

MEDIA

SUSTAINABILITY

INDEX

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IREX

THE PRESSURE PUT ONTO INDEPENDENT MEDIA BY THE GOVERNMENT WAS LIKELY ONLY TO INCREASE WITH THE APPROACH OF THE 2006 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS. THE STATE COULD BE EXPECTED TO TAKE ADDITIONAL MEASURES TO LIMIT THE ACCESS OF JOURNALISTS AND THE PUBLIC TO INFORMATION.



During 2005, Belarus moved closer toward a full-fledged authoritarian regime with the legislature and the judiciary totally controlled by the executive authority of the president.

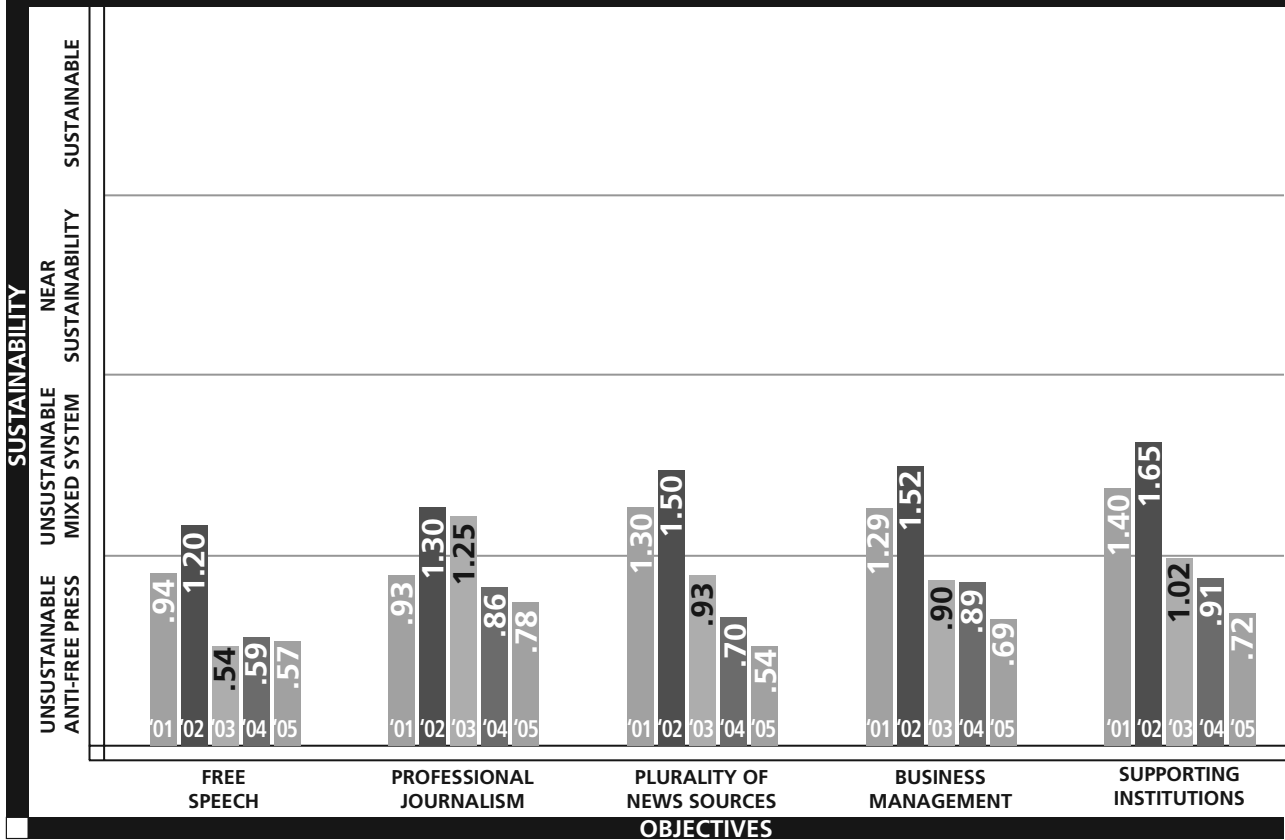
The incumbent government is not a classic dictatorship: There are opposition parties and opposition mass media, and the public—at least in big cities—has access to some independent media sources of political and social information. However, the space in which the political opposition and independent media can act is extremely limited. The relative political stability and lack of popular resistance to the regime of President Lukashenko may be explained by relatively high economic growth indicators and improvement in living standards.

Nevertheless, in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections, there were new processes in Belarusian society that opened favorable possibilities for democratic development. According to respected Belarusian researchers whose views were reported by the 2005 Media Sustainability Index (MSI) panelists, the percentage of people expressing democratic values is on the rise. As an example, they cited a national poll of 1,100 people aged 18 and over carried out by the NOVAK public opinion research company in 2005 in which 54.4 percent of respondents aged 18 to 34 said they would vote “Yes” in a referendum asking whether Belarus should join the European Union. According to the researchers, the increasingly democratic mood represents an incremental process based in the cultural, economic, and political integration of Belarus into the global community.

