

BELARUS



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2019

Tracking Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
Around the World



BELARUS

AT A GLANCE

GENERAL

- **Population:** 9,527,543 (CIA World Factbook, 2018)
- **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% (CIA World Factbook, 2009)
- **Religions (% of population):** Orthodox 48.3%, Catholic 7.1%, other 3.5%, non-believers 41.1% (CIA World Factbook, 2011)
- **Languages (% of population):** Belarusian (official) 23.4%, Russian (official) 70.2%, other 3.1% (includes small Polish- and Ukrainian-speaking minorities), unspecified 3.3% (CIA World Factbook, 2009)
- **GNI (2017-Atlas):** \$50.24 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)

- **GNI per capita (2017-PPP):** \$18,120 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.7 %; male 99.8 %, female: 99.7% (CIA World Factbook, 2015)
- **President or top authority:** President Alexander Lukashenka (since July 20, 1994)

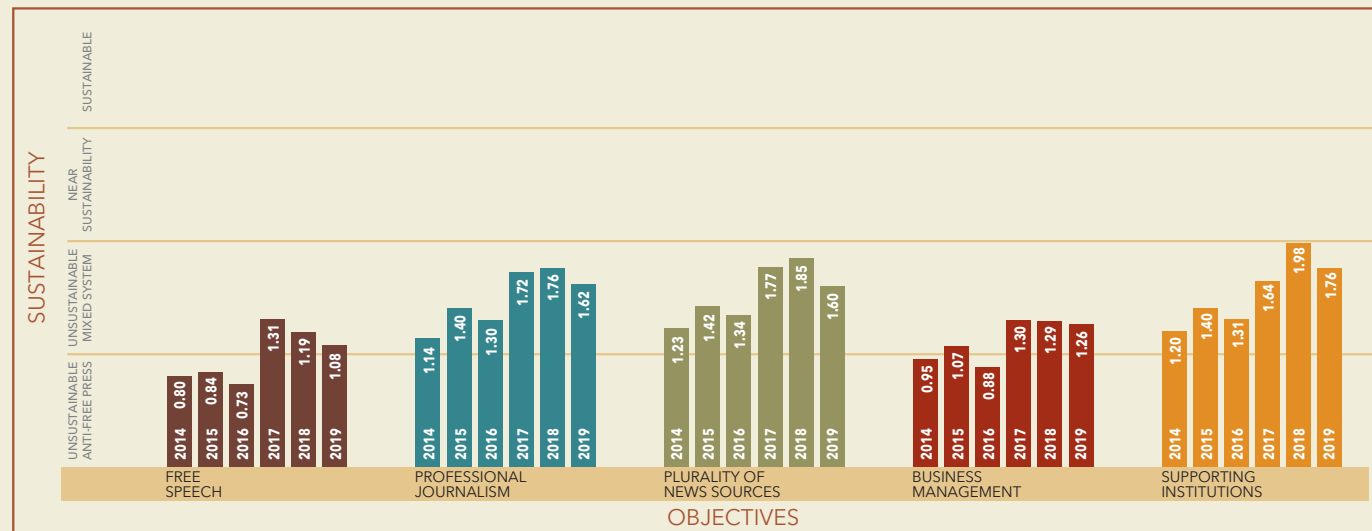
MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals:** Print: 743 domestic newspapers, 866 magazines and journals; 102 television programs; 174 radio channels/programs (including 26 FM stations); and 9 news agencies. More than 30 Internet news portals (Ministry of Information, 2018).

- **Broadcast ratings:** TV ONT (67.7 percent Belarusians watch it once a month, Informational and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration, 2017), NTV Belarus (64.6 percent Belarusians watch it once a month, Informational and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration, 2017), Belarus 1 (59.7 percent Belarusians watch it once a month, Informational and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration, 2017). Radio: Radio ROKS (17 percent), Humor FM (17 percent), Radio Unistar (14 percent) (GEVS, January–December 2018).
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: *Belarus Segodnia* (state owned, 400,000 copies weekly, as per official website), *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* (private, 300,000 copies weekly, smi.by as of April 2018), *Zviastda* (state-owned, 60,000 copies weekly, Megapolis Media Advertising Agency)

- **Magazines:** *Zhenskaya Zhizn* (15,000 copies, <https://ladys.by/o-zhurnale>), *Office Life* (5,600 copies, <https://officelife.media/about/magazine/#book-8506&page-1> as of November 2018), *Bolshoi* (23,000 copies, https://bolshoi.by/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/mediakit_Bolshoi_magazine_03_04_2019.pdf), *Nasha Historyja* (10,500 copies, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=216345&lang=ru> as of September 2018)
- **Internet news portals:** NEWS.TUT.BY (17.4 mln visits/month in December 2018), ONLINER.BY (25,200,000 visits/month in December 2018) (Similarweb.com),
- **News agencies:** BeITA (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, 2018)
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** \$99 million (ViBel, Alkasar, December 2018)

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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.

Scores for all years may be found online at <https://www.irex.org/msi>



Belarus saw a decline in its overall score, from 1.61 in 2018 to 1.46 in 2019. MSI panelists attributed this drop to increasing governmental pressure on journalists and the media, as well as changes to the country's mass media law which are expected to further limit freedom of expression. While all five objectives studied by the MSI dropped, particularly large losses were seen in Objectives 1 (Freedom of Speech), 3 (Plurality of News), and 5 (Supporting Institutions). However, despite this broad regression on all fronts, there has been some improvement in the quality of independent media as they have turned to diversified business models and to cultivating online audiences in order to increase their chances of survival.

