmental print media outlets improved slightly, as they were allowed back into the state system of distribution after 11 years. Nine newspapers in all made it back to kiosks—including the national *Novy Chas* and the regional *Gazeta Slonimskaya*, *Intex-press*, and *Borisovskie Novosti*. At the same time, Viciebsk-based *Vitebski Kurier* has not been accepted into the distribution system, despite having a publishing license registered in Russia.

Against the background of the repressive political regime, the quality of the independent media outlets has grown, with their business models becoming more diversified and online-audience oriented. Restricted economic freedoms and the lack of reforms, however, hold back their development. In this sense, discrimination toward the nongovernmental media sector prevents Belarus from significantly increasing this score.

The continued availability of LTE/4G connection and broadband Internet made it easier for an increasing number of Belarusians to access information. Yet in 2017, the government took a more active approach to punishing online content. Throughout the year, the Ministry of Information issued 17 warnings to media, including 10 targeting online outlets. The government also blocked access to websites 106 times.

Several nongovernmental media outlets also succumbed to self-censorship in 2017 by agreeing to remove archived information about the past of IT businessmen Viktor Prakapnya, who has close ties to the president.

**OBJECTIVE 1:
FREEDOM OF
SPEECH**

1.19

The score for this objective experienced the largest decline in 2018 compared with its 2017 score, driven by the growing pressure on journalists and media and an increase in censoring materials by labeling them extremist.

Laws limiting free speech remained unchanged and enforced. While 2017 did not bring resolution of the case against pro-Russian reporters detained in late 2016 (their five-year sentence was suspended in early 2018), the year passed under the shadow of this criminal investigation. The authorities accused the three Russia-based writers—Dzmitry Alimkin, Yury Paulavets, and Syarhey Shyptsenka—of inciting racial hatred in their publications and detained them for more than a year. While their publications fell far short of journalistic standards—often replicating pro-Kremlin propaganda about Ukraine and other former Soviet states—human rights defenders, along with the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), criticized their treatment as too harsh. In an interview with the independent radio station Euroradio,¹ BAJ chair Andrei Bastunets said that while the articles contained some violations of journalistic ethics, they did not violate Belarus’s criminal code, and therefore, in his view, the state overstepped in its interference at the expense of freedom of speech and opinion.

In October 2017, Alyaksandar Karlyukevich, the

new minister of information, announced the government’s preparation of changes to the law on mass media. According to the minister, who emphasized that the move is not aimed at “censoring or limiting free speech,”² the changes are expected to target social media and online content. The ministry has until April 2018 to consult on the draft before Parliament’s review.

The state also continued its attacks on free speech by labeling more than 300 materials and publications extremist in 2017. While many of the banned pages contained jihad propaganda, Nazism, and other extreme views, some were blocked because of references to Belarusians participating in the conflict in East Ukraine, on the Ukrainian side. In December 2017, the list of blocked websites expanded to include belaruspartisan.org, a website set up by the slain Belarusian journalist Pavel Sheremet. In its explanation, the ministry only stated that it applied Article 511 of the state mass media law because “the website hosted news and materials that contain information that, if spread, may harm national interests of the Republic of Belarus.”

As in 2016, the Ministry of Information issued relatively few—17—official warnings to the media: 7 for traditional media outlets and 10 for online media. Most of the warnings detailed minor violations, such as “not mentioning the age limits for the publication” or “mistakes in output data.” An exception was a warning to *Borisovskie Novosti*’s newspaper and website for the “violation of the article 38 of the Law on Mass Media.” In December 2017, its editor, Anatol Bukas, was slapped with a BYN 345 (\$150) fine for mentioning an unauthorized demonstration in his publication. The court ruled that an October 4 *Borisovskie Novosti* article mentioning an opposition demonstration in Minsk on October 21 had violated

² “Editors’ Club,” Belarus-1 TV. October 7, 2017.

the law on mass gatherings, which bans giving the date and time of unauthorized demonstrations. This marked the first time the law on mass gatherings was applied to a media outlet in Belarus.