Whatever the long-term perspective, however, the present situation for media independence in Belarus is extremely grim. The MSI panelists recorded a further decrease in the overall index from 0.79 in 2004 to 0.66 in 2005, a decline of 44 percent from 2001, the first year the MSI was conducted. The deteriorating situation was reflected by a drop in every MSI objective.

The Ministry of Information continued to suspend newspapers, acting against 25 print outlets during the past two years. Many newspapers had to close altogether, or significantly decrease their circulations after they

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BELARUS



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

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

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

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

restarted. The authorities often censor or confiscate print runs of independent newspapers, while the state media work under conditions of strict and severe censorship. Under pressure from international public opinion, the authorities are trying to present their measures as legal, switching from direct to latent pressure. This most frequently takes an economic form, such as unequal conditions for starting a business, unfair taxation, restricted access to information sources, or control over distribution channels. As a result, the newspapers suffer financially, and the necessity to survive the economic difficulties leads to self-censorship.

Some specific improvements were noted in individual MSI indicators. The self-organization of the journalistic community strengthened in 2005, and the effectiveness of independent journalist organizations has increased, MSI panelists said. Heads of independent media outlets found new ways of keeping their businesses alive despite the growing pressure. Although there are serious difficulties with attracting and keeping qualified staff, the professional level of journalists in independent media is growing. New channels of distribution of independent information were discovered, and existing channels were used more efficiently. Independent television and radio companies developed some of their own news production. However, panelists concluded these incremental improvements in the information available did not lead to significantly increased awareness among the population against a generally repressive backdrop.

The pressure put onto independent media by the government was likely only to increase with the approach of the 2006 presidential elections. The state could be expected to take additional measures to limit the access of journalists and the public to information. During the pre-election battles, the ideological polarization of media also was anticipated to increase. A decrease in the level of trust in the media—both state and independent—was likely to be the result.

MSI panelists in Belarus agreed to participate only if they were not quoted by name.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH

Belarus Objective Score: 0.57 / 4.00

Authorities in Belarus systematically use multiple legal, economic, administrative, and ideological methods to limit independent media activities. The MSI panelists mentioned numerous cases when the rights of journalists and citizens to freedom of speech were violated. The laws of the Republic of Belarus on media do not

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

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

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

correspond to international standards in many respects. For example, the procedure for registration of a media outlet is extremely complicated, and the Ministry of Information is authorized to limit constitutional rights of people. One of the panelists said categorically: “The criminal code is a cudgel for managing ‘inconsistent’ journalists, and a rather powerful cudgel. Courts, taxes, everything is politicized. It is a shame for the country to have such articles in the criminal code as we do.”

Some participants mentioned that there is not enough understanding of the freedom of speech as a value in the society. For that reason, the pressure put on the media by the authorities does not lead to public outcry.

Panelists were unanimous in describing the situation related to licensing of television and radio broadcast as extremely limiting. Licenses are issued based on political loyalty and the procedure is so complicated that many potential actors choose not to apply. There are no fair and open contests to award a license. One of the panelists described how his company had been applying for a license to start up a regional FM radio for years, always in vain. In most cases when a license is issued,

the authorities insist on having a state organization among the company's founders or appointing its own CEO. A television company in Grodno was ordered to add a provision to its by-laws saying the rector of the Grodno State University should be the director of the television company. "You would not get a license to start up a radio station unless you are related to a governmental body," one of the participants noted.

All participants of the discussion agreed that starting a media business is much more difficult than any other business. All new media outlets that enter the market are being "politically vetted." The law guarantees equal conditions for all market participants, but independent media outlets are constantly limited in access to printing services and distribution networks. They pay higher taxes and higher printing and distribution fees. It is often impossible to buy opposition newspapers in state-owned kiosks run by the Belsoyuzpechat and Belpochta companies. As a result, as one of the participants said: "Today's main strategy for us in business development is to survive ... Business as such for (non-state) media outlets ended 18 to 24 months ago." Other panelists gave somewhat more neutral opinions, suggesting, for example, that in most cases tax inspectors treat media outlets the same way as other businesses, but there was no indication of an improvement in operating conditions.

"The criminal code is a cudgel for managing 'inconsistent' journalists, and a rather powerful cudgel. Courts, taxes, everything is politicized. It is a shame for the country to have such articles in the criminal code as we do," said a panelist.

Participants mentioned that there were no crimes by authorities against journalists during 2005. But they said the ways of pressuring journalists have changed, with the

authorities trying to present their actions as legal ones. They restricted journalists by canceling or refusing accreditations, filing lawsuits over alleged libel and insult of public officials, suspending newspapers, confiscating print runs, and refusing registration of new outlets. Mainly, it is independent media that face legal actions, which are less and less frequent for state-owned media. Panelists said a message of "Do not trust independent media" is being spread deliberately.

Different forms of court and non-court persecution have been used against the leading opposition newspapers *Narodnaya Volya* and *BDG. Delovaya*

Gazeta. The Oktiabrskii district court in Minsk awarded penalties of \$23,000 against *BDG* and \$2,300 against its journalist Sergey Satsuk in a libel suit. The chief editor of the independent newspaper *Zhoda*, Alexey Korol, and his deputy were fined \$1,200 for "distribution of knowingly false information." Similar suits have been filed against *Narodnaya Volya* and Svetlana Paramygina, a journalist for the sports weekly *PressBall*. The latter is already paying compensatory damages to the finance minister Nikolai Korbust under another libel suit. Bailiffs have twice held the property of *PressBall's* editor, Vladimir Berezhkov. The amounts of the fines are of punitive nature and can easily threaten the existence of the outlet.