The escalating persecution of journalists and the introduction of controversial updates to the law on mass media combined to pull down Belarus's overall 2019 Media Sustainability Index (MSI) score. As the new version of the media law just went into effect in December 2018, its real effect on the media sector is not yet known. However, some of its elements—including the end of anonymous comments on online news and required registration for online media—can be expected to further limit freedom of expression. Furthermore, while the country's constitution guarantees the freedom of expression and the right to receive, store, and disseminate information, Belarus still criminalizes defamation, libel, and insult.

Since 2014, online media outlets have been subject to the same restrictions as traditional media; prior to then, the government could not limit access to websites without a court order, which made them less censored than traditional media. As a result, the Ministry of Information exercised this legal tool against two news websites and at least 27 other websites in 2018. The media law updates give the state even more power to block online resources and blacklist media.

The availability of LTE/4G connections and broadband Internet continues to grow, improving access to information for an increasing number of Belarusians. Yet in 2018, the government enacted more punishing measures for online content it deemed threatening and repeatedly used anti-extremism laws to punish commentators on social media, including journalists. Moreover, the state detained 36 journalists in 2018. One of

the most persecuted journalists, Kastus Zukouski, had to find shelter abroad for fear of his life and security. In addition, foreign media cannot operate freely in Belarus, and freelancers working for foreign media without accreditation were fined 118 times for a total of over \$50,000 during the year.

A case involving the alleged stealing and misuse of the newswire belonging to the Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BelTA), targeting 15 Belarusian journalists and editors, had sweeping implications on many aspects of media sustainability and illustrates the Belarusian government's willingness to suppress the media. The state used the Investigative Committee to threaten the journalists with criminal proceedings. Advised by defense lawyers to confess guilt, most of them asked for the reclassification of the case to administrative status—prompting BelTA and two state newspapers to sue the journalists for damages.

Economic discrimination against independent media continues as well. They are subjected to unequal distribution and production conditions, with the state providing pro-government media subsidies of around \$75 million per year. Against the background of a repressive political regime, the quality of the independent media has still managed to improve, with increasingly diversified business models and greater orientation toward online audiences. More media now rely on donations from their readers and other types of audience-related revenue. However, restricted economic freedoms and lack of reforms, along with the attacks on media freedom, hold back the independent media's development.

**OBJECTIVE 1:
FREEDOM OF
SPEECH**

1.08

Growing pressure on journalists and media, including court cases, censorship of “extremist” materials, and harsher punishment for reposting content on social media all contributed to the further decline of freedom of speech in Belarus over the past year.

Laws limiting free speech remain in place and are enforced. In early 2018, several pro-Russian reporters—Dzmitry Alimkin, Yury Paulavets, and Syarhey Shyptsenka from the Regnum.ru information agency—received a five-year suspended jail sentence each after 14 months of detention for “inciting racial hatred” in their publications. While the quality of their reporting veered far from accepted standards, human rights defenders do not believe the accusations were justified.

Throughout the year, the Ministry of Information held limited consultations on updates to the law on mass media. The law, which went into force in December 2018, introduced several new restrictions. First, it bans anonymous comments on online stories and compels online media to apply for registration. It also expands the reasons the Ministry of Information can block websites without court order: If they contain any information that violates the mass media law, other legislative acts, or court orders as well as for non-compliance with requests to remove information seen as violating these laws, acts or court orders, failure to inform the Ministry of Information about the removal of this content, or receiving two or more warnings per year. Furthermore, if foreign media operate on Belarusian territory, they must follow the same legal obligations as Belarusian outlets.

In 2018, the state labeled more than 337 materials and publications “extremist.” While many of the banned pages contain Nazi or jihadist propaganda or other extreme views, some were blocked for mere usage of the words considered derogatory Ukrainian propaganda or for spreading information about the participation of Belarusians in the East Ukraine conflict on the Ukrainian side. In early 2018, the Ministry of Information blocked access to the news website charter07.org, allegedly for posting information about banned mass gatherings and for publishing “extremist” materials. In addition, the Ministry of Information continued to block belaruspartisan.org, which has been blacklisted since the end of 2017.

At the same time, the Ministry of Information has significantly decreased the number of official warnings issued to the media. In 2018, it issued only six such warnings: Three to traditional media and three to websites (down from 17 in 2017). Most of the warnings detailed minor violations that the outlets corrected.

Media licensing and registration continue to be unfair, according to the panelists. Print and broadcast media alike must pass several layers of a highly bureaucratic registration process to gain a permit, and foreign-based Belarusian broadcasters are barred entry to the local market. For example, officials repeatedly refuse to issue a permit to European Radio for Belarus (Euroradio), an exiled broadcaster with a bureau in Minsk and only extended its accreditation for one year. Beginning in December 2018, the new mass media law granted media hoping to build an online presence an opportunity to apply for an official registration, which is necessary for outlets to be allowed to operate as media and call their staff members journalists. However, those that do not secure registration but still publish online will be held responsible for any

violations of the mass media law.

Market entry and tax structure for media remain unfair in comparison to other types of companies, and independent media face additional disadvantages compared to state media. In addition, as of December 2018, online media now face the same difficult conditions as their counterparts in traditional print and broadcast media. Unlike other businesses, media newsrooms cannot be located in residential homes. 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—and beginning in 2018, that applies to online media as well. A broadcast media editor-in-chief must pass a special exam on broadcast law knowledge, technical settings of radio and television broadcasting, and advertising law for his or her outlet to receive a dissemination license.