Officials also deployed copyright law as a preferred tool to persecute journalists. In October 2017, the authorities confiscated the equipment of Belsat TV freelancer Alyksandar Barazenska for alleged “violation of the trademark.” In March 2017, they confiscated equipment from two Belsat TV offices in Minsk. This was possible because of a Belarusian court’s 2014 decision to register the Belsat trademark with the Belarusian commercial

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 of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- ▶ Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- ▶ Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- ▶ State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- ▶ Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- ▶ Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

¹ Lukashuk, Zmitser. “BAJ Chairperson: Freedom of Speech Is Violated in ‘Belarussophobes’ Case,” UDF. December 15, 2016. <http://udf.by/english/main-story/149611-baj-chairperson-freedom-of-speech-is-violated-in-belarussophobes-case.html>

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company “BELSATplus.” BELSATplus was established before Belsat TV and since having the same name brings reputational risk, BELSATplus was legally granted the trademark for the Belsat name, which validates the violation of trademark charges.

Media licensing and registration continues to be unfair. Print and broadcast media alike have to pass several stages of the highly bureaucratic registration process to receive a permit, and foreign-based Belarusian broadcasters are barred entry to the local market. For example, officials again refused to issue a permit to European Radio for Belarus (Euroradio), an exiled broadcaster with a bureau in Minsk. The accreditation of this broadcaster was extended for only one year. At the same time, online media continue to operate without any registration or permit requirements.

Market entry and tax structure are distorted for media compared to other types of businesses and between state and nonstate media. Unlike other businesses, media newsrooms cannot be located in residential houses. Individual entrepreneurs are not allowed to publish any media, except in online outlets. An editor in chief of a media outlet applying for registration is required to have at least five years of media management experience. Broadcast media editors in chief must pass a special exam on broadcasting law, technical settings of radio and television broadcasting and advertising law for their outlet to receive a license.

In 2017, the state detained 167 journalists—in most cases, journalists’ detentions were related to their coverage of anti-governmental protests in the beginning of the year. BAJ recorded 101 detentions of journalists by police, while 69 freelancers working for foreign media without accreditation received fines amounting to \$29,600. To compare, in 2016, there were only 13 detentions and 10 fines. The last year more than 100 journalists were detained

was 2011: a year of “silent protests” after the flawed presidential election and a major currency crisis. The practice of fining journalists for unaccredited work for foreign media outlets has been in place since 2014. Between 2014 and 2016, journalists were fined nearly 50 times; then that practice slowed—but was revived in spring 2017, with average amounts for fines ranging from \$230 to \$575.

In 2017, the state returned to its practice of detaining journalists—in most cases, journalists’ detentions were related to their coverage of anti-governmental protests in the beginning of the year.

With no public service broadcasting and the state’s regulation of the media market, only a handful of media outlets can be considered editorially independent. State-run media received more than \$57 million in subsidies from the government’s budget, showing their preferential treatment. President Alyaksandar Lukashenka personally appoints and dismisses the heads of the main national state-owned media.

Libel continues to be punishable under the criminal code, with offended parties having no responsibility to prove falsity or malice. However, there has been a positive trend, with judges favoring the independent media in nonpoliticized cases. “Five years ago, when we talked to judges about freedom of expression and quoted the constitution, they never followed our advice. Now, they themselves tell businesses that instead of suing for defamation they should first resort to softer tools, such as asking media outlets to publish corrections. They quote all the relevant constitutional norms defending freedom of expression,” a panelist with a legal background

said. Three criminal code articles can be applied for defamation of the president or public officials, yet none of them were used in 2017.

At the same time, the Supreme Court upheld the libel charges pressed against Associated Press journalist Yuras Karmanau in 2016 for investigating the use of radioactive milk in the country’s dairy products. Karmanau claimed that milk samples he had collected from a Milkavita farm (near the zone with continuing contamination from Chernobyl) contained radioactive isotopes 10 times above national safety levels, according to tests by a lab in Minsk. After hearing testimony from a lab employee, Belarus’s Supreme Court upheld a ruling ordering Karmanau to pay court costs and to retract key evidence from his story.