The investigations into the murders of journalists Dmitry Zavadskii from Russia's ORT TV and Veronika Cherkasova from *Salidarnasc* continued to drag on without a conclusion as to whether they were politically motivated. There was a discussion among the panelists about what to consider a crime against journalists. As one said, "It is true that journalists do not disappear now, but in the regions they are constantly taken by force from an event. The pressure on journalists has increased lately."

The courts are politicized and do not provide legal protection for the journalists, the MSI panelists said, often making decisions in violation of the current legislation. Panelists did mention examples of rulings within the law but stressed that those were an exception rather than the rule: "Nonetheless, it is a fact that a court in Slonim decided in favor of an NGO [Will for Development] and against the state TV and radio company," a panelist said. "But yes, the ruling has not been enforced. That's another problem."

According to the participants, editorial independence is guaranteed by the law only formally, but in fact the state controls the editorial policy of the state media by openly appointing managers of the outlets.

State media are advantaged as to the taxes and rates they pay—lower prices for printing, distribution, and subscription and more favorable advertising possibilities among them. According to an internal instruction of the Ministry of Statistics, state media are getting information for free, while independent ones have to pay for it. Non-state structures have to pay higher fees for broadcasting licenses, if they get them. There were massive tax inspections of non-state media during 2005.

Restricted access to information is probably the main tool for violating freedom-of-speech rights in Belarus, the panelists said. Laws are not enforced, accreditations are withheld from journalists, secret bans on providing information are placed on officials, and limitations on

information from official press centers are widespread. "Any police sergeant is empowered to put a ban on information. There was a funny case when a sergeant didn't allow filming the eternal fire at the Victory Square monument because this is a guarded object," a panelist said.

State media have obvious advantages as to accessing information, but access to information that authorities are not interested in distributing is limited for all journalists.

"Everywhere in the world it is hard to get information, and nobody wants to give it. The difference here is that it is just a total ban to access information," said a panelist. Information access was the MSI indicator receiving the lowest score within the Free Speech objective, and the panelists said the situation was getting steadily worse. Moreover, there are no legal mechanisms to call officials to account.

Panelists gave several examples of gross violations of the rights of journalists and media owners. Several independent newspapers (*BDG*, *Vremya*, *Salidarnasc*, *Mestnaya Gazeta*, and *Den*) were forced to be printed in Russia. The newspaper *Kurier iz Borisova* was closed by a court ruling. Editors of another newspaper, *Zhoda*, were fined for publication of political collages. Irina Khalip, a Belarusian journalist, received numerous warnings from the office of the Prosecutor General for her stories in the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. Andrzej Pisalnik, the acting chief editor of the *Glos znad Niemna* newspaper, was given a 10-day jail sentence for participation in an unsanctioned picket.

Independent media get virtually no support from the business community. Afraid of political risks, entrepreneurs avoid investing in the media. Unlike Russia or Ukraine, there are no media tycoons in Belarus.

Foreign channels and titles can enter Belarus only with approval from the Ministry of Information and only via channels controlled by the state. One panelist commented: "It is enough to drop in at a Belsoyuzpechat kiosk and compare what you see to newsstands in Warsaw or Vilnius. The latter have a wide selection of foreign press. Here in Minsk, Russian titles are what you get at best." The majority of independent media in Belarus cannot afford subscriptions to foreign news agency services and have to reprint or rebroadcast foreign news without permission. Russian media are widely available, and northern and western Belarus are reached by Polish and Lithuanian broadcasters. Russian television channels are censored on various pretexts.

The experts pointed out that access to Internet information sources still is widely available to the public

and journalists. The number of Internet, satellite, and cable television users has increased. Internet use among the urban population has grown from 20.2

percent in 2003 to 26.1 percent in April 2005, according to Novak market research. The majority of Internet users are educated young people, which the panelists noted comprise the most promising stratum from the point of view of democratic development. However, the government fully controls the outbound Internet traffic via the state telecommunications monopoly Beltelecom. The panelists noted that this very monopoly puts the freedom of Internet access in jeopardy. Also, the participants mentioned that independent media find it costly to pay for Internet access. A panelist noted that a UNDP project to provide Internet access for media outlets and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) might end and if so, "media outlets and NGOs will have to pay for Internet access from their very limited revenues and that can seriously limit Internet access." One participant mentioned the growth in the number of users of satellite television: "If last year the number [of satellite dishes] was approximately 400,000 dishes, now it is more. According to the companies that install dishes, the number is growing at 50,000 to 60,000 [dishes] per year."