One panelist, an editor, commented, “In Belarus, the state is behind most of the harassment of journalists in the form of fines, detentions, other types of punishment for our work for independent media, especially foreign outlets. Despite these actions falling formally within the current criminal and administrative codes, I consider this a systematic campaign—an act of pressure on freedom of expression as a crime.”

While there were no significant crimes against journalists in 2018, old cases, such as the 2004 murder of Veranika Charkasava, remain unsolved. The fulfillment of the United Nations Sustainable

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Development Goal 16.10, related to freedom of the press and the safety of journalists, is assigned to the Ministry of the Interior—the same ministry that provided the most witness statements in cases against journalists. However, the number of detentions of journalists decreased compared to 2017. Journalists were detained 36 times, 10 of which resulted in three-day stays in the detention center (compared to more than 100 times in 2017). The number of fines climbed to 117, exceeding the four preceding years combined.

The BelTA case began on August 7, 2018, when 15 independent journalists and editors were charged with alleged theft and misuse of the BelTA news agency's newswire. BelTA, a state-subsidized agency, often has exclusive access to government sources and events, and makes all of its paid news available for free minutes after they are published—allowing them to be republished with hyperlinks. The defendants claimed they never used the stories in question before they were officially open access. They were subjected to searches of their homes, and their personal equipment—as well as that of their families—was confiscated. They were then held without access to their personal lawyers, and their families received delayed information about their whereabouts. Authorities used copyright infringement as a pretext for the detentions, but they later threatened them with trials under the criminal code article that punishes those who steal passwords and hack into databases.

As a result, 14 out of 15 journalists and editors, representing BelaPAN, TUT.BY, and Belrynok, as well as some other media, had their cases reclassified as administrative and paid fines. BelTA and two state newspapers sued those journalists, claiming they were victims of the unauthorized distribution of BelTA's information. On top of fines, the journalists had to pay damages to these organizations.

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

The fifteenth media professional, Marina Zolotova—editor-in-chief of the largest portal in Belarus, TUT.BY—fell under a criminal investigation that continued into 2019 for allegedly hacking into the state news agency. She was eventually charged with “official inaction,” or negligence, for failing to control her subordinates when they accessed BelTA using account passwords for the agency. Under that article, she could face up to five years in jail and a possible ban from holding managerial positions. She was, in particular, charged with failing to conclude the commercial agreement with BelTA, despite lacking the authority to sign such agreements in her position.

Apart from the BelTA case damages, journalists paid over BYN 100,000 (\$50,000) in fines in 2018. One panelist, an editor, commented, “In some countries, such as Malta or Slovakia, private groups might perpetrate crimes. In Belarus, the state is behind most of the harassment of journalists in the form of fines, detentions, other types of punishment for our work for independent media, especially foreign outlets. Despite these actions falling formally within the current criminal and administrative codes, I consider this a systematic campaign—an act of pressure on freedom of expression as a crime.” The panelist also mentioned the police beating BELSAT TV channel camera operator Andrus Kozel during local elections in March, after which the state punished Kozel for alleged illegal activities at the polling station. At the same time, some other panelists said the situation did not relate directly to his journalistic activities: Kozel did not perform the filming. He was a trusted associate of a candidate and performed his functions as an observer. On the other hand, the panelists consider the detention of journalists during the Day of Freedom in March 2018 a crime against journalists. Also in 2018, the situation was worsened by the theft, possibly by the security service, of independent newsroom drones during the Day of Freedom coverage. The authorities never investigated the theft.

With no public service broadcasting, nor state 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 official budget, revealing their preferential treatment. Moreover, the state budget will increase the amount of these subsidies to \$75 million per year in 2019. President Alexander Lukashenka personally appoints and dismisses the heads of the major national state-owned media.

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Libel continues to be a criminal offense, and complaining parties have no responsibility to prove falsity or malice. The criminal code contains six articles on libel and offense, including Article 367, which establishes a higher punishment for libel against the president, and Article 368, which regulates the defamation of the president. Article 369 punishes for defamation of public officials. All these articles are frequently used by the courts, and while there have been no cases of punishment in 2018, at least one criminal case was initiated for violation of one of these articles. The BelTA case has demonstrated that authorities can use the Investigative Committee to initiate lawsuits against journalists. Journalists and editors were forced to admit their guilt within the criminal law procedure in order to avoid the criminal trial, after which a state-owned news agency and media outlets sued them for damages.

More than 60 state institutions and organizations—including the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Culture—are empowered to keep their data secret from journalists. Ministries and state institutions require journalists to hold special accreditation before they will provide any information. As part of a “Right for Information” campaign in 2018, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) sent letters to 51 governmental institutions asking about this special accreditation procedure. Replies from 39 institutions demonstrated that the procedure is not formal, and decisions are made on an ad hoc basis. In one notable case, in October 2018, BelaPAN correspondent Uladzimir Laptsevich’s accreditation for the Forum of Regions of Belarus and Russia was withdrawn. When he arrived at the forum and tried to attend an event, he was denied entry. By telephone, the press secretary of the Council of Republic (the higher chamber of the Belarusian Parliament) told him he was not allowed to enter

per the president’s press service. The reason for that decision was not given; at the time that this MSI study was prepared, the journalist was trying to prove the illegality of the action in court.¹

