

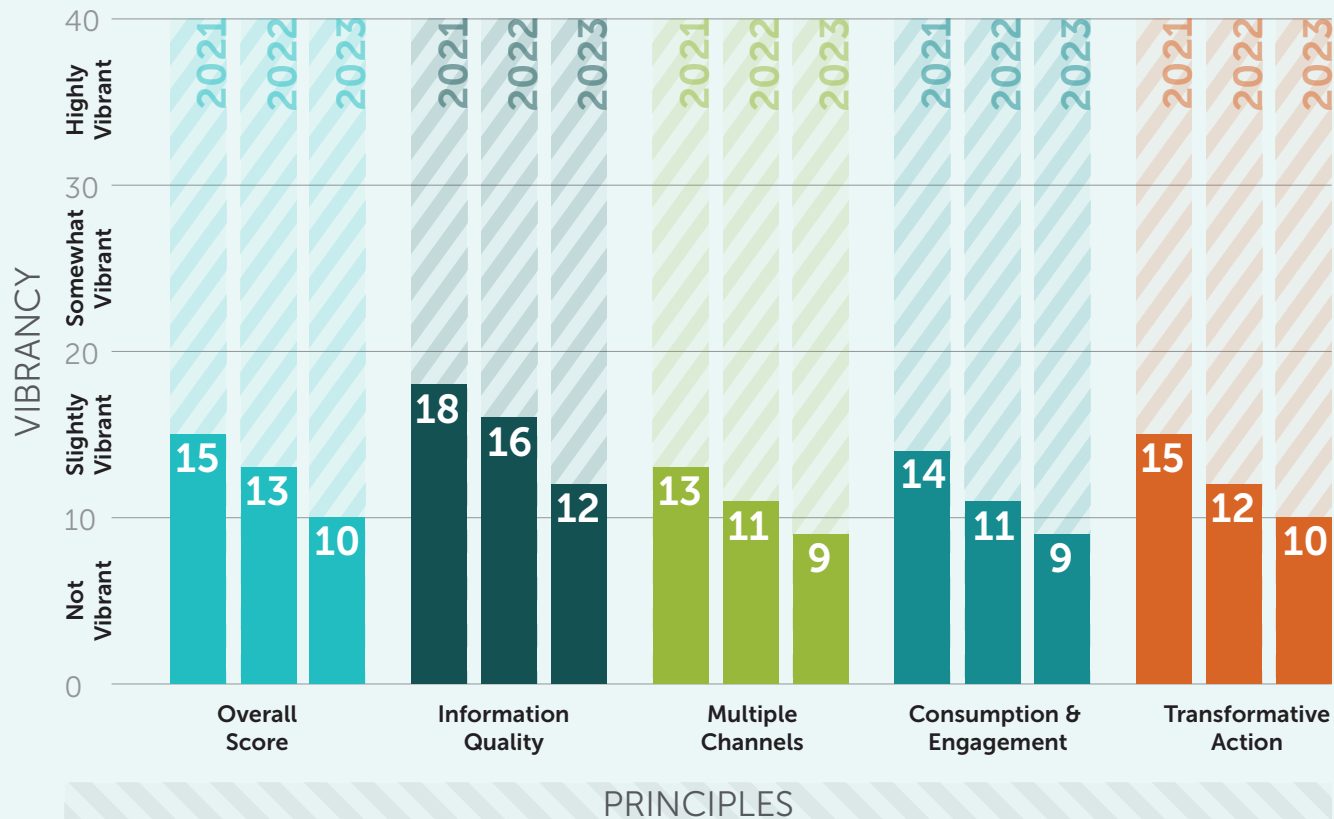
# BELARUS



## Vibrant Information Barometer

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

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

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

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

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

10

Repressions against journalists and media in Belarus intensified in 2022, with the Belarusian government supporting the Government of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and introducing more restrictions. The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), which operates in exile since being banned in-country, [registered 11 new criminal cases](#) against journalists and other media workers in 2022, and by the end of the year 33 journalists were imprisoned. The emigration of dozens of media professionals continued, prompted by governmental repressions and restrictions in the informational space.

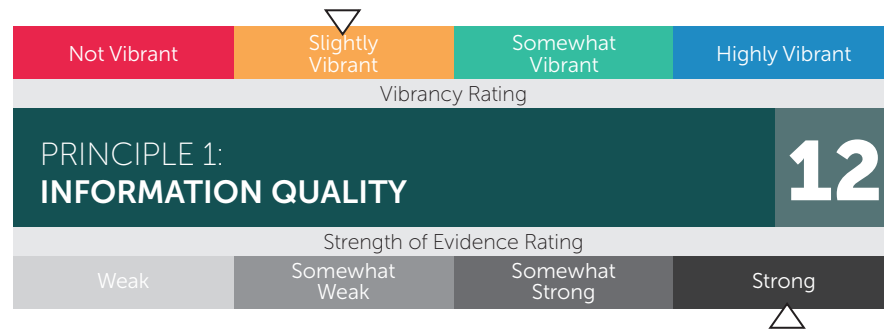
The reform of the law allowing the expansion of the definition of extremism resulted in more citizens accused of alleged “extremist” activities for online speech. Out of more than 5,000 cases of “extremist crimes” registered in Belarus in the first 11 months of 2022, three quarters were related to online posts, usually related to the post-election protests of 2020. The government classified nine independent media outlets either as “extremist organizations” or spreading “extremist content.” The court sentences against journalists got harsher.

The Belarusian government’s support of the Kremlin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has resulted in greater restrictions in Belarus’s internet space. The Belarusian government fully or partially blocked more than 3,000 web resources in 2022, which is 40 per cent of all websites blocked in the last eight years. Another blow to the audiences of media that provided impartial coverage of the war in Ukraine was Roskomnadzor’s (the Russian

government’s Information Technology and Mass Media Agency) censorship for Russia-based audiences.

While Belarus’s VIBE scores have declined across the board since the 2022 VIBE study, Principle 1 (Information Quality) received the highest scores from the panelists, buoyed by indicators around quality of information and fact-based reporting, mostly attributable to exiled and non-state actors. Panelists gave lower scores to indicators around harmful information and sufficient resources, reflecting the Kremlin’s role in spreading mal-information, especially on the war in Ukraine, as well as the financial pressures faced by nonstate media. Principles 2 (Multiple Channels) and 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) tied for the lowest scores of the 2023 study for Belarus, with indicators looking at the deteriorating independence of information channels, the effective disappearance of space for access to information, and low media literacy penetration and skills. In Principle 4, higher scores were seen in indicators looking at civil society’s responsible usage of information and news producers’ willingness to share information across ideological lines.