There are no special limitations to professional activity, except for difficulties connected with accreditation of journalists who do not have professional education. Journalism education is equally accessible for all citizens, but the panelists said the quality does not meet international standards. The participants mentioned that after the European Humanities University and local offices of the international media development NGOs IREX and Internews were closed, possibilities for professional development narrowed. Getting a second diploma in journalism is most difficult, as a second higher-education course is not free. Panelists noted with concern the January 2005 removal of Vasily Vorobiov, the dean of the journalism faculty at the Belarusian State University, on ideological grounds. This followed a 2004 inspection of the faculty by the Ministry of Education and major state media directors. The panelists also pointed to some cases of pressure put on students working in independent media outlets and tighter controls over job placements of journalist faculty graduates.

"You would not get a license to start up a radio station unless you are related to a governmental body," one of the participants noted.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Belarus Objective Score: 0.78 / 4.00

The MSI panelists, recording a slight decline in journalistic professionalism during 2005, agreed that tendentious and biased reporting exists and quite often does not comply with professional standards. They said this is true in both state and independent media. "The stance of journalists and editors is very much that of [political] party and partisan literature," one panelist said. "This is an obstacle to overcome for journalists to create objective and fair reports, but nevertheless there are still objective reports and media outlets." Among newspapers offering high-quality stories are *Respublika*, *BDG*, *Intex-press*, and *Belorusy i Rynok*.

There are examples of high-quality journalism in state-owned newspapers such as *Respublika*, but they are rare. At the same time, there are articles in the independent media that are not fact-checked or objective. Still, panelists agreed that "the level of objectivity and the overall professional level of non-state journalism is generally higher." There is growth of professionalism in state media, but the journalists are constantly hampered by censorship and the need to compromise themselves. Numerous trainings held by international organizations contributed to improving the professional level of journalists. However, all the

organizations working in the media sector had to leave the country and only are able to offer trainings in Russia and Lithuania.

The experts mentioned the ethics code adopted by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) as contributing to the introduction of international professional standards in journalism. Observing the code's principles makes journalists less vulnerable to libel suits, for example. Violations of professional ethics are mainly connected with conflicts of interests. The loyalty of state media journalists is essentially bought by various guarantees from the government that can be interpreted as hidden forms of bribery. But as the country has no well-developed markets, the demand for paid hidden advertising is minimal in comparison with Russia.

All participants agreed that self-censorship in Belarus is as widespread as in other CIS countries. One of the participants noted that "in the majority of cases, both journalists and editors do not simply practice self-censoring but use it as a daily guide." The panelists agreed that the self-censorship results mainly from pressure by editors on journalists.

For independent media, self-censoring is often a necessary means of survival to keep, for example, advertisers. Nevertheless, according to the participants, independent media, despite political risks, have fewer "closed" topics than do state media. However, one panelist described "one very negative tendency: The regional press—apart from several exceptions—is growing more toothless. And that amount of freedom has narrowed during this past year after the government has 'instructively' suspended several newspapers. It feels like there are ever fewer topics that can be covered by newspapers, both locally and nationally." Participants listed among the "closed topics" President Lukashenko's family and the business interests of government officials.

The panelists reported that salaries of journalists working for independent media have decreased during the past three to four years in comparison with the general countrywide income growth. Panelists expressed concern about the widening gap between the lower salaries at independent media vs. the higher ones at state outlets: "The gap in incomes is tremendous and getting to be dangerous. There is no point in pressing media outlets legally if the gap between the average salary in the country, said to be \$500, and the income of journalists in independent media soon will be so big that nobody will stay to work for independent media." The worsening financial situation of journalists in independent media was cited

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).

as a reason why many qualified professionals left their newspapers. Panelists also noted that regional media outlets already lacked qualified specialists.

Low salaries produce the potential for corruption in the journalism sphere, the panelists said. Journalists from independent media sometimes sell their articles to politicians and business owners, at times with approval from the editor. Corruption during political campaigns takes place as well. But there were no examples of gross violations of professional ethics or direct bribery of journalists offered by the panelists.

Positive growth in news and information coverage in broadcasting was mentioned. The majority of the participants thought the balance of entertainment and news programming was about the same in Belarus as many other countries. Some suggested that growth in informational broadcasting was to the detriment of entertainment content, but the conclusion was that it is difficult to draw a line between the two formats in Belarus. Entertainment on television becomes more and more ideological, more politically oriented, and thus more information-like, they said. It was mentioned that entertainment dominates on non-state radio. The main conclusion, however, was that increased news and information broadcasting did not appear to lead to greater informing of the population.

Panelists were unanimous in their view that upgrading the technical capacity of independent media will grow more pressing soon. Television companies face bigger problems: "As to the technical means for collecting information, they are quite good. As for the rest—production and distribution—there is an abyss." Other participants noted most journalists lack computers, camcorders, digital recorders, and other standard equipment. State media upgrade their equipment more often, to their competitive advantage. Independent media experience constant financial hardships. Moreover, new regulations adopted by authorities do not allow media to receive foreign help. There are practically no technical or financial opportunities for overcoming state barriers to media distribution through, for example, satellite television, Internet television, or independent terrestrial broadcasting. The panelists said this presents missed opportunity, as there are no political restrictions in this sphere so far.