Media largely have access to information and can freely use the sources. According to one panelist, “My media outlets can use any foreign media as sources; we are not prevented from doing so. We are only limited from using some websites, such as Lurkmore or charter97.org, blocked under the pretext of spreading extremist information.” Another panelist added, “There are no specific limitations, and standards are in place. At the same time, I do not consider this trend sustainable, and I do not consider the Ministry of Information’s power to block access to news sites totally justified. This concerns both news sites and social media.” One panelist, an editor and media trainer, attributed his low score to the BelTA case, in which journalists were accused of stealing the state agency’s information. Another panelist, a media lawyer, commented, “BelTA was created by a legal act as a source to disseminate state news, which should be accessible to anyone. Therefore, it received state budget subsidies and the right to exclusively cover many official events. At the same time, on the surface, it is a commercial entity that takes money for services it should be giving for free. The current trial shows the clear wish of the state to limit our access to this information.”

Entry into the journalism profession continues to be largely unrestricted. There are no registered cases of a candidate being disqualified from enrolling in a journalism school based on a

personal interview on sociopolitical topics during the entrance exam. At the same time, not every journalist can be regarded as such by the state. Entry of press cards from the sample issued by the Ministry of Information is allowed only to registered media outlets and only to full-time staffers. Under the new mass media law, it means that the state will no longer consider reporters working for unregistered online media as journalists, and they could be persecuted for their activities. In addition, their access to information is even more restricted. Freelance and part-time journalists, as well as staffers of online media outlets 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

1.62

The state media grew less professional and more enmeshed in political campaigns during 2018 to persecute journalists and activists, the panelists reported. They consider the reporting by independent media outlets far more objective, fair, and sourced than the state-run outlets, but believe the non-state media’s disadvantaged position in the market limits its ability to compensate for the state media’s shortcomings.

Still, there are lapses in sourcing and verifying information from the independent media too. “A leading independent national media outlet published a story that stated that a head of a company was in close family relations with the government, based only on an image on social media that resembled

¹ “BelaPAN Journalist Sued the Council of the Republic.” Belarusian Association of Journalists. December 11, 2018. <https://baj.by/be/content/zhurnalist-belapan-padau-u-sud-na-savet-respubliki>.

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the manager in question. This journalist or his editor never cared to verify his information, and this led to their subsequent defeat in court," a media lawyer said. Another unprofessional article, published by the ej.by platform, claimed that Belarusian health authorities purposefully experimented on children by using dubious vaccines. "The author of this article often published stories that were possibly provided to him by the government, as they contained data that was difficult or impossible to verify. In this particular case, he published data that would have been easy to verify and denounce, but for some reason, he did not," one panelist mentioned.

In 2018, there were no flagrant cases of self-censorship in Belarus, but the panelists admitted that some media houses, while adamantly denying self-censorship, avoid publishing stories on certain sensitive topics. "Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish whether it is a genuine editorial decision or not, especially if it is the only independent media outlet in the region," one media network representative said. At the same time, the same panelist noticed that whereas before 2018, regional journalists asked for help to "push" certain topics with their editors, they seem to feel freer now. Some regional independent media decided to raise more sensitive issues; for instance, after the decline of *Brestskiy Kurier*, the competitor *Brestskaya Gazeta* transformed its focus from lifestyle to socio-politics. "Still, many editors—those centered on politics and others that normally cover non-political issues—are telling me informally that they are trying not to irritate the government too much, but sometimes cannot resist an interesting scoop. For instance, in Brest, every Sunday, activists gather to "feed pigeons" [a protest against the construction of a battery factory in the city], but many newsrooms do not send their staff for fear of detentions," one panelist confirmed. Another editor said, "I confess

to my own self-censorship. With a story headlined "Set a Wolf to Guard the Sheep," my designer put Lukashenka's picture on the same page nearby. I asked him to remove that. While the headline was not actually paired with his image, we still decided to play it safe." Another case of alleged censorship involved the firing of the social media manager of Belsat TV, which broadcasts from Poland to Belarus. The manager was dismissed after he posted a picture of the Polish and American presidents being mocked by the Polish opposition on his personal Facebook page. "I see a clear violation of freedom of expression in this case," a media lawyer said. "Based on the comments by the management of Belsat TV, we can clearly see there is a lack of freedom there," another journalist said.

Journalists cover major events and issues, although they still tend to rely on secondary sources when reporting major news. This is partially caused by the closed nature of state sources and partially by risk and business calculations of the investment in time – and resource-consuming primary source reporting. Still, in 2018, more private media outlets produced their own news and invested in targeting and regionalizing their content, showing interest in becoming more responsive to their readers and growing their audiences. More journalistic platforms, such as talk shows and video pitches, appeared in regional media outlets.

Belarus's lackluster economy limits the potential to improve pay for editors and journalists. According to one expert, Minsk-based journalists can expect salaries close to the national average, around \$500/month, but it depends on the type of newsroom they work in. Higher incomes are possible for journalists willing to work for several media outlets part-time or who accept assignments in exchange for honoraria. In addition, most newsrooms do not limit their employees from accepting gifts.

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).

The situation is much worse in the regions, where \$150–\$200/month is the average salary for independent media; state media earn slightly more. State regional news outlets pay better salaries than those in smaller cities—around \$200–\$300/month, varying according to the type of media and level of experience. Foreign-based independent media often pay higher salaries. National state television employees average \$700–\$1,000/month on the salary scale. However, those who work on news and current affairs receive much more than those who work on cultural and children's programming, and either work many extra hours or combine their work in state and non-state media. The presidential administration's newspaper, *SB*, pays higher salaries on average than state television.