Among factors that influence the information sphere in Belarus the most, panelists mentioned state censorship, collaboration of Russian and Belarusian governments in the information and communications technology (ICT) sphere, financial, legal, and psycho-social challenges for both exiled and in-country media, and a growing gap between Belarusians in exile and those who cannot or do not wish to leave the country.



Panelists scored indicators examining quality and fact-based information the highest within this principle. Despite increasing censorship, blocking websites, and pushing independent media into exile, independent actors can keep going and cover news for their Belarusian audiences, mostly from abroad for national outlets and in-country for several regional publishers. The overall score for this principle is significantly lower than in 2022 (experiencing a four-point drop), as the repressions that started after the 2020 presidential election never receded and only intensified with the Government of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine that was supported by the Belarusian regime. At the same time, pervasive governmental and pro-Kremlin propaganda as well as hate speech were widely available and imposed on the Belarusian population, while income streams for nonstate media were even more scarce than before. Thus, indicators looking at information that does not intend to harm and sufficient resources scored lower.

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

Quality information is produced and disseminated first and foremost by nonstate media, mostly online. The government’s strong repression of the independent media sector has negatively impacted content availability; however, content quality improved as outlets were able to reorient their newsgathering strategies when forced into exile. Dozens of media outlets and their social media platforms were added to the government’s list of media with--in the authorities’ eyes--extremist

content or, in some cases, labeled extremist organizations. Web users and other media quoting their stories are held legally liable for content from these so-called extremist organizations, even when they repost materials preceding the dates when media was declared extremist. This, combined with the persistent blocking of web resources by the Ministry of Information, negatively affects Belarusians’ access to fact-based quality information.

The government heavily regulates the broadcast industry and does not allow any independent broadcaster to get a license in Belarus. The print market has shrunk, reflecting global trends and due to post-presidential election repressions against independent publishers. Panelists agreed that the infrastructure for independent publishing is “nonexistent,” as the government has not eased pressure on nonstate media that were blocked or denied printing facilities.

The quality of journalism education has further deteriorated, following the decline in academic freedoms all over the country. According to a [PEN Belarus report](#) on cultural worker rights violations in 2022, teachers and professors of humanitarian sciences were detained, fined, and arrested in Belarus on a mass scale, with many of them later being forced to quit their jobs. In early 2023, the Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Ihar Lutski [claimed](#) that the faculty of journalism of Belarusian State University “prepares not just journalists but fighters on the informational front.” As a result, Belarus’s authoritarian president, Aleksander Lukashenko, appointed a faculty supervisory board consisting of state officials and the dean of the faculty.

While opportunities for informal education still exist, they are less accessible to people inside Belarus, whose mobility has significantly reduced since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Belarus’s border with Ukraine is closed, while only a few crossings are in place on its borders with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. “The Belarusian government’s decisions to expel EU diplomats and consular workers negatively affects embassies’ ability to issue Schengen or national visas. This means that for any Belarusians, including existing or aspiring journalists, it became more difficult to leave the country,” a panelist noted. The only remaining direct flights that allow Belarusians

affordable visa-free travel, excluding Russia, are flights to Georgia. The Belarusian Association of Journalists and Belarusian Press Club, which together with Free Press Unlimited operate an internationally funded coworking and study facility MediaPort in Warsaw, provide a variety of online and in-person courses. The latter takes place mostly in Lithuania or Poland. “Regional media that stay in Belarus say that they feel the gap in training and would appreciate tailor-made mentoring schemes in country as well as short-term foreign fellowships,” an expert said.

The overall restrictive nature of the Belarusian regime makes it more difficult to improve journalism education in-country. According to [LawTrend](#), since 2020 at least 1,173 NGOs in Belarus were either forced to shut down or were liquidated by the government. As activities by unregistered organizations have been criminalized, this reduction in NGOs means that there are not enough organizations to spearhead informal journalism educational initiatives in the country.

The proliferation of fabricated information, especially in state media, continues. State-aligned outlets spread false information and propaganda about political opponents, independent media, and the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, there is no ethical oversight body that can support self-regulation in nonstate media. According to one of the panel experts, “Editors-in-chief of main nonstate media regularly meet in Warsaw and Vilnius to discuss ethical issues in person.” These meetings are mediated by the Belarusian Association of Journalists or the Belarusian Press Club.

Available research data shows that Belarusians are less likely to engage with “classic” political reporting, and the chilling effect of interaction with “extremist” content has negatively impacted potential engagement. However, the Kremlin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine created a new type of demand for news, as state-owned media do not cover the war impartially. Those media that can provide fact-based and first-hand information from Ukraine, or republish independent Ukrainian media, confirmed they had a boost in traffic in the first months of 2022. That,

however, changed by the second half of the year with people’s fatigue and the normalization of war in their environment.

Belarus did not have a massive military mobilization campaign, so unlike Russia, people did not fear of being conscripted into the army. The influx of Russian draft dodgers was picked up by several media outlets, but as they are mostly choosing to move to South Caucasus and Central Asia countries, their impact on Belarus was not as significant.

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Covering Belarusian and Russian troop movements proved to be dangerous. Instead of mainstream media, this data is collected mostly by a Telegram channel *Belaruski Hajun* which uses crowdsourcing for live feed reports. The channel has been included by the government into the list of “extremist organizations” in 2022.

The ongoing repression does not allow independent Belarusian media to significantly diversify their content. The war in Ukraine was an unbeaten leader in the coverage in the first half of 2022. However, Belarusian journalists who sought shelter in Ukraine in 2020-2021 needed to leave Ukraine due to unfavorable legal and economic treatment (such as frozen bank accounts, the Ukrainian government’s refusal to issue residence permits to Belarusian nationals), thwarting any possibility of Belarusian journalists covering the conflict from inside Ukraine. The bias against Belarusians who had to leave Ukraine (compared with Ukrainian passport holders) was a hot topic for exiled outlets. “Journalists had to move [from Ukraine] again and restructure their work completely, which of course also influenced their editorial policies,” one panelist noted. The largest media outlet that had to relocate from Ukraine to the EU was *Zerkalo*, a news outlet that became heir to *TUT.BY* (largest internet news portal in Belarus that was shut down by authorities in 2021).

Inside Belarus, the increased number of banned media outlets meant narrowing access to news and commentary sources for non-governmental outlets, while pro-governmental spread largely Kremlin narratives.

News content from state media follows the line of the state and increasingly Russian propaganda, while remaining nonstate news outlets working in Belarus attempt to maintain editorial independence. Still, there are cases of self-censorship from those journalists and media outlets who decided to stay in-country.