There are enough specialized reports and information programs on television, panelists said, and local business, environment, education, and other topics are covered in regional newspapers and television programs. But some genres, particularly investigations,

are becoming extinct. The general trend for this objective is downward. The panelists mention the following reasons: restricted access to information, insufficient professional education, lack of demand for specialized information, and the limited financial resources of the outlets.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Belarus Objective Score: 0.54 / 4.00

The availability of multiple news sources declined further in 2005. According to the MSI panelists, the population in large cities has quite good access to public and private sources of information. These possibilities, though, are limited in smaller towns and villages. Panelists noted that the selective hand of the editor is strong at many state and independent newspapers, and citizens generally are not accustomed to forming their own opinion from facts offered in balanced form. The experts emphasized the underdeveloped demand for information by the general public. Panelists said there is a lot of ideology in the media, and less information.

Participants agreed that in 2005 the government stuck to its practice of restricting access to international

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

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

“On one hand, there are independent media, there is Internet, and the number of users is growing, the number of satellite dishes is growing. But on the other hand, you need to make efforts to receive information. And the further from the city you are, the more effort is required and the less possibilities there in fact are,” said one panelist.

news sources for the public and journalists alike. It is more difficult to buy foreign titles, except for Russian ones, even in the capital, Minsk, than in neighboring countries. Foreign news broadcasts have been decreasing for the past three years. For example, the programming of Russian channels rebroadcast in

efforts to receive information. And the further from the city you are, the more effort is required and the less possibilities there in fact are,” said one panelist.

There are no true public media in Belarus. State media are setting their sights solely onto providing information on behalf of the incumbent government and do not reflect the interests of the whole of the political spectrum. In fact, the function of public media in the country is carried out by non-state media, said one of the panelists. But most participants said Belarus lags far behind even Russia and Ukraine in terms of state or public media reflecting a range of views in a nonpartisan manner. In fact, such media hardly reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, and the situation is getting worse.

There are 15 independent television stations in Belarus. Most of them produce daily news programs, mostly on local news. Journalists for these programs do not interfere with “big politics” and face many problems accessing information sources and finding technical and financial resources, panelists said. The quality of the programs is not high, and the content is formed on the basis of a limited number of sources, mainly Internet. “They do produce their own news, yet all TV and radio stations I’m familiar with aren’t independent as to their content,” said one panelist. “There are some newspapers, like *Vitebskii Kurier*, that is actually made of BelaPAN’s newswire, BelaPAN’s e-paper, and the Internet. Some newspapers just do not have anything written by themselves. Even so, they claim to be reporting nationwide news,” added another expert. Many news programs are deteriorating and becoming, as one panel put it, “rather toothless.”

Belarus is frequently changed, with news and analytical programs cut out or censored, as in the cases of *Zerkalo* (Mirror) and *Vesti nedeli* (News of the Week) from Russian RTR network. Russian news programs are replaced by programs from Belarusian state channels. News broadcasting by cable operators is controlled, and some stopped rebroadcasting CNN and BBC.

Polish, Ukrainian, American, and British television channels are almost unavailable to wider audiences. FM radio stations stopped broadcasting independent news in 2004 for fear of losing their licenses, and they continue to broadcast only official information. Internet cafés block access to websites with political news under pressure from authorities. A forum at the Vitebsk city portal <http://forum.vitebsk.by> was the last of the “official” municipal sites that had political news, but it was closed down.

There are eight news agencies in Belarus, including four independent ones—BelaPAN, Prime-TASS, Agentstvo Grevtsova, and a Russia-owned agency, Interfax-Zapad. The state-owned news agency BelTA is the mouthpiece of the government.

While opposition newspapers face repression, the government subsidizes subscriptions to state-owned titles. The authorities also pressure points of sale, and Minsk supermarkets and other shops refused to sell leading independent newspapers such as *BDG*, *Beloruskaya Gazeta*, *Belorussky Rynok*, and *Narodnaya Volya*. At the same time, there are new possibilities for people to access international media: The number of Internet and satellite television users is growing. Panelists anticipate new government measures to strengthen control over these information sources.

The panelists named BelaPAN the only “full-fledged news agency that covers all viewpoints.” It is, however, repeatedly facing pressure from the government. There is an unofficial ban on state media subscribing to and broadcasting BelaPAN news. Many independent media cannot afford subscriptions to news services and have to use information illegally. State-owned agencies produce, select, and distribute news under severe censorship. The discussion showed that independent news agencies often are compelled to compromise themselves, to produce politically neutral or nonpolitical news, and to practice self-censorship. As a result, production of alternative information continues to shrink.

Nationwide opposition media, mainly printed, are mostly available in large cities. “On one hand, there are independent media, there is Internet, and the number of users is growing, the number of satellite dishes is growing. But on the other hand, you need to make

The information about the owners of media is open and available in Belarus. Many independent newspapers are in fact owned by government structures or local authorities. The independent media market is not monopolized. Big businesses do not own media and are not eager to do so. One of the panelists commented: "Independent media in Belarus are as much of a civic initiative as a business. It has its own advantages that business structures have no influence on them." The participants mentioned that there are thought to be cases of direct intervention into editorial policy, such as pressure on the biggest independent daily, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorusii*, to be less critical of the government, but there are no open scandals. Information about the owners of media outlets does not really influence the level of trust the outlet enjoys, and most consumers do not care about it at all. The panelists agreed that the only monopoly on the media market is the state.