The practice of claiming additional expenses for participating in trips that are already covered by

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hosts is quite popular both in state and non-state national media. At the same time, this approach highly depends on the newsroom culture. “We had many discussions with editors [of regional media] about foreign trips that include per diems. Some indeed think of them as a way to give some of their staff a little extra money; others consider those trips the staff’s private initiatives. Often, they would even pay extra per diem if journalists would return and report back on ideas and knowledge received abroad that would be useful for the newsroom,” one panelist remarked.

As for bloggers, they often receive payments to cover certain topics or work with agencies that promote their brands and pay commissions. Often, bloggers agree to promote brands in exchange for gifts. Some bloggers publish paid posts, the price of which ranges from \$15 to \$50. Some communities on social media earn the equivalent of a one – to two-month salary by publishing paid posts, links, and advertising.

In 2018, pro-Kremlin bloggers and informational sites were active in Belarus. Although there was no proof that they received honoraria from Russia, one panelist said, “It is widely known that some Russia-based organizations hire bloggers; there was more money for that in the beginning of the year, less by the end of the year.” Another editor added, “At the same time, I think that the salaries are high enough to stop the corruption of journalists and keep highly qualified professionals in journalism. Good professionals can always find a job in the media sector.” Still, many people leave the profession for communications and public relations agencies or leave lower-paying media outlets for those that pay better.

As in previous years, there is a huge imbalance toward entertainment programming at state television stations and pro-state radio stations—with

little to no objective coverage of news and information. Independent monitoring of state-run television channels and newspapers conducted by the BAJ in late 2018 showed the dominance of pro-Kremlin narratives in the news and current affairs coverage of those media outlets, especially on television. Their narratives often differ from the official state policy on non-recognition of the Crimea annexation by Russia or on the treatment of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

An editor of the independent media outlet said, “even pro-state media try to cover serious topics of social importance. The problem is that media consumption habits have changed. People do not go to the media’s websites; they visit specific articles based on social media sharing. Therefore, the balance between entertainment and information is less important than it was before.”

Surrounding the BelTA case, state-run media outlets also engaged in targeted attacks against their competitors in the independent media sector, both on organizational and personal levels. They declared the editors and journalists guilty without waiting for court verdicts and engaged in unethical discussions about their professional and moral qualities.

Online media, both independent and state, are trying to attract mass audiences and resort to clickbait headlines to gain a competitive advantage for advertising. On the other hand, as an editor of the independent media outlet said, “even

pro-state media try to cover serious topics of social importance. The problem is that media consumption habits have changed. People do not go to the media’s websites; they visit specific articles based on social media sharing. Therefore, the balance between entertainment and information is less important than it was before.”

However, independent regional media outlets have increased the diversity of their informational coverage. “During the annual best regional newspaper of the year contest, we as a jury were impressed by the investigative, social, and political stories entered by contestants. Maybe the growth is not very significant, as criminal news still wins traffic indicators, but we still see interesting stories, especially in Brest and Slutsk. The coverage of the construction of the battery factory in Brest by *Brestskaya Gazeta* stands out as a great example of such improvements,” a media expert said.

Access to equipment needed for proper reporting is improving with the advancement of modern technologies and access to the Internet. However, the confiscation of personal and working equipment during the BelTA case, combined with high fines and damages, was clearly aimed at preventing several leading independent journalists and media outlets from doing their jobs. Coordinated action by citizens, as well as civil society and professional and human rights organizations, helped these journalists get back to work without significant delays.

There are not many niche outlets, neither regional nor national, but the panelists pointed to both positive and negative developments in this sphere. “We have witnessed solid investigative journalism in the regions related to social issues: schools illegally spending money designated for children’s breakfasts, conflicts regarding plants and factories, etc. Usually, media take single cases

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of wrongdoings and expose larger issues through that lens. This may reflect growing social and economic tension in Belarus,” one panelist said. On the national level, there is still space to improve the quality of journalism, especially investigative. “We probably have lost the tradition of investigative journalism in Belarus; only some people are still able to do that. We only have some stories resembling investigative journalism, as real investigations demand a lot of resources, both human and financial,” said one panelist. Furthermore, another added, “Media outlets that rely on grants may also sometimes pretend to do investigative journalism, as the donors want that.”

There is also a lack of professional business journalism; the *Nasha Nina*, or *Women Only*, projects started in 2017 have not demonstrated significant improvement in the quality of women-related stories. At the same time, in 2018, the quality of storytelling and the visualization of stories have improved significantly, also in regional media, such as *INTEX Press*, *Brestskaya Gazeta*, and others. This may be related to the accessibility of new tools and trainings.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

1.60

Although access to news sources improved in 2018, the state's monopoly on national television and radio broadcasting, and its failure to thwart the proliferation of biased pro-Kremlin news, limited the plurality of viewpoints. Economic constraints further undermine independent media in their coverage of socially relevant topics.

From the Ministry of Information's point of view, citizens have access to multiple sources of news and

information. According to the Ministry of Information, Belarus has 743 domestic newspapers, 866 magazines and journals, 102 television programs, 174 radio channels/programs (including 26 FM stations), and nine news agencies. Belarus rebroadcasts more than 200 foreign television channels, including a significant share from Russia. Rebroadcasts of the Ukrainian television channel UATV did not begin in 2018 (as promised back in 2015); that launch shifted to early 2019.