With more outlets being forced to move abroad and with research showing the fatigue of the Belarusian audiences when it comes to coverage of non-stop political repressions, more experiments with formats were undertaken. Media outlets started looking for ways to promote alternatives to the government's views through apolitical formats such as cooking, history, and culture content. For those outlets and journalists in exile, coverage expanded to include problems and success stories of Belarusians who had to leave their country. For example, MOST media outlet in Polish Bialystok, founded in 2021, found its niche in video interviews with Belarusians who successfully run businesses in Poland. At the same time, the burden of covering national news inside Belarus was increasingly on the shoulders of local news outlets which took longest to move their operations abroad. As not all of them were included into "extremist" lists, these outlets used the opportunity to attract audiences who want to interact safely<sup>1</sup> with allowed content by republishing national news.

By the second half of 2022, the war in Ukraine had become more contextualized for Belarusians by most independent content providers. The conflict was covered from the political angle (lack of contact between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy with Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya) and the military angle (movement of troops on Belarusian territory, Belarusians' undercover guerilla actions, and Belarusians fighting for Ukraine as part of Ukrainian army).

1 A presidential decree dated October 18, 2022, significantly simplified special services access to the content of online resources. Accordingly, telecommunication service providers and owners of internet resources will be required to register in a special information system for electronic interaction with special services within a three-month period. They will also be expected to set up resources for law enforcement to have unhindered online access to their content.

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

The access of independent journalists to information from state sources, already limited in 2021, narrowed further in 2022. The outlets which had more access were new brands that did not immediately make it on the list of extremist content or groups. "Usually, a new title has around three months before the authorities react and include them in one of the lists. This is too little to build a new significant audience, but if the brand is supported by well-known journalists, people still follow it," a panelist said.

Fact-based, well-sourced, and objective information, especially in the context of the Belarusian government's support of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine, was an exception and was mostly seen in nonstate media but violated by state outlets. Because of the lack of access to information or in a struggle to win clicks, however, even nonstate media often had to present their assumptions as facts.

Creating and disseminating false and misleading information became even more widespread among state-owned media when the invasion of Ukraine started. The focus shifted from the migrant crisis that dominated

the agenda in 2021 to Kremlin narratives about Ukrainians and Ukraine. According to an [analysis](#) of Sputnik Belarus (a Russian government-owned Belarusian outlet promoting Kremlin narratives) by iSANS, the main messages were: questioning Ukrainian statehood, promoting Russia's alleged military successes in Ukraine,

and accusing the United States and NATO countries in general of using Ukraine as a proxy to fight Russia.

Professional independent content providers tried to quote Ukrainian sources, but those were not always reliable. For example, at the beginning of the invasion, Ukrainian and Belarusian media widely reported that the defenders of Zmeinyi Island (a Ukrainian island in the Black Sea, known in English as Snake Island) who bravely fought

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a Russian ship were all killed. However, it appeared later they were taken prisoners and survived. “It was difficult to decide whom to trust. Ukrainian news agencies, especially at the beginning of the year, often provided emotionally charged and unreliable information, and it was not possible to use it to disprove the statements of Russians. Only after some time, using our own sources in Ukraine and reliable media, we were able to get a more balanced view,” an editor on the panel said.

Non-professional content producers became targets of repressions for their TikTok or YouTube shows. The [grounds for repressions](#) varied from posting commentary on the socio-political situation in Belarus to mocking Belarusian President Lukashenko’s phrase about “unbeatable proof” of Ukraine’s plans to attack Belarus “from four directions.” In some [cases](#), arrests happened based on videos from 2020 that “contained appeals to participate in protests.”

State agencies fully supported the Kremlin’s false narratives about the war in Ukraine, and they transmitted that support in the state-aligned media. According to [iSANS](#), they called Ukraine a “Nazi state,” accused it of hostile plans regarding Belarus, and buried information about advancement of Ukrainian forces. iSANS also [reported](#) that Belarusians fighting in the Ukrainian army were labeled “traitors” aiming for power in Belarus.

As in 2021, there were no cases when spreading non-factual or malign information was punished in Belarus. Fact-checking is available, but the challenge of war coverage without direct access to sources has made it more difficult. “We do not have enough tools to analyze each video that comes from Ukraine, so reposting them is always a risk,” one panelist observed. At the same time, some Belarusian media outlets have joined international investigative journalism consortia that have strengthened fact-checking: The Belarusian Investigative Center is member of Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting network (OCCRP).

Panelists mentioned that moderating media content is a way to protect themselves and their readers from the authorities’ persecution rather than an instrument to reduce misinformation.

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

With Belarus acting as co-aggressor in the Ukraine invasion, the Government of Russia doubled down on its efforts to promote of its version of events. Belarusian state propagandists support Kremlin statements that clearly are meant to do harm. The Belarusian regime’s narrative has become explicitly pro-Russian.

The Belarusian government is less involved in hate speech directly, but the media outlets affiliated with it (such as the SB.BY portal and newspaper belonging to the presidential administration) do not mince words. “Those Ukrainian Nazis, or Bandera followers, or those who were brought up in Bandera values... those are the ones ruling Ukraine, those are new Nazis, Ukronazis. They have to be eliminated,” SB.BY [posted](#) shortly after the start of the invasion.

Government officials and media aligned with them are not pressured to apologize or resign based on the harmful content they generated or disseminated. “The aggressive rhetoric became a new norm. Things that would have shocked in 2020 or 2021 have been repeated so many times that they now go unnoticed,” a panel expert noted. Global technology companies continue to selectively react to state propaganda. For example, one of Belarus’s most noted propagandists, 26-year-old Grigory Azarenok, finally had his YouTube account removed in July 2022—but [only after three warnings](#).

The language of political bloggers and other nonprofessional content producers is more moderate when compared with their content in the immediate aftermath of the 2020 elections. However, hate speech aimed at the Belarusian opposition is more frequent. The re-emergence of exiled politician Zianon Pazniak, who holds conservative patriotic views, has resulted in the formation of an online group of his supporters. He directly accuses the leader of the Belarusian opposition Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya of being a pro-Russian agent and promises legal proceedings against her if Lukashenko leaves office. “Criticism [of Tsikhanouskaya] often bears misogynist features. Mostly male politicians and bloggers say that she is too weak, unprepared for politics, prefers

being seen as doing something rather than actually doing it, and is not a proper leader in war time. This in turn depreciates the importance of women who played a leading role in 2020 protests,” a panelist said.