There is a number of small national minority newspapers in Belarus, including *Slowo Zycia* (circulation 7,575 copies), *Atikva* (the Vitebsk Jewish newspaper, circulation 299), *Istoki* (Vitebsk Russian community, circulation 3,000), *Gloz znda Niemna* (circulation 5,260), *Magazyn Polski* (circulation 2,000), and others. It is difficult to judge how well they reflect views of national minorities, as their readership is narrow, circulation low. They are difficult to find at newsstands and are distributed mainly by subscription. The only mass national newspaper, *Glos znad Niemna*, covering the Polish minority, was subject to pressure from local authorities during 2005 because of coverage of conflict within the ethnic Polish community over support to the government, the panelists said. It also was mentioned that there is no nationwide independent television company broadcasting in Belarusian and that the language appears to be forced out of the media.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Belarus Objective Score: 0.69 / 4.00

The business environment for media is bleak. MSI panelists noted in particular that media services such as distribution and printing are monopolized by the state. Their efficiency as businesses is minimal, and profits are achieved by side operations: "Belsoyuzpechat honestly admits it is making money by selling eau-de-colognes and hairbrushes rather than by selling newspapers, meaning a specialized structure set up to distribute the press makes money on something else," a panelist said.

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.

There is no fair competition on the market of services for media. Independent media must agree to very unfavorable terms, and the state structures routinely violate agreements. Belsoyuzpechat and Belpochta often delay payments to the newspapers for the copies sold, undermining the papers' efficiency. One of the panelists said: "The number of printing houses in Belarus is not enough, especially alternative ones. To change a printing house for a newspaper is a killer situation, and that's why we have to agree to any unfavorable conditions." Distribution fees for subscription are 30 percent higher for independent media than for state-owned ones. The state also interferes with subscriptions, demanding and then rejecting licenses for self distribution and sales. Local authorities in many oblast capitals continue the campaign started in 2003 to liquidate all private kiosks. State-owned kiosks, meanwhile, are often instructed not to sell certain independent newspapers, or to put these newspapers on the counters so they hardly can be seen by consumers.

The majority of media outlets are subsidized either by the state or by foreign sponsors. Dependence on subsidies influences the editorial policy significantly. Independent titles do not receive any subsidies from the state. To survive, they often must run side businesses, which are sometimes absolutely different businesses. Only electronic media in Belarus are self-sufficient, in the form of independent regional television companies.

Newspapers rely on advertising. "The worst comes if we have to rely on newspapers sales only. We won't survive on that," said a panelist. However, decreasing advertising sales prompt the search for other revenue sources: "All my colleagues from electronic media and also from printed ones are starting up other businesses to fund their media outlets," a panelist said.

"Belsoyuzpechat honestly admits it is making money by selling eau-de-colognes and hairbrushes rather than by selling newspapers, meaning a specialized structure set up to distribute the press makes money on something else," a panelist said.

Panelists agreed that business operations of independent media have improved somewhat, and the sources of revenue are differentiated. Due to business trainings offered by international media assistance organizations,

media managers demonstrated certain progress as far as accounting, business planning, advertising, distribution, and marketing are concerned. Some independent media outlets choose to set up small regional media holdings such as in Pinsk and Svetlogorsk. "They earn money on television broadcasting, from advertising papers, and FM radios, yet there are only three or four of them," said a panelist.

Participants agreed that Belarus has moved toward international business management standards, but overall the situation has weakened. The improvements do not compensate for the negative consequences of economic discrimination against independent media outlets, resulting in decreased advertising profits, circulation numbers, and so on. Under such conditions, even leading independent media outlets are experiencing serious financial difficulties. Thus, for example, *BDG* has lost a considerable part of its circulation due to difficulties with distribution.

The participants agreed that advertising agencies do not assist independent media as they face pressure and interference by authorities themselves. Under pressure from the state, advertising agencies prefer to place ads in state media. "I would like to stress that they are afraid of working with independent media. There have been several instances when advertising agencies placed ads with our e-paper and the next day they were telling us they had received a call from the Information Ministry that ordered removal of ads," said a panelist.

Advertising revenues of independent media outlets are significantly lower than those in the neighboring countries. Additionally, one expert said, "Advertising possibilities are used more and more efficiently. Ad agencies are just too lazy to work with small media outlets." Also, advertising expenses are taxed at high rates, thus hindering the growth of the advertising market. Igor Samkin, director of the Association of Belarus Advertising Organizations, estimated the advertising market at \$40 million to \$45 million in 2004, with \$20 million spent on television advertising, \$7 million on outdoor advertising, \$350,000 on Internet advertising, and the remainder in newspapers.

The experts agreed that some loyal independent media outlets (for example, the weekly *Obozrevatel* and Channel 2 TV in the city of Mogilev) as well as specialized titles on history, culture, and other topics (for example, *Krayaznauchaya Hazeta* and *Golas Radzimy*) do receive subsidies, though not full ones. Independent sociopolitical editions are not subsidized by the state.