Access to information for media has grown more difficult. As several panelists noted, ministries and state institutions are now more likely to require special accreditation before they’ll provide any information to journalists. State press services often withhold information or organize “pseudo” press conferences where they only allow one or two questions. An August 2017 poll by BAJ of more than 50 state and nonstate media professionals named the least open institutions: the Ministry of Information, the Committee of State Security, and the Operative and Analytical Centre of the Administration of the President. The most open institutions are the courts, Ministry of Emergency Situations, Ministry of Sports and Tourism, and the Ministry of Forestry.

While previously some media used the law on inquiries by physical and legal persons to obtain replies to their requests, it became more difficult in the past year. Instead of providing nationwide data, ministries check the address of citizens requesting the information and then pass the requests to the city authorities, who in turn can provide only limited city-related information.

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Legislation does not restrict access to or use of domestic and foreign news sources, although one can be punished for spreading messages considered extremist. Because of the lack of clarity in copyright definitions, many news organizations borrow stories from other outlets, giving credit to original sources.

Entry into the journalism profession continues to be largely unrestricted. At the same time, the state limits access in other ways. The Ministry of Information, for example, only issues press entry cards to registered media outlets and full-time staffers. Freelance and part-time journalists, as well as staffers of online media outlets and journalists working for foreign media organizations, must obtain accreditation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Working without accreditation is subject to fines and other types of administrative punishments.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

1.76

The panelists attribute the improvement in the score of this objective to the professionalization of the nonstate media, while the gap in quality between independent and state outlets remains wide.

The dominance of state-controlled media, varying degrees of self-censorship, and the popularity of politicized and unbalanced reporting on some independent platforms prevent Belarusian journalism from meeting high professional standards.

More often than not, media sink to producing click-baiting, misleading headlines and recycling news from each other. Panelists also noted the media's unwillingness to look for second or

alternative sources of information. "I recently received a ready-for-publishing text for review, and I'd estimate that at least 30 percent of the text required basic fact-checking—and this is not an isolated case," one panelist noted. Some nonstate media outlets offer fair and objective reporting, but they are limited by the restricted access to information and the lack of financial and human resources.

While there are two commissions of ethics set up by journalists' unions—the pro-state Belarusian Union of Journalists (BUJ) and the independent BAJ—both are considered ineffective. Their handling of homophobic articles published by a state-run regional newspaper, *Vecherniy Mogilev*, illustrates their limited influence: both commissions reviewed the case and came to opposite conclusions, and none of that has influenced the authors or editors of the paper.

BAJ's ethics code needs to be updated to address the realities of online journalism. Still, it is important that BAJ's commission regularly reviews the cases, as an incident with Belarus 1 revealed. In August 2017, the state-run television channel aired a story about pedophiles using a picture of a Belarusian surgeon who had nothing to do with the charges. When independent media reported on their egregious error, the channel issued an official statement blaming the reporter's "extremely high speed of work" for the mistake.

In 2017, Belarus's nonstate media found itself in the middle of a new type of self-censorship in the country. While some outlets have regularly succumbed to political intimidation to issue "corrections," last year, leading portals, such as TUT.BY, Onliner.by, and others agreed to delete old articles about the businessman Viktor Prakapenya, following requests from his lawyers. Prakapenya, now considered the president's right hand in Belarus's IT-revolution, just two years ago spent time in the state security detention prison. He was never

Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS

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

officially charged, however, and was released after several months. In September 2017, he approached dozens of media that had published information about his detention and asked them (or, according to some reports, offered them bribes) to remove articles that were damaging his image among international partners. Leading and smaller portals alike quietly removed the publications or made them unfindable via Internet search—a move that took an independent blogger to uncover. Some media chose to remove only reprints linking to other publications, but kept their own original stories. The panelists disagreed, however, on whether this case qualifies as self-censorship. "The businessman turned to the newsrooms at a time when his connection to the president was still unknown, and he could get the sympathy of editors as a victim of unfair persecution," one panelist noted.