There were no known cases of nonprofessional content creators losing credibility or standing for their content among their core audiences in 2022.

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

The practice of the pro-governmental Telegram channels to humiliate and deter citizens from expressing their views is widespread. These channels republish videos of forced admissions of guilt by protesters and add hateful commentary that are initially filmed by the police. Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the [background of those videos](#) often features letter Z, symbolizing Russia’s campaign.

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

Media publish in the Russian and Belarusian languages, while nonprofessional content creators—who mostly used Russian before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine—have shifted to using the Belarusian language more often<sup>2</sup> to demonstrate to Ukrainians and the rest of the world that they are not aligned with the Kremlin’s efforts in Ukraine. Platforms for news dissemination are limited, with YouTube maintaining its popularity among nonstate media since it is harder to block and because the government cannot easily identify the names of viewers of its content.

Belarus’s information sphere contains a wide range of opinions and

<sup>2</sup> For example, [https://www.tiktok.com/@olia\\_metelitsa/video/7088976377071832325?lang=en](https://www.tiktok.com/@olia_metelitsa/video/7088976377071832325?lang=en)

ideological views, but it is difficult to access them all in one place, especially since many well-known media outlets were formally banned by the government in 2022. “In the end, people are looking for information on YouTube and follow personalities, not media, which narrows down their variety of information sources,” said an expert.

LGBTQ+ topics, already rarely featured in Belarusian independent media, declined even further after the start of the invasion. At the same time, hate speech directed at this community grew. Journalists for Tolerance, which aims at uniting media professionals attempting to cover LGBTQ+ topics responsibly, admitted in their [2022 research](#) that “almost every second publication [that mentioned LGBTQ+ issues] in the Belarusian media contained hate speech.” Their monitoring included a mix of websites (mostly governmental or pro-governmental media) and Telegram channels (mostly independent media or non-professional content providers).

Ethnic and religious minorities are not prominently covered in either independent or state media. State media mostly focuses on the waves of Ukrainian refugees who are seen as receiving preferential treatment by EU member states, and they [accused](#) the EU of a “new form of racism - splitting migrants into right and wrong ones.” This statement alludes to the ongoing flows of Middle Eastern and North African migrants from Belarus to Poland who are often turned away and do not get the same treatment as Ukrainians fleeing the war. While Poland and other EU border states were indeed [criticized](#) for unequal treatment of different ethnic groups, the Belarusian regime sponsored those migrants’ trips in 2021 in an attempt to distract the EU’s attention from the buildup of Russian military forces near Ukraine.

Underrepresented or vulnerable groups are formally represented in the professional media sector, but the coverage is often overly formal and lacks depth. “In a [story](#) by Malanka Media about the people with disabilities, a disabled person was only given voice once,” a panel expert said. In October 2022, Mediazona (a Belarusian franchise of the Russian independent outlet) [published](#) a review of the treatment of disabled people in Belarusian penal colonies and prisons within the context of patients’ rights violations.



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

Gender balance is yet to be achieved in content and in the management structure of media organizations, including nonstate outlets. In 2022, gender researcher Olga Shparaga published an [article](#) about “invisible” women in the social and political sphere of Belarus, but it did not get a wide coverage by Belarusian independent outlets. “There were attempts to question the decision of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya not to include women in the first iteration of the transitional government, and joint efforts of media and civil society helped correct that decision. But this has not resulted in a sustained campaign advocating for more female empowerment,” noted one panelist.

The nonprofessional content producers’ scene became slightly more gender balanced with female experts, such as political scientist Katsiaryna Shmatsina, who launched her own YouTube show. Journalists Katsiaryna Pytleva and Sasha Ramanava also launched an informal YouTube show called “[Woman Wants.](#)” The show discusses stereotypes around women’s relations with finances, alcohol, family, or sexual life and suggests alternatives to traditional views on those issues.

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

Since many nonstate media newsrooms had to flee Belarus and re-establish themselves abroad, their reliance on international donor funding increased while they were searching for alternative sources of commercial income. Some of them, such as news agency BelaPAN (rebranded as Pozirk), were able to restore contracts with their business clients, and others began monetizing their YouTube content.

In attempt to funnel funds to state media, a new governmental decree

in early 2022 taxed advertising and internet usage for any remaining Belarus-based nonstate media; however, the amount of donor support to nonstate media did not significantly grow, the panel experts noted. “Nonstate media lost the possibility to distribute printed materials, and their advertisers and other sources of funding in Belarus withdrew because those media were added to extremists lists or blocked and thus deprioritized by the search engines,” a panelist explained.

Public funding continues to be available, largely for state media. Private funding in-country that used to support some of the nonstate media has significantly declined with businesses being afraid to fund blocked websites. International donor funding continues to be available for nonstate media. This support had grown in 2020 and 2021 to compensate for the country’s increasingly repressive environment, but it did significantly increase in 2022, due to the necessity to prioritize foreign aid to Ukraine.

Patreon, a membership subscription-based platform for content creators, provides an alternative source of income for individual authors and media entities such as Zerkalo, Euroradio, and The Village. On top of that, Google has supported several Belarusian nonstate media organizations, including Euroradio, with grants to promote their content on Google News. In 2022, Zerkalo attempted to sell its branded merchandise.

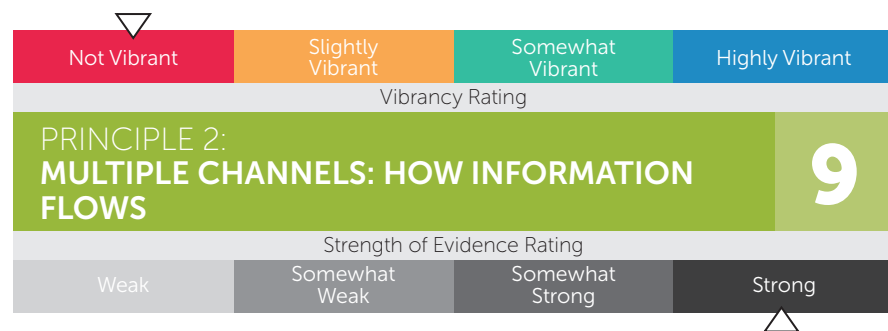
According to the Association of Advertisers of Belarus, in 2022 the overall volume of advertising in Belarus was estimated to be \$65 million, 25 percent lower than in 2021. The only advertising sector experiencing growth is online. The share of TV advertising dropped significantly from 35 percent to 23 percent due to the withdrawal of international advertisers related to war in Ukraine and possible sanctions against Belarusian enterprises and state entities. Those [advertisers](#) included Procter & Gamble, Mars, Jacobs Douwe Egberts, Ferrero, Nestle, Abbott Healthcare Products, L’Oreal, Bayer and BP.