The discussion showed that the majority of independent media managers realize the necessity of market research for their businesses. In particular, several newspapers conduct their own telephone- and questionnaire-based polls. Most independent media, however, cannot afford the services of professional marketing specialists and sociologists. Consequently, professional market research is rarely done. Media managers are underqualified as far as media marketing is concerned and often are unable to effectively use data already available.

Panelists said there are no trustworthy statistics on print media circulation, but the situation is improving. It was also mentioned that no research on television audiences is done using current technology. Research based on polls is offered only by one company, the Novak firm.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Belarus Objective Score: 0.72 / 4.00

Belarus has no trade union for journalists. State media journalists are members of the trade union for culture workers. Owners of independent media are often not interested in trade unions. "So, we should help starting up an organization that would fight us? Why would we need that? We already have to fight the government," said one panelist. However, there are a number of organizations setting their sights on consolidation of the community journalists and private publishers (BANT, BETA, TBN, and Foundation for Local Press Development). Panelists said that some of these

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

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

organizations are getting more active. The Foundation for Local Press Development is implementing a project to develop press distribution systems and offers members training and other incentives such as centralized purchases of newsprint.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) brings together about a thousand media professionals from both independent and state media. BAJ does a lot to protect journalists' rights, provide legal support, and collaborate with international organizations—and therefore is subject to prosecutions. BAJ activities in the regions have been hindered by liquidations of some of its regional structures, a tactic orchestrated through the Ministry of Justice. Although the number of BAJ members is growing, its local office in Gomel is registered at three square meters in a lobby. According to the MSI panelists, BAJ is doing its best to protect journalists' rights and to contribute to their professional development, but its financial and organizational possibilities are very limited. Some suggested that it is too early to call its work sustainable, and there were also doubts about the efficacy of one organization uniting both publishers and journalists.

Some human-rights groups and other NGOs—such as the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Vyasna, and the Union of Entrepreneurs—also support independent

media, monitor cases of violations of journalists' rights, and make public freedom-of-speech violations in Belarus. However, their representatives are located mostly in cities, and these organizations are subject to pressure from the authorities. When the national daily *Narodnaya Volya* was fined more than \$30,000 in two court cases and was in jeopardy of being closed, some of these organizations helped to organize a protest action in Minsk. Overall, panelists said, aggressive state policy aimed at suppressing freedom of speech is being protested more often. There was a protest in Borisov to support *Borisovskie Novosti* and *Kurier iz Borisova* newspapers. Activists of the Zubr and Malady Front movements and the civil initiative Volat together with employees of *Borisovskie Novosti* and *Kurier iz Borisova* newspapers banded together against pressure targeting the independent editions.

The majority of the participants evaluated the quality of journalist education in Belarus as low and not corresponding to modern standards. Programs of journalist education in state universities are ideology-based and tend to prepare propagandists rather than journalists. Some hope to raise the quality of journalism education rests on the revival of the European Humanities University in Vilnius. The possibilities for further training abroad are still in place, a panelist noted, but "there is a tendency that to get such education, students of state-funded faculties should get approvals from their universities ... which may limit the possibilities a great deal." The labor market for journalism faculty graduates is wide enough, but the prospects of low salaries, limitations for self-realization, and other factors are making the profession less attractive for young specialists.

There is no system of further education for independent media journalists, and there is no systematic coordination among the training and seminar programs

held by local organizations (Foundation for Local Press Development, Mass Communications Foundation, and others), although some attempts are made.

As noted, IREX, Internews, and other specialized international media development NGOs have been forced to leave Belarus. To the extent that foreign organizations continue to work in Belarus, they tend

"So, we should help starting up an organization that would fight us? Why would we need that? We already have to fight the government," said one panelist.

to pay attention to the problems of journalistic ethics and other “general issues” and do not provide enough attention to practical journalism, panelists said. Most needed are sustained training in modern technologies, such as use of the Internet, and special programs for young journalists. Training abroad often does not meet local needs. “I’m not sure it is possible to train a journalist, first of all a TV journalist, say in Sweden, for them to work in Belarus. They have a different mentality, different approaches, and a different environment. International seminars and foreign internships are a double-edged sword,” said a panelist.

There are private printing houses, but they are few. The state printing houses will print independent newspapers, but business contacts depend on political factors and independent media outlets can often be rejected. One of the participants described the situation: “Printing houses often refuse profitable clients due to political reasons. The distribution structures are monopolized, and there are practically no independent alternative distribution companies in the country now.”

The state totally controls media distribution channels and keeps rejecting newspaper attempts to create their own systems. The experts mentioned that independent media are still looking for new opportunities for distribution. Private shops and kiosks are widely used, but sometimes it is necessary to distribute newspapers illegally and some activists in the regions have been arrested for doing this. In Grodno, a journalist at *Salidarnasc* newspaper, trade union activist Ivan Roman, was arrested by police for distribution of the opposition daily *Narodnaya Volya* to workers of a local plant.