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Journalists cover most major events and issues, although they still tend to rely on secondary sources. In several cases in 2017, however, mass media coverage forced the government to change its behavior. One such case, in October, involved coverage of the suicide of an 18-year-old soldier in Pechy, a military unit near Barysaw. His mother, convinced his suicide was staged, contacted the online outlet, Media Polesie. After that, Euroradio developed the story further—visiting the unit, talking to the soldier’s friends and relatives, and asking officials uncomfortable questions. As a result, all major nonstate media reported on the suspicious death, and thousands of Belarusians signed a petition demanding a response from the Ministry of Defense. The State Investigative Committee agreed to treat the case as suspicious and claimed it would reopen the investigation of similar cases in recent years. Ultimately, Belarus’s president apologized to the family (through his press secretary).

Significant media attention also proved key in changing the government’s stance on the on affair known as the “Patriot’s Case.” Soon after the spring protest, the state secret services accused a patriotic sports club’s owners and members of forming an illegal armed group and plotting a riot. The defendants included acting and former employees of the border troops, the Armed Forces, and the Ministry of Emergency Situations and Internal Affairs. State media showed stashes of weapons allegedly found in their apartments—coverage independent media denounced as fake and kept up the pressure by regularly publishing inconsistencies in the prosecutors’ statement. By late 2017, all detainees were released.

The Belarusian economy had a rough year, as reflected in declining salaries for journalists. “Last year, we lost one-third of our staff. All of them, 10 people, went to work either in Minsk or abroad,” a regional panelist said.

“The level of income of journalists is very low. Outside Minsk, one can find job classified ads offering as little as \$250 per month for a full-time reporter’s work. As regional media outlets cannot afford to pay more, they either have to rely on low-quality workers or be prepared to lose good journalists,” another regional panelist said.

Furthermore, audiences have developed a taste for new media, which requires more expensive media specialists, such as 3D-animators, videographers, or designers. This places yet more strain on already struggling independent media outlets, especially those relying on print as a main channel of distribution and income.

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Again this year, the panelists highlighted the huge imbalance of news and entertainment programming at state television and pro-state radio stations, with little, if any, objective coverage of news and information. In contrast to 2016, the panelists also reported an increase in state-run disinformation, as demonstrated vividly by the “Patriot’s Case” coverage. The propagandist film *Zvonok Drugu* (Call a Friend), which depicted street protesters demanding the denouncement of the so-called freeloaders tax as paid opposition lobbyists, provides another example.

Interestingly, a former chief propagandist, Alexander Zimovsky, gave an extensive interview to the independent portal kyky.org, explaining in detail how such fakes are filmed and how their authors are remunerated. Another long-forgotten tool was brought back in 2017: publishing false information about street protest participants in regional press. “We have noticed a wave of such publications in the state-owned media outlets all over the country,” said one panelist.

With the development of modern technologies and the relatively high accessibility of the Internet, most journalists do not experience major problems surrounding access to equipment. However, regional nonstate outlets complained that they lack the modern equipment required for their jobs, or the knowledge to properly use cheaper, more modern equipment and software. At the same time, one panelist commented that the significant technical upgrade of state-run regional media has made them more competitive and allowed them to lure some local journalists, drawn by the greater stability and security state outlets can provide, to their side.