The distribution of state subsidies for advertising contracts significantly distorts the market. The state is entitled to publish “social advertising,” which is free-of-charge advertising on social issues or issues of “public

significance” that can be posted only by the government according to the [Law on Advertising](#).

For nonstate media, operational conditions have worsened compared to 2020 and 2021, leading to lower salaries and lower quality of life for independent journalists. “Journalists who decide to stay in the profession have to move increasingly undercover or consider getting another job in order to feed themselves and their families. In these conditions, one should not expect that they can engage in long-term [investigative] projects,” an expert said.

Advertising placement is extremely politicized, with the state using a variety of instruments to ensure available advertising is placed in state-owned media, such as openly discouraging businesses placing advertisements in independent outlets and including an increasing number of nonstate sources into the list of “extremist” content producers or groups. “Any company, state or non-state, will have serious problems if they attempt placing ads in a nonstate outlet,” one panelist commented.



Principle 2’s average score would have been even lower if not for Belarus’s advanced ICT infrastructure. As a result, panelists scored the indicator examining adequate access to channels of information comparatively highly, driven by the country’s ICT infrastructure and affordability of internet access. However, panelists gave single-digit scores to indicators looking at rights to create, share, and consume information, diverse channels for information flow, and independence of information channels. The panel saw increased online censorship and

the government’s constant attempts to control access to information as impeding the access to content that this technical infrastructure supports. The panelists also observed a profound lack of equality in access to information between nonstate and governmental media.

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

Panel experts agreed that laws guaranteeing freedom of press or expression are hypothetical in Belarus. “The state ideology, combined with the practice of persecuting people with any alternative points of view, override any norms or principles of the Constitution,” a panelist said. “I could have given zero on all points, as the laws are not followed anymore in Belarus,” another expert added.

Internet providers are obliged to block any content that is considered extremist or otherwise illegal. In 2022 alone, the Belarusian Association of Journalists [reported](#) that the government had deemed more than 1,500 sources and links “extremist.” This list includes social media accounts and webpages of established nonstate media, along with politicians, experts, and bloggers. Those who do not want to risk getting onto the list have to resort to self-censorship. Most Belarus-based outlets quote content of their so-called extremist colleagues without hyperlinks to the original sources. “In my view, most of the content producers practice self-censorship: either for career prospects--or for the security of themselves, their families, and their colleagues--or in order to keep operating inside the country,” a panelist claimed.

Journalists continue to be harassed for doing their jobs in a variety of ways, including search and confiscation of their equipment, bullying online and via telephone, and public hate speech by state media actors. In 2022, new long-term sentences were given to journalists and editors, as well as media managers. For example, former Belsat TV employee Iryna Slaunikava got five years in prison in August 2022 for alleged violations of the public order and for creating an extremist group. On October 6, 2022, the court sentenced media manager Andrei Aliaksandrau to 14 years in prison, former BelaPAN agency director Dzmitry Navazhylau to 6 years and BelaPAN editor-in-chief and director

Iryna Leushyna to four years under a variety of [trumped-up charges](#).

With the level of state repression quite high in Belarus, panelists noted other forms of retribution for speaking or writing about potentially controversial or sensitive topics, such as non-extension of work contracts at state enterprises.

This overriding restrictive atmosphere means that any laws that protect sources exist only on paper and are not implemented or enforced. Even laws not directly related to the media sector are leveraged to persecute journalists and Belarusian citizens for both news coverage and openly expressing opinions.

In 2022, the laws on extremism applied to even more media workers and entities than before. On June 14, 2022, the Supreme Court of Belarus confirmed that, based on a decision of the Minsk Economic Court, TUT.BY (which used to be the largest online news and information portal in the country) is an extremist organization. The court ordered the company to be dissolved, and its company employees are under criminal investigation. Ihar Lutski, former Minister of Information, [explained](#) in a public statement that: “There took place a direct encroachment on the sovereignty and independence of our country. The funding of these non-state media was carried out from abroad, and it was also coordinated from abroad. The current verdict on TUT.BY is a vivid example of that. They have been recognized as extremist!”

According to Viasna, a human rights organization, more than 11,000 criminal cases involving “extremism” were opened between August 9, 2020, and July 1, 2022. However, [according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs](#), by August 2022, 79 percent of those wanted for “extremist crimes” left Belarus.

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

According to Freedom House’s Freedom of the Net 2022 [report](#), Belarus’s technical infrastructure supports access to information, and the cost of internet is relatively affordable. As of May 2022, the median mobile broadband download speed was 10.1 Megabits per second (Mbps), and the median fixed broadband download speed was 47.9 Mbps. A 100 Mbps package combined with the TV access costs \$8 per month while unlimited mobile internet combined with free calls by the provider A1 costs \$10 - \$15 per month.

The state ICT provider Beltelecom is a monopoly, but it allows for socially vulnerable groups to have unlimited access to the internet for one-third of the cost. These reduced rates are available to families with disabled children under 18, families with three or more children, or the older population who lived through World War II.

Other ways of accessing information, such as TV and radio, are available for people who are less literate, but the government does not allow any independent radio or TV stations to broadcast inside the country. After jailing prominent Polish-language journalists and activists Andrzej Poczobut and Andželika Borys, there is even less available information in the

Polish language. Additionally, the Belarusian government does not permit any Ukrainian sociopolitical TV channels or media to broadcast within the country, especially in light of the government’s support to the Kremlin’s war in Ukraine. “Infrastructure exists and it spans across the whole country, but limited access to information, including for national minorities, does not allow a significant part of the population to get necessary information,” a VIBE panelist said.

Belarus completed its analog to digital transmission process in 2018, ensuring digital radio and TV services in all parts of the country. However, since some households did not reconnect to state broadcast media,

the government is trying to stimulate reconnection by offering special programs. The program announced in 2016 that provided people with visual disabilities free radio receivers experienced significant delays, and digital TV boxes were not subsidized.

The prices for access to TV and internet are affordable for Belarusian households. The minimum wage in 2022 was BYN 483 per month (approximately \$191), while the average pre-tax monthly salary by December 2022 was BYN 1915 (approximately \$758). Beltelecom's interactive TV platform ZALA has more than 2.5 million subscribers out of a total of 4.3 million Belarusian households.

There are few barriers for specific subgroups to access existing channels of information; instead, the government blocks or bars certain information at a national scale. However, prisoners and people in pretrial detention are a large exception, as they are deprived from the possibility to subscribe to independent news, even ones that are still available in-country.