Panel Participants

Leonid Mindlin, Journalist, WEN-TV, Minsk

Sieva Rahoisha, Board Member, Foundation for Development of Local Press, Minsk

Andrey Bastunets, Deputy Chair, Belarusian Association of Journalists, Minsk

Petr Martsev, Chief Editor, Publisher, *BDG. Delovaya Gazeta*, Minsk

Sergey Kuzemensky, Director, Skif TV, Borisov

Ales Lipai, Director, BelaPAN Information Company, Minsk

Pawlyk Bykowski, Political Editor, *Belorusy i Rynok*, Minsk

Andrey Dynko, Chief Editor, *Nasha Niva*, Minsk

Vladimir Yanukevich, Chief Editor, *Intex-press*, Baranovichi

Anatoly Martinkevich, Print Media Project Coordinator, Mass Communications Foundation, Minsk

Moderator

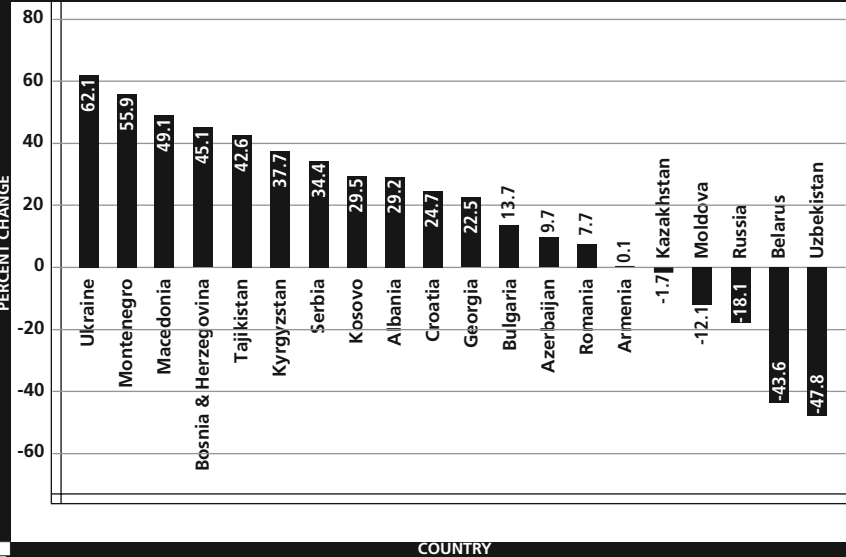
Andrey Vardomatsky, Director, Novak Opinion and Market Research, Minsk

BELARUS AT A GLANCE

GENERAL

- **Population:** 9,812,900 (2004)
Belorussky Rynok
- **Capital city:** Minsk
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):**
Belarusian 81.2%, Russian 11.4%, Pole 3.9%, Ukrainian 2.4%, other 1.1%
1999 Official Population Census
- **Religions (% of population):**
Christian 50% (Russian Orthodox 73%, Catholic 14%, Protestant 2%).
From an interview with Stanislav Buko, chair of the State Committee on Religions and Nationalities at the Council of Ministers, April 11, 2003.
Non-Christian religions make up the other 50% (data not available from official sources).
- **Languages (% of population):**
Belarusian 73.7%, Russian 24.1%
1999 Official Population Census (However, only 36.7% speak Belarusian on a daily basis, while 62.8% speak Russian.)
- **GDP:** \$17.45 billion *World Bank*
- **Literacy rate (% of population):**
97% *1999 Official Population Census*
- **President or top authority:**
President Alexander Lukashenko
- **Next scheduled elections:**
September 9, 2006

MSI AVERAGE SCORES—PERCENT CHANGE 2001–2005



MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Newspaper circulation statistics (total circulation and largest paper):**
Sovietskaya Byelorussia is a state-owned daily with an official print run of 506,948 copies per issue and a weekly circulation of 2,534,740 copies.
Belarusian Ministry of Information
- Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* (Belarusian edition of a popular Russian daily) is the largest independent daily with an official print run of 43,000 copies per issue (220,000 copies on Fridays) and a weekly circulation of 435,000 copies.
Mass Communications Foundation, 2005

Narodnaya Volya is the largest opposition daily with an official print run of 27,000 copies per issue and a weekly circulation of 135,000 copies.
Mass Communications Foundation, 2005

- **Broadcast ratings (top three ranked stations):** First National Channel of Belarusian Radio (broadcast throughout Belarus: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia), Radius FM, Radio Stolitsa (FM station)
Novak Laboratory, 2005

- **Number of print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** 1,266 print outlets, 8 news agencies, 54 television stations, 136 radio stations
Belarusian Ministry of Information, October 2005

- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** \$40 million in 2004 (press, television, radio, Internet, outdoor advertising)
Hepta Group Publicis advertising agency

Igor Samkin, director of the Association of Belarus Advertising Organizations, estimated the advertising market at \$40–\$45 million in 2004 (\$20 million television, \$7 million outdoor advertising, \$350,000 Internet)

- **Number of Internet users:** 14.3% of population
IISEPS News—Analytic Bulletin of Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, #3, October 2004

- **News agencies:** BelTA, BelaPAN, Interfax-Zapad, Prime-TASS, Ecopress, Agentstvo Grevtsova, Minsk-Novosti, Agentstvo Finansovyykh Novostei, Register Information and Legal Agency

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BELARUS