“The problem is also the low media literacy of society: people do not realize why they should even be interested in the ownership of the media,” an editor on the panel said.

However, the overall quantity of outlets does not translate into a variety of viewpoints within the Belarusian media landscape. Moreover, the panelists regard amendments to the media law as “an attempt by the state to reshuffle the media market” in the near future and ultimately suppress the media outlets they consider most threatening.

The Internet remains Belarus's only truly pluralistic media platform. However, despite the growing number of users (nearly 90 percent of the adult population, according to a 2017–2018 survey² published by the Informational and Analytical Center), only about half of all Internet users said they prefer to get their political news from the Internet. Nearly 40 percent point to social media as their preferred source. The independent portal TUT.BY was the third-most popular website among

² Respublika Belarus v Zerkale Sotsiologii Sbornik materialov sotsiologicheskikh issledovaniy (The Republic of Belarus in the Mirror of Sociology, Collection of Audience Survey Materials). Minsk: 2018, 180 pages.

Belarusians, right after two Russia-based social media websites (Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte). Still, 72 percent of the population considers television its main source of information about events in Belarus and abroad, compared to approximately 60 percent of the population that turns primarily to the Internet. Meanwhile, media that offer little to no diversity of perspective in the coverage of social and political topics continue to dominate the traditional media sphere.

There are no legal restrictions to access to domestic or international media, aside from the Ministry of Information's blocking of informational websites, as seen with the *charter97.org* news site in early 2018. The new amendments to the media law ease the path even more for officials to block access to foreign media it deems threatening.

Other limiting factors impacting access to information include unequal registration requirements for broadcast media and the economic discrimination against non-state print media, which limits the news options for people without high-speed Internet access.

State media largely reflect the views of the government, with opposition politicians or independent media receiving little to no positive mentions. Independent media are also specifically targeted in centralized campaigns, such as in the *BelTA* case. Before any official charges were made, the main state-run *SB.BY* newspaper and portal wrote, “Simply speaking, detained workers of *TUT.BY* and *BelaPAN* stole the information as often as they said ‘hello.’ The free access to paid news was a working habit. They calmly and daily used the results of someone else's work without paying a cent.”

No new information agencies were registered in Belarus in 2018. Out of the nine existing agencies, four (*BelaPAN*, *BelTA*, *Interfax-Zapad*,

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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. In addition, 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 agencies. Economic difficulties have forced many independent media to cut their subscriptions to news agencies, including national newswires. The sudden death of the BelaPAN director in 2018 led the agency to review its ownership and sustainability plans, but the agency continues to work as before.

The situation for broadcast media remains difficult. The state controls all national television channels, while the only alternative, Poland-based TV Belsat, is persecuted with fines and warnings. Accredited journalists from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and European Radio for Belarus contribute to the body of independent, trustworthy broadcasting, along with reporters of the non-accredited Radio Racja and special correspondents of other international broadcasters—such as Deutsche Welle, BBC, and Radio France Internationale (RFI). The government has taken no steps to enable those broadcasters to widen their access to audiences.

The amendments to the media law have not made it easier to learn the exact ownership structure of media outlets, although this information can be obtained by request. Print media publish this information on their first or last pages, but websites and blogs are not obliged to publicize

their owners—and that has not changed with the new online registration procedure. Private media ownership is not concentrated, although the government owns a substantial amount, with more than 600 news outlets. 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 skirt this rule by registering in Belarus as Belarusian entities. The purchase of the independent *Belgazeta* by the Belarusian journalist Kiryl Zhyvalovich in 2017 resulted in a conflict between him and a minority shareholder, bringing the newspaper to the brink of closure by late 2018. “This indicator [transparency of media ownership] is not very relevant for Belarus; it is more relevant to countries where media are owned by oligarchs or some political forces. In Belarus, it is more or less clear: there are state and non-state media,” one panelist said. “Some information about media ownership seems to be available but is not, because the limited liability companies do not provide their ownership information openly. This concerns *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi*, BelaPAN, and some other newspapers... Also, when Belsat TV had a funding crisis, many people were shocked to learn that it was part of the Polish public television broadcaster but received money from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” another panelist said. “The problem is also the low media literacy of society: people do not realize why they should even be interested in the ownership of the media,” an editor on the panel said.

The lack of clarity on ownership often makes it difficult to evaluate how the owners influence editorial policies. “Websites do not publish detailed information about their owners; the identities of physical people who register websites will be protected. Unlike in Ukraine, we do not have a law that obliges media to show the final beneficiaries of

outlets’ business activities,” a lawyer said. The media law amendments promise to limit foreign ownership of Belarusian media even more than before. While previously founders who are foreign citizens could not own more than a 20 percent share in a media outlet, they could create Belarusian companies that were able to distribute media products. As of December 2018, this will no longer be possible for new businesses (although companies that had registered earlier will be exempt).

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.

Reliance on a narrow variety of sources and commentators renders both independent and state media weak in reflecting diverse social interests. One positive trend in 2018, however, was the growth

in popularity of live streams, podcasts, and vox pops, as well as long-format reporting, in the editorial agendas of a variety of media. However, the reliance on infotainment and clickbait-fueled publishing limits media usage of these tools. “Journalists, while using such sophisticated genres as long reads, are not using their potential to attract attention to smaller details, nuances, and new angles,” one panelist said. “In a content analysis I performed on the range of regional media, crime took up 18–33 percent of their space, politics 0–5 percent, and entertainment about 14–25 percent. Religion is nearly non-existent, but education, health, and other social topics together reach up to 30 percent.”