The panelists reported a surge in specialized, niche outlets—both regional and national—such as the new Brest-based Binokl outlet. Positioned as a city-centric outlet (very much like Citydog in Minsk), it presents a strong visual storytelling approach to journalism, concentrating on human stories and appealing to younger audiences. The opening of the Minsk franchise of the Moscow-based online outlet The Village also strengthened city-centric coverage; it follows the tradition of hyperlocal journalism set up by the *Village Voice* in America. Other examples of specialized coverage include *Nasha Nina*, a web spin-off of *Nasha Niva* about women run by a female editor, and the Tolki Zhanchyny (Women Only) program and Facebook community run by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). At the

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same time, a gap in investigative journalism persists. There are no specialized outlets that run investigative stories. Foreign broadcasters produced the year's most daring investigations, such as Belsat TV's use of drones to find the hidden residential houses of Belarusian officials. Economic journalism has stagnated since the 2015 split of the national weekly *Belorusy i Rynok*; personnel changes in *Ekonomicheskaya Gazeta* have also weakened coverage of the economy. *Office Life*, a print journal that launched its web version in 2017, is one of the few outlets trying to fill that need.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

1.85

Belarusians' access to multiple news sources continued to grow in 2017, although it was somewhat limited by the state monopoly on national television and radio broadcasting, and a lack of decisive steps to stop the proliferation of biased pro-Kremlin news. Economic constraints further undermine independent media coverage of socially relevant topics.

According to Belarus's Ministry of Information, citizens have access to multiple sources of news and information, including 752 domestic newspapers, 869 magazines and journals, 103 television programs, 176 radio channels/programs (including 30 FM stations), and 9 news outlets. More than 200 foreign television channels are rebroadcast—a significant share of them from Russia. However, the healthy quantity of outlets does not translate into a variety of viewpoints within the Belarusian media landscape.

The Internet remains the only true pluralistic environment for Belarusian media. However, despite

a growing number of users, the Internet has not become a primary source of daily information for the majority of consumers. Meanwhile, the traditional media sphere remains dominated by media with little to no diversity in the coverage of social and political topics.

There are no special legal restrictions to access domestic or international media. High-speed mobile LTE/4G Internet has become increasingly available outside the capital city, which may improve the access of the population beyond Minsk to a greater variety of news. According to Gemius, in December 2017, around 45 percent of all Internet traffic in Belarus went through mobile phones, four percent through tablets, and 51 percent via PCs. The limitations rest on the level of media outlets themselves: broadcast media are subject to unequal registration conditions, while nonstate print media face economic discrimination, thus limiting the plurality of news sources for those who do not have access to high-speed Internet. Also, the blockage of access to Belaruspartisan in 2017 demonstrated the Ministry of Information's willingness to block access to news sites.

State media largely reflect the views of the government, with opposition politicians or independent media receiving few, if any, positive mentions—especially outside of election years.

Belarus did not register any new news agencies in 2017. Out of the nine existing agencies, four (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. On average, domestic news agencies charge approximately \$300 per month for daily news updates and twice as much for real-time and hourly news alerts. Apart from newswire services and news websites, BelaPAN and BelTA offer photos, multimedia stories, and infographics. Additionally,

BelaPAN sells thematic analytical reviews on a variety of topics, and BelTA publishes a weekly newspaper and an economic magazine. BelTA also builds and maintains websites for local state media and government outlets. However, economic difficulties have forced many independent media to cut their news agency subscriptions, including national news wires. "On top of that, state media and some private FM broadcasters received unofficial 'advice' from the government not to subscribe to BelaPAN," according to one panelist.

"One could see how the trust in media that provided such [live video] streaming grew. People who are usually reluctant to comment about anything on camera, especially for nonstate media, stood in queues to tell their opinion," one panelist noted.

Many broadcast media continue to face difficult circumstances. The state controls all national television channels, and only the alternative Poland-based television station, Belsat, is persecuted. Prosecutors harass its journalists relentlessly in the form of fines and warnings. Accredited journalists from RFE/RL and European Radio for Belarus contribute to independent, trustworthy broadcasting, along with reporters from the non-accredited Radio Racja and special correspondents of other international broadcasters, including Deutsche Welle, BBC, and RFI. The government has taken no steps to grant these broadcasters wider access to audiences.