Access to information is heavily limited due to the governmental blocking of websites and overall repressions against media and information. "While many Belarusians learned to use VPNs, it still is not widespread, especially among older or rural populations," a VIBE panelist observed.

There are alternate systems in place to distribute information in the case of a disruption to the telecommunications grid.

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

The right to information remains extremely limited. There is a constitutional provision limiting the right of citizens to access information that does not concern them personally, and there are additional regulations on access to information that are well below

international standards. At the same time, the government ensures that people are informed about punishment for civic activism. One panelist observed, "In 2022, there has been more information both on state websites and social media about the most outrageous laws that introduce punishment for dissidents."

Mechanisms to access or influence government policy or decision-making processes continued to be inaccessible in 2022, since no independent platforms for sending petitions were set up to replace petitions.by or change.org that the government declared extremist and blocked in 2021. At the same time, ministries and state institutions have sections of their websites that allow electronic appeals, petitions, or requests for information. However, one panelist said that "replies to information requests may come on time but be very formalistic. People mostly know about the possibility to ask state institutions about their activities, but they often are afraid to do so." Political prisoners, and prisoners in general, still only have limited, if any, access to independent news and information.

““ The nonstate media dependence on donor money has increased, but there is no evidence it could lead to self-censorship,” a panelist said.

Government agencies have press secretaries and press centers but getting accredited to attend press conferences is difficult for nonstate media. "They rather serve as filters of information and make sure that exclusive news is shared first and foremost with state media," one panelist

noted. "In 2022, important data related to health, economy, or justice, became state secrets. State institutions regularly provide unverified or blatantly false information," another panelist added.

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

Laws regulating domestic and foreign ownership of media are in place, and there are no laws that govern the concentration of ownership in media companies.

Only some state-run competitions that regulate access to the broadcasting market—such as broadcast licenses—are known to the

public, and when the contests happen, there is no clear explanation or established criteria to support who is selected. For example, radio frequencies are distributed through open competition, but they are never given to commercial broadcasters that would pursue a different editorial angle than the government's line in their current affairs coverage.

No special laws require transparency in media ownership. Moreover, the government monopolizes all channels of media distribution.

While nominally Belarus has more than 1,000 nonstate media, there is no independent broadcaster registered in-country. Belarusian exiled broadcaster European Radio for Belarus (Euroradio) and its content has been declared extremist by the government, while the only external Belarusian TV channel, Belsat, was also labeled an "extremist group." Establishing a media outlet requires registration with the government, and there are strict qualifications the editor-in-chief of a registered media outlet must have.

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

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

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

Ownership influences the editorial content of both state and nonstate media outlets. State media exclusively provide the government's point of view. Nonstate media that were declared extremist have mostly re-registered abroad and continue their operations. "The nonstate media dependence on donor money has increased, but there is no evidence it could lead to self-censorship," a panelist said.

Panelists confirmed that the government discourages state and private companies from placing advertisements in nonstate outlets. At the same time, the remaining nonstate media that operate legally in Belarus are able to improve their financial positions compared to their exiled or banned counterparts. One panelist commented, "Those of our partners

who managed to keep their businesses in Minsk and the Belarusian regions inform us about the relative growth of advertising revenues compared to early 2021, when there were more independent media in-country. The war in Ukraine and the withdrawal of large advertisers from the Belarusian market impacted mostly state TV channels, but not the media we work with."

State media receive most of government subsidies to the media sector. Moreover, in 2022, a special "[advertising tax](#)" was introduced that allows state media to receive 10 to 20 percent of all online and display advertising with limited exceptions, as well as 1 percent of the tax on internet traffic. "On top of lavish state investment, private companies have to sponsor state-leaning Belarusian media. This is unprecedented," one panel expert said.

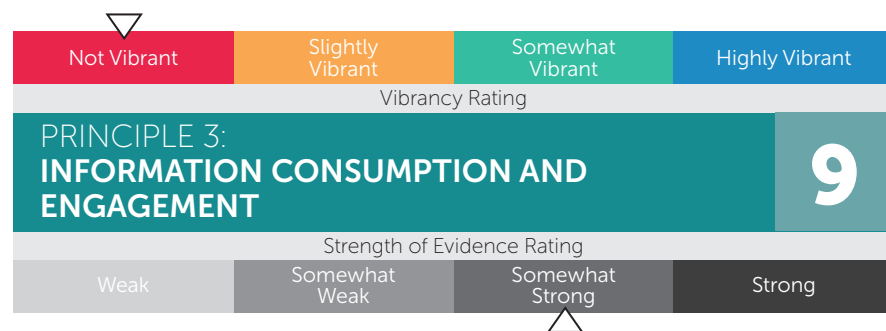
The distinction between newsroom operations and business management is still lacking. Because of shortages in human resources caused by repressions and resulting economic disadvantages, one person often serves as editor-in-chief and business director at the same independent media outlet. This is especially true for smaller regional media, even the ones that moved into exile. For national outlets--such as Nasha Niva, Belsat or Euroradio--these roles are separate.

Government agencies overseeing frequency allocation or telecommunications are not neutral. The market entry and tax structure for media remain unfair compared with other types of companies, and independent media faces more disadvantages than state media. Unlike other businesses, media newsrooms cannot have their offices in residential homes, and individual entrepreneurs are not allowed to publish any media, including online outlets. An editor-in-chief of a media outlet who applies for registration is required to have at least five years of media management experience. A broadcast media editor-in-chief must pass a special exam on broadcast law knowledge, the technical demands of radio and television broadcasting, and advertising law for his or her outlet to receive a broadcast license. Such licenses are not given to independent broadcasters, like Euroradio, Radio Racja, or the television channel Belsat TV (all of which are run from Poland). Moreover, all those entities were declared extremist in 2021 or 2022, which will

further delay any attempts to legalize within Belarus.

Arbitrary rules are applied to limit independent media’s access to information as compared to the access afforded to state outlets. For example, the state-owned national news agency BELTA exclusively disseminates information about state institutions. Belarus-based media that receive comments from state actors typically refrain from covering political news (e.g., Onliner portal).

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



In Principle 3, panelists experts gave relatively high scores to the indicators on protection and security tools and on engagement with audience needs. The indicator on media literacy scored the lowest, and the indicator on community most received “not applicable” from the panelists.

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

Belarus’s law on personal data protection ensures the security of citizens’ personal data, but it is ignored by law enforcement along with

pro-state media or Telegram channels. ‘In 2022, we saw nearly daily posts on social media by state institutions or their allies that revealed personal data, correspondence, or bank information of people they consider criminals for their civic activism,’ an expert said.