The government continues to suppress the Belarusian language in education, culture, and the media sphere, although it is an official language alongside Russian. Therefore, the language of the titular nation’s majority can be considered a minority language, while the language of the actual minority, Russian, dominates.

While Belarusian media focus primarily on domestic issues, two exiled broadcasters, Belsat TV and Euroradio, are doing their part to increase international reporting. Euroradio is 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 vaccination and health in the former Soviet Union, environmental coverage, and investigative journalism. In addition, Belsat TV launched a cooperative effort with the BBC Russian service in the spring of 2018, rebroadcasting its programs on air, and has enhanced its Russian-language broadcasting by providing live streaming from crucial Russian events.

**OBJECTIVE 4:
BUSINESS
MANAGEMENT**

1.26

The market is distorted by governmental subsidies to the state-owned media on one end and political repression plus the dependence on external funding for most of the independent media on the other. The audience’s shift to the web, mirroring a global trend, fails to compensate for losses from traditional models of advertising. Economic discrimination at the hands of the state deepens the hardship.

Most media outlets receive subsidies either from the state or from external actors, such as foreign donors. The latter do so at great risk, as the state highly constrains this support, and it can be considered illegal. As Belarusian law penalizes all foreign aid that is not registered with the authorities, and as all media that receive such aid risk running afoul of the law, the panelists agreed that such assistance should not be considered a sustainable income source. As for the state subsidies, as one panelist said, “If state media would have been left to operate without the subsidies, only *Perekhodnyi Vozrast* (a newspaper for teenagers) would stay afloat.”

The media share in the online advertising market has increased by 18 percent compared to 2017; it reached \$15.2 million.³ TUT.BY, Onliner, and Kufar (the two latter being a mixture of online shopping and information platforms) attracted \$13.8 million of the total. This includes banners, native advertising, video advertising, and promotion on

social media and via Google and Yandex context ads. Advertisers pay special attention to mobile traffic, with video advertising as the fastest-growing format. The small volume of the online advertising market makes it difficult for any outlet to consider it a serious revenue opportunity. Another online revenue source, audience-related payments, continue to be rare. In 2018, *Imena*, a magazine that managed to crowdfund both for social causes and for editorial activities successfully, decided to register as a charity foundation and ceased being a media outlet. Also, in 2018, *Nasha Niva* launched a paywall for some of its publications.

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.
- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- ▶ Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.
- ▶ Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.

The Council of Business, affiliated with the Belarusian president, presented the national concept of developing an advertising market effective until

³ “In Belarus, Calculated the Volume of the Market of Online Media Advertising for 2018.” Bel.retail.by. February 20, 2019. <https://belretail.by/news/v-belarusi-poschitali-obyemyi-ryinka-mediynoy-internet-reklamyi-za-god>.

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2022, which will influence legislation in this sphere.⁴ 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, and online media have no limitations in the volume of advertising. However, online media outlets that wish to sell advertisements for Belarusian services and businesses are asked to host their websites on servers within Belarus, per the 2010 President's Decree No 60. Only some lifestyle traditional media are able to get enough advertising to constitute a serious income source. On the regional level, independent print media outlets receive around 45–50 percent of their income from advertising, which reflects the broader regional trend for Central Europe, according to the panelists.

Independent media often use Google or Yandex counters as a free alternative to market research, but these platforms do not provide in-depth data about the audiences that would have been available for those newsrooms via more sophisticated paid research. Only TUT.BY and *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi* buy such data," said one panelist.

⁴ "Draft Law: The Concept of Development of the Advertising Market in the Republic of Belarus for the Period up to 2022." Business Development Council. January 31, 2018. <http://ced.by/ru/discussion/~shownews/koncepcia-razvitiya-reklamnoho-rynka>.

The government has increased subsidies and investments into new state-owned media outlets. At the same time, circulations and audiences of traditional printed media have fallen. According to one of the panelists, the regional independent news media's circulations fell 10–15 percent while their online audiences grew on average 15–20 percent.

Market research is scarcely available and rarely used. "Independent media often use Google or Yandex counters as a free alternative to market research, but these platforms do not provide in-depth data about the audiences that would have been available for those newsrooms via more sophisticated paid research. Only TUT.BY and *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi* buy such data," said one panelist. The available data rarely change the editorial policy, with most of the actual changes happening without being grounded in the research. Notable exceptions are niche media, such as Citidog and Kyky.org, which use market research to inform their activities. Sociological surveys that would analyze media's real audience have not been available for independent media for several years.

Broadcast rankings are not widely available for non-state media and are unpublished by their state-owned media counterparts.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

1.76

Belarusian media have fairly good access to professional education but not all opportunities are being efficiently used. The professional organizations defend the interests of their base, but some media workers, such as freelancers, remain largely unprotected. The quality of the state journalism degree has not increased. Media

distribution channels remain monopolized and/or politically controlled and restricted, with increased restrictions imposed by the December 2018 media law amendments.

The regional media association (United Mass Media) has increased its professionalism and the variety of services it offers to its members. In 2018, it increased cooperation with similar networks in Lithuania and Poland, expanding the relevant knowledge it brings to its members. It receives revenue from advertising placed in its membership network, which increases its sustainability.