It is difficult to see the exact ownership structure of media, although this information can be obtained by request. Print media publish this information on their front or last pages, but websites or blogs are not obligated to publicize

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS

- ▶ A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- ▶ Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- ▶ Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- ▶ Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- ▶ State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- ▶ A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- ▶ Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.

ownership details. The state controls more than 600 outlets in Belarus, serving as the major “investor” for most. Private media ownership is not concentrated. Under Belarusian law, foreigners cannot own more than 20 percent of the shares in a private Belarusian media company, but the leading Russian television channels found a way to circumvent the requirement by registering in Belarus as Belarusian entities. An unusual development in 2017 was the purchase of *Belgazeta* by a Belarusian journalist, Kiryl Zhyvalovich, who organized a successful subscription and crowdfunding campaign to give new life to this well-known brand. Before, Belarusian businessman Sergey Isaev owned *Belgazeta*; he bought it from the Russian-owned business in 2015.

Reliance on the narrow variety of sources and commentators weakens the ability of both independent and state media to reflect diverse social interests. But panelists underscored one positive trend in 2017: live video streamed by a range of media during the street protests in the spring. “One could see how the trust in media that provided such streaming grew. People who are usually reluctant to comment about anything on camera, especially for nonstate media, stood in queues to tell their opinion,” one panelist noted.

It is important to note that the government does not actively promote use of the Belarusian language in education, culture, or the media sphere, despite its status as an official language alongside Russian. Therefore, the language of the nation’s majority can be considered a minority language, while the language of the actual minority, Russian, dominates. As for other national languages, official promises in 2015 to introduce a Ukrainian television channel to the cable networks have gone unfulfilled.

The lack of institutional knowledge sharing also hinders coverage of national minorities. “At a press conference by the Polish ambassador, the young editor in chief of a leading independent outlet apparently knew nothing about the history of the split between unions of Poles in Belarus; for him, this [2005] split was ancient history,” one panelist said.

While Belarusian media focus primarily on domestic issues, an increase in international reporting was seen in two exiled broadcasters: Belsat TV and Euroradio. The latter continues to be part of the wider international network of Russian-language media, the Russian Language News Exchange. Examples of international reporting brought via the exchange include a special project on unrecognized territories in the former Soviet Union and a special feature on Crimea.

**OBJECTIVE 4:
BUSINESS
MANAGEMENT**

1.29

While Belarus now offers more educational programs for media managers, 2017 brought few, if any, new opportunities to improve business models or learn lessons from successful media business examples.

At the same time, the shift of audiences online has heightened print media’s hardships, and income from alternative sources cannot compensate for their losses. The overwhelming majority of media in Belarus continue to be either directly owned or subsidized by the state; the rest face economic discrimination, as the state monopolizes traditional media distribution.

Most of the media do not operate as sustainable business enterprises. Those not subsidized by the state rely on scarce, forbidden foreign funding and limited internal advertising and subscription revenue. While nonstate media try to introduce new models of income generation, such as crowdfunding or new types advertising, it is not enough to compensate for their disadvantaged position compared to the state outlets.

The panelists discussed whether foreign aid received by some media outlets should be considered part of a sustainable strategy. However, as the Belarusian law penalizes all foreign aid that is not registered with the authorities, and as all media that receive such aid risk punishment under the law, most experts agreed it cannot be considered a sustainable income source. “If media were profitable businesses, the donor community would not hear from them cries for help to cover their basic core needs,” one panelist said. Independent media must also cope with the constant threat of increasing

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finances and detentions. “How can a media outlet plan or organize its work if at any moment its equipment could be confiscated, its journalists could be detained for several days and thus be unable to work, or it could be fined a huge amount?” another panelist asked.

The online advertising market saw growth of native advertising in the past years. The major Internet portal TUT.BY boasted of publishing more than 600 native ads throughout 2017—the first year it started developing this type of advertising. Such advertising also proved key for the income of the sports portal Tribuna.com, which also relies on gambling ads. The Minsk portal Citydog.by claimed that in 2017, the share of native advertising in its overall advertising turnout was 78 percent, up just slightly from 76 percent in 2016.