The list of agencies that can classify information is long in Belarus. According to the “List of State Bodies and Other Organizations Entitled to Classify Information as State Secrets” (enforced by a presidential decree dated February 25, 2011), there are around 60 organizations that can designate information as a state secret, including the Belarusian State Concern of Food Industry, the State Inspection of Protection of Flora and Fauna, and the National State TV and Radio Company.

Digital security training and tools for Belarusian media are mostly available online. With more outlets having to relocate abroad, accessing face-to-face training became better than in 2021. “Now, the main focus is on protecting correspondents and sources inside the country, and we have to keep in mind their safety even when we are not under pressure ourselves,” an expert said.

Media use dynamic tools and services like CloudFare to combat distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks. Use of VPNs is growing, and among the most popular VPN applications are Psyphon, ExpressVPN, Surfshark, Proton, and NordVPN.

There is little evidence to indicate Belarusians have a deep understanding of how social media algorithms work or other ways tech platforms use personal information. Most of the videos of detained Belarusians who shared comments online show how easy the governmental services can identify their accounts on Telegram or other social media, but most of the data came from 2020 and is a bit dated.

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

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

instance, the state-run ONT TV channel has the [program](#) “Antifake” which in fact promotes fake news. For instance, a July 2022 program accused Poland of “[teaching children to shoot and hate Russia](#)” and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s team of “[plans for armed seizure of power.](#)” It also claimed that people [were never tortured in Minsk’s Akrestsina](#) pre-trial detention center, despite hundreds of testimonies to the contrary that were recorded by human rights defenders.

Media and information literacy and critical thinking trainings used to be offered by nongovernmental organizations, most of which had to shut down in 2021 or 2022 as part of the government’s comprehensive crackdown on civil society.

There is little evidence of people using special tools for fact-checking or debunking disinformation. The polling available shows self-proclaimed high levels of media literacy, but people often cite intuition as their way to check the trustworthiness of the content.

The November 2022 Chatham House [poll](#) claims that “consumers of independent media are much less likely to trust information from state media,” which could be a sign of strong commitment of this group to high quality news.

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

Freedom of speech and the right to information were severely repressed in 2022. With more than 30 journalists and bloggers behind bars by the end of the year (down from 50 the previous year), the state continues to take unprecedented measures to quash independent media and opinions, intensified by censorship related to the war in Ukraine.

Belarusians continue getting prison sentences for comments left on social media that could be interpreted as their dissatisfaction with the authorities. Viasna human rights center noted, “In 2022, freedom of expression was violated under the guise of combating extremism and

terrorism. The authorities routinely blacklisted people, organizations, and media products for their alleged involvement in “extremist activities” or featuring “extremist content.” According to the Ministry of Information, the list of “[extremist products](#)” contained 2,750 entries by the end of the year, more than 1,220 of which were added in 2022.

“A new group of repressed citizens in 2022 were tour guides,” an expert noted. Pro-governmental media published articles defaming some travel agencies and persons working as guides, and as a result people in the travel industry had to self-censor. Initially, some were arrested on administrative charges, but their sentences became criminal, as in the case of Ihar Khmara who was not released after serving an administrative sentence (it was reported he was arrested “for speaking Belarusian” despite it being an official state language) and was [sentenced](#) to two-and-a-half years of restricted freedom under home confinement under

Art. 342 of the Criminal Code (organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them). Charges under the same article were brought against tour guides Aksana Mankevich and Valeryia Charnamortsava who remained in detention at the end of 2022. The government’s Resolution 839

in December 2022 [banned](#) anyone who participated in the 2020 post-election protests from working as tour guides as of 2023.

Chatham House’s November 2022 survey suggested that around 49% of Belarusians regularly engage with the content of independent media (half of them follow both state and non-state media). This is a significant number, considering that the very fact of following those media or sharing their content online can lead to criminal persecution. YouTube and Instagram continued to be the most popular social media platforms for news consumption, while the importance of Telegram went down. “The so-called ‘remorse videos’ of detainees shared by the government often demonstrate that those people subscribed to extremist Telegram channels, or shared banned content in Telegram chats,” an expert said. As a result, people would read content on Telegram without sharing it or following its channels.

**Often media outlets and journalists warn their audiences inside Belarus to refrain from comments, likes, or shares to avoid potential arrest later.**

The Belarusian public largely adheres to norms and standards for online communities, and it frequently reports hate speech or misinformation on platforms. Bodies like Belarus in Focus’s information office (Press Club Belarus) and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s office are involved in the dialogue with big tech platforms to make sure that the Belarusian content is not deprioritized or ignored, particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

There are no public councils or ombudsmen to address most of the complaints about the media. “There are secure online communities for discussions among media managers and editors, and some of them regularly meet in person. Most of the complaints are discussed at these meetings and usually we find solutions,” a panelist said.

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

Independent audience studies inside Belarus continue to be limited. Online research, however, is more widespread, either shared publicly (like Chatham House) or with limited groups of media and civil society partners (such as research done by NDI and Internews).

As blocking web access continues, reliance on online quantitative audience data from social media platforms has grown, yet Meta’s increased restrictions on promotion makes it more difficult to get insights. One panelist shared, “A media partner reported that their Instagram account was blocked allegedly for war-related content. In reality, their content referred to common history and culture with Ukraine.” All panelists noted limitations that TikTok introduced on war-related content, as well. On the other hand, as an editor on the panel observed, “TikTok is one of the few platforms which shows our real audience inside Belarus.” YouTube analytics is also important since it continues to be the most accessible to Belarusians who do not want to be identified while browsing their favorite media content. “The war in Ukraine and the popularity of Ukrainian military experts on YouTube created more opportunities for Belarusian content producers,” one panelist said.

“The increasing gap between exiled media and in-country audiences contributes to the erosion of trust,” panelist claimed.

Letters to editors are less popular as more and more media outlets have been deemed extremist by the government. Often media outlets and journalists warn their audiences inside Belarus to refrain from comments, likes, or shares to avoid potential arrest later. However, one consequence of this practice is that it reduces feedback media can receive from this still-significant part of their audience. “Journalists have to rely more on the feedback from friends and relatives still in country than on the comments from readers,” an expert explained.

Public events largely happen in the centers of exiled Belarusians, such as Warsaw, Poland and Vilnius, Lithuania. Their online streaming is available globally, but people inside Belarus have extremely limited opportunities to engage directly with the media they follow. Anonymizing branded media content is balanced by promoting personal brands of journalists and non-professional content promoters. The November 2022 survey by Chatham House showed that the audience<sup>3</sup> of the leading independent media news outlets was less than the audience of the state ones. “The increasing gap between exiled media and in-country audiences contributes to the erosion of trust,” panelist claimed.