The BAJ, which unites around 1,200 media professionals, intervenes to protect the rights of media workers, as it did during the BelTA case in 2018. The association also initiated new projects last year to help its members, such as the "Right to Information" campaign or its monitoring of Russian influence on the media scene of Belarus. In partnership with human rights defenders, it has supported journalists who had to pay high fines for their work. It has also initiated the process of uniting all the value-based media around the national strategy to develop the independent media.

There is also a pro-state, 1,500-strong Belarusian Union of Journalists, but the Union and Journalists and BAJ rarely cooperate. There are no associations of publishers or businesses of independent media, excluding professional unions, such as the Telecommunications Industry Union which unites cable broadcasters.

"The Telecommunication Industry Union protects the interests of cable broadcasters very well. This year, they defended the rights of those broadcasters to not pay copyright fees for rebroadcasting programs available through a so-called social package, which is guaranteed by the state. Previously, they were obliged to transmit that

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package and faced lawsuits from the holders of rights, but now the Parliament is reviewing amendments that will stop this practice,” one panelist said. The panelists held up the work of the Press Club, as well as BAJ, for providing good educational courses for journalists. In 2018, new platforms for education and discussion, such as the Hrodna media room, appeared in the regions.

“BAJ and Press Club play an important role in the trainings, media talks, and lectures. I also visit the media managers’ school organized by the International Educational Center and find it very informative. In general, those who wish to develop new skills and knowledge in journalism can get training,” said one panelist.

Panelists noted, however, that there is a rising distrust in the society among journalists. “I cannot blame non-governmental organizations for that, but there is a lack of solidarity among independent media in Belarus,” one editor said. “All human rights defenders closely work with BAJ, and we divide responsibilities. We have cooperated on the BelTA case and some other cases in Belarus. We realize it is very important not to omit any case of rights violations of journalists and media. Taking into account Belarus’s dense network of human rights defenders, we cooperate with regional media frequently as well. However, our support does not always improve the situation of the independent media due to political constraints,” a human rights activist on the panel said. “There is growing interest in media and journalists from new organizations, such as Human Constanta. They provide the media

with lots of useful tools on data privacy protection, digital security, and ethically covering refugee issues. They also helped journalists obtain emergency support after their equipment was confiscated,” one panelist said. At the same time, as some of the types of support are not totally legal in Belarus, some non-governmental organization resources are not advertised to large numbers of journalists.

Belarusian State University remains the leading institution offering journalism degree programs. Its Institute of Journalism currently hosts more than 1,250 students. Regional universities complement the Institute of Journalism’s degree programs and often send their students to train at the local media outlets, including non-state media.

A diverse array of short-term professional education opportunities in 2018 targeted different groups of media professionals. “It is really important for us to get free access to BAJ educational courses,” a regional participant said. Media, including regional outlets, increasingly support their staff members in participating in professional education. “BAJ and Press Club play an important role in the trainings, media talks, and lectures. I also visit the media managers’ school organized by the International Educational Center and find it very informative. In general, those who wish to develop new skills and knowledge in journalism can get training,” said one panelist. Participation in most of the courses is free, although some require acceptance tests. Some state media professionals attend the trainings as well. At the same time, some topics, such as investigative journalism, are not the best attended. The Press Club organized a meeting with Bellingcat and only a handful of journalists came. According to the panelists, that was related to the lack of popularity of investigative journalism as such. In some other cases, such as the paid lecture of a *Gazeta Wyborcza* business specialist, the trainings were unpopular

because of the combination of the high price of the entrance ticket (\$30) and the lack of relevance of Polish business experience to Belarusians. “People are ready to pay quite a lot of money for skills they consider applicable, such as social media management, but they find it hard to imagine what Polish business experience they could use,” one panelist said. A joint conference organized by the Press Club, Russian media, and SIDA gathered a representative group of free and paid participants in order to learn regional media transition practices. In 2018, some Belarusian independent media trainers began educating other journalists, mostly in Central Asia.

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.

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Conditions for access to newsprint remain unequal, with state media receiving favorable treatment. The price of newsprint for non-state media is growing on no objective grounds. “The prices of newsprint are getting higher for everyone, but state media get subsidies that can cover some of these costs, while Belarusian independent media have to negotiate with Russian factories in order to find solutions,” a panelist said. “The quality of printing has declined for independent media outlets, although that can be connected to their decreasing circulations and subsequently decreasing attractiveness to the printing houses,” another panelist added.

Price discrimination against privately-owned newspapers continues as well. 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, serves as the main retail distributor, while the state postal monopoly Belposhta controls press subscriptions.

The state still restricts and controls print and broadcast channels. The Internet, however, offers growing opportunities. Access to technology is expanding, with the gap between Minsk and the regions gradually narrowing. Over 2018, more than two million Belarusians gained access to 4G/LTE high-speed mobile. According to an OpenSignal study, Belarus outranks the United States, Germany, the United Arab Emirates, and Japan in 4G connection speed.⁵ Depending on the amount of

traffic per month, access to 4G/LTE and phone communication can cost from \$2 to \$25 per month.

The state provider, Beltelecom, is actively introducing broadband connectivity to Belarusians; more than 3.2 million households gained access in October 2018.

List of Panel Participants

IRES 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.

The panel discussion was convened on November 28, 2018

⁵ “Average speed of 4G in Belarus—39.1 Mbit/s.” Reformation. February 2, 2019. <https://reform.by/srednjaja-skorost-4g-v-belarusi-39-1-mbit-s/>.