Belarusian law restricts the volume of

advertising to 30 percent in newspapers and magazines (25 percent in state-owned titles). For radio and television, the volume is limited to 20 percent, including no more than 16 minutes per hour during prime time. Advertising-only outlets are exempt from this rule. “It was difficult for me to evaluate this indicator. Some national nonstate

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media, such as *Narodnaya Volya*, have very little advertising, but there are regional outlets that always fulfill the quota and could benefit from more advertising,” one panelist said. Online media face no limitations in the volume of advertising. However, online media outlets that wish to sell advertisements for Belarusian services and businesses are requested to host their websites on servers within Belarus, per a 2010 presidential decree.

As mentioned earlier, the state-owned media receive government subsidies, giving them an unfair edge over their nonstate counterparts (especially when combined with other economic discrimination tactics). Independent media that would like to apply for foreign assistance—and thus receive subsidies from other governments, private companies, or individuals—must comply with the law mandating the registration of any foreign donations with the government. Throughout 2017, *Imena* has been lobbying to change the legislation in order to abolish mandatory registration, at least for micropayments from abroad. The magazine—Belarus’s first

crowdfunding success story—is unable to receive donations for social causes because of this restriction. *Imena*’s management expressed hope that in 2017 the law would be changed, but it is not a fast process.

Meanwhile, the government has increased subsidies and investments in new state-owned media outlets. “In Hrodna, the city council has invested huge funds into a fine print magazine about the city. We could never dream of the equipment it has received,” one panelist said. At the same time, circulations and audiences of traditional print media continue to fall. The debt crisis has pushed the non-state *Brestskiy Courier* to the verge of shutting down. Those media outlets that still show profits, such as *Vecherni Hrodna*, suffer the consequences of their founders’ decisions not to reinvest in the development of the media but to repurpose the income elsewhere.

Market research is scarcely available and rarely used, although there have been attempts to improve long-term planning. “At the media management school where I teach, we have a special course on strategic planning for editors and owners of media—and it’s hugely popular,” said one panelist. “The issue is not that the media do not know how to plan strategically, but in Belarus, they can, at best, just plan for a start-up phase or crisis management. It is impossible to look ahead for more than one to two years,” another panelist argued. Marketing tools have become more accessible. “Nowadays, one can obtain market data quite cheaply. We monitor the preferences of our readers during polls twice a year and actively solicit feedback via social media. We’ve segmented our audiences and understand who they are,” one panelist said.

Because of the state’s backlash against independent sociologists, non-state media have limited access to broadcast ratings; circulation

Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

- ▶ Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- ▶ Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- ▶ Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- ▶ Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- ▶ Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- ▶ Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

figures are published in the newspapers but cannot be found easily online.

**OBJECTIVE 5:
SUPPORTING
INSTITUTIONS**

1.98

Access to professional education has grown for the Belarusian media, and human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and professional organizations have demonstrated a high level of support for the independent media. There has been moderate growth in the quality of journalism degree programs, but channels for media distribution remain monopolized and/or politically controlled and restricted.

Nearly all panelists noticed the lack of a business association to provide services to more than a small group of regional media outlets or advertising businesses. Such an association could help outlets navigate the complicated legislative environment governing media operations. “We need someone to explain to us how to deal with the new system of taxation of incomes derived from online platforms. Yet we do not know whom to ask, as there is no one representing our interests,” said the editor of a national specialized website.

At the same time, some specialized unions, such as the Telecommunications Industry Union and the Association of Cable Broadcasters, effectively lobbied for legislative changes that would expand possibilities for rebroadcasting in 2017. United Mass Media is a significant regional player, representing 14 independent print publishers from all regions in Belarus except Homiel.

BAJ, which unites around 1,200 media professionals, intervened in a timely way to protect the

rights of media workers. In partnership with human rights defenders, it supported journalists ordered to pay high fines for their work. Together with dozens of other NGO players, it has come up with a united approach to treating the case of pro-Russian reporters: while disapproving of the content of their articles, BAJ considered their detention too harsh a response. There is also the pro-state, 1,500-member strong BUJ for state-owned media journalists. Both unions rarely cooperate.

The panelists differed on how well NGOs in Belarus support free speech and independent media. Those panelists with professions more closely related to the NGO sector had a feeling that the interest of NGOs had grown. They provided examples of solid cooperation between BAJ and human rights defenders in providing input on the UN’s Universal Periodic Review on Belarus. Others expressed more skepticism. “I have a feeling that we [media] are totally alienated from civil society. Yes, there is cooperation with human rights defenders, but the rest of the third sector is indifferent to us,” one panelist said.

Belarusian State University remains the leading institution offering journalism degree programs. Its Institute of Journalism currently enrolls more than 1,250 students. Regional universities complement the school’s degree programs and often send their students to train at the local media outlets, including nonstate ones. The quality of these students varies greatly. *Vitebski Kurier* reported negative experiences with students lacking basic writing or critical thinking skills. Media outlets in the west of the country report a more positive experience. “Some years before, we wrote to Hrodna State University, asking them not to send us any more interns, as we couldn’t do anything with them. This year, we wrote them a letter of gratitude for the first time,” said one panelist.

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- ▶ Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- ▶ Professional associations work to protect journalists’ rights.
- ▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- ▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- ▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- ▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

Strengthening media managers emerged as the main trend in short-term professional media education in 2017. There were three schools of media management, organized by the International Educational Centre and “Third Sector” (a Hrodna-based NGO), BAJ and the Entrepreneurship Institute, and, lastly, one organized by the Press Club. BAJ continues to cooperate with Sweden’s Fojo media institute in strengthening Belarusian newsrooms. “Still, there are professions that one cannot learn through short-term courses. Advertising specialists, social media marketers, or big data analysts need a more long-term, thorough education, which is difficult to obtain,” one panelist said.

Conditions for access to newsprint continue

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to favor state media. The price of newsprint for non-state media keeps climbing on no objectively reasonable grounds. In 2017, the Shklou paper factory reoriented its sales to Russia, making all national newspapers suffer from a newsprint shortage. The media were forced to buy newsprint from secondary sources in Russia at sky-high prices. In Hrodna, a crisis of a different nature has unfolded: seven years ago, the printing house bought an experimental Russian-Indian printing machine, and now it cannot find spare parts needed for repairs. “The deputy director of the printing house told me that they would not buy a new one, as soon they will run out of clients anyway,” one panelist said.

“I have a feeling that we [media] are totally alienated from civil society. Yes, there is cooperation with human rights defenders, but the rest of the third sector is indifferent to us,” one panelist said.

Price discrimination against privately owned newspapers continues to be a common practice. Private media are required to make down payments, while state media can print on credit. Belarusian law holds owners of printing facilities responsible for the content of printed materials, and printing equipment must be registered at the Ministry of Information. Belsajuzdruk, a state network of around 1,500 newspaper kiosks, is the main retail distributor. Press subscriptions are in the hands of the state postal monopoly, Belposhta.

Print and broadcast channels of transmission remain restricted and controlled by the state. The Internet, however, offers growing opportunities. The access to information and communication technology is growing, with the gap between Minsk

and the regions gradually narrowing. Throughout 2017, LTE/4G high-speed mobile Internet became accessible in smaller district cities of Belarus, such as Barysau, Cherven, Berazino, and Polack. Overall, more than 100 cities and towns in Belarus now have access to this technology. Depending on the amount of traffic per month, access to LTE/4G and phone communication can cost from \$3 to \$15 per month.

State provider Beltelecom has actively introduced broadband access to Belarusians, with more than 2.4 million households having such a connection by the end of 2017.

List of Panel Participants

IREX protects the identity of the panelists who agreed to participate this study. Amendments to the criminal code include an article, “Discrediting the Republic of Belarus,” that provides for criminal liability for giving international organizations “false information” about the country.

The panel discussion was convened on December 27, 2017.