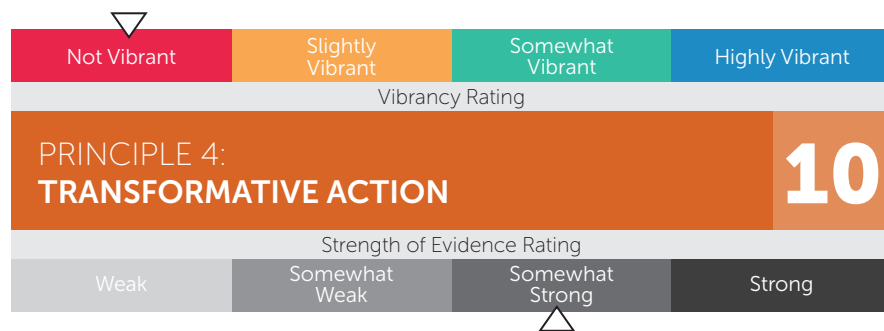
Links between nonprofessional and professional media content producers remain weak, with each of them staying within their niche audience. “But cooperation between civil society and media has improved, and we often see media publications about the reports by non-profits,” an expert said. However, others on the panel added that the prevalence of civil society-related news might be caused by the lack of access to governmental or in-country sources of other information.

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

Community media as commonly understood does not exist in Belarus, the panel experts unanimously agreed.

<sup>3</sup> People who were polled were provided a list of sample independent outlets to reference.





Indicators under Principle 4 are the most polarized in the 2023 study of Belarus. On one hand, the indicators relating to nonstate media’s information sharing across ideological lines, along with individuals’ and civil society’s use of information, received comparatively higher scores. However, indicators relating to the government’s use of quality information to make public policy decisions, along with good governance and democratic rights, received single-digit scores from panelists. The average score for this principle is 10, two points lower than in 2022, reflecting the overall worsening operating environment in Belarus.

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

Most non-partisan content reaches large audiences through Belarus-based online resources that engage in self-censorship, such as the Onliner portal. However, exiled outlets started audience fatigue about “hard” political news and, over the course of the year, information about war in Ukraine. Therefore, more lifestyle and non-political content was produced in 2022 to attract those less interested in politics and afraid to engage with political content. The Belarusian language is often chosen as a medium to deliver content. Notable examples in 2022 were Euroradio’s online formats about the history and culture of Belarus and Soika media’s visual journalism.

Dialogue between various political forces is typically limited to the

increasingly fractured Belarusian opposition. “Nongovernmental media did a good job in presenting views of the supporters and opponents of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya within the opposition,” an expert noted. However, there is little to no evidence of how audiences in various information bubbles can receive alternative information, potentially contributing to greater polarization of Belarusian society.

Townhall meetings or call-in shows inside Belarus are limited to state-run ideologically controlled events. This approach became more prevalent after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Some initiatives are emerging that try to engage citizens in more direct contact with the exiled opposition, such as the new Novaya Belarus app and website. However, this is largely targeted at Belarusians who live abroad.

Open and constructive discussions may happen online, but the panelists were not sure how to measure if they are informed by quality news and information.

Media continue to be trusted by many Belarusians, according to [available reports](#). For example, the Chatham House [November 2022 report](#) cited earlier demonstrated that only 25 percent of respondents consider independent Belarusian outlets “somewhat” or “completely” not credible, while this figure was 34% for state Belarusian TV channels and 27% for pro-Kremlin Russian TV channels.

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

There is limited evidence about what type of content informs people’s views on political or social issues. As [reported](#) by the Australian Institute for International Affairs, polls performed in 2022 by Chatham House among largely urban populations show that most Belarusians opposed Russia’s actions in Ukraine, and even more were against any direct involvement of Belarusian troops in the war.

“The attitude of Belarusians towards war at their borders could be a sign of them using fact-based information,” an expert said. At the same time, the official governmental narrative has always been deeply anti-

militaristic, and the government never committed to sending Belarusian troops to Ukraine. As a result, some of this attitude could come from following the official sources.

Election campaigns previously were one of the remaining windows for voters to engage with candidates or current deputies in a legal and safe way. However, those opportunities for engagement have closed, and currently there are no avenues for direct dialogue with politicians. The local elections planned for 2023 were rescheduled to February 2024 and will take place alongside parliamentary elections.

With COVID-19 becoming less of an issue, there is less misinformation from the government regarding health, and the level of the government following WHO recommendations has returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Starting in 2020 after civic protests in Belarus, false information continues to be actively used by pro-state media to stoke popular sentiment against the political opposition. However, it is unclear whether this has impacted the views of a significant number of people. Some of non-professional content producers, like Volha Bondarava, [initiated](#) a series of governmental steps to persecute opposition or remove associated with it cultural memorials, but these attempts tend to be championed by one person rather than supported by popular will.

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

This indicator received relatively high scores due to the notable work of civil society that is now mainly in exile.

The shutdown of CSOs in Belarus due to repressions that started in 2021 continued in 2022, with more of them relocating abroad or going deeply undercover. These exiled organizations with known brands--such as Viasna (Spring96.org), PEN Belarus, and Budzma--have successfully

managed to restructure and continue activities. “Unfortunately, quite often news from those organizations is about the next group of cultural or civic activists being arrested,” an expert said. It has become a normal practice for media outlets to regularly check with CSOs for information about new political prisoners. The specialization of their products increased, with PEN Belarus releasing a [comprehensive report](#) on violations of cultural rights in Belarus in 2022.

There were no recorded incidents of CSOs spreading mis- or mal-information to their constituencies in Belarus in 2022. In general, civil society actors attempt to spread information responsibly. However, it became more difficult to get such information because of increased restrictions stemming from Belarus’s support of Russia’s actions in Ukraine.

CSOs’ work against mis- and mal-information is becoming more evident but mostly affects exiled populations, as the people inside Belarus would often have barriers to access this content due to laws on extremism, while opportunities to engage with people directly have shrunk. “There is a risk that civil society will stop reacting to misinformation, especially coming from the government, due to fatigue, and this itself could help misinformation to spread,” one panelist expert said. At the same time, there have been new programs and formats by bloggers and independent media creatively addressing disinformation such as Euroradio’s [weekly review](#) of the most absurd Kremlin and Belarusian propaganda called “Cringe of the Week,” NEXTA’s “Cotton Top-20” (a wordplay on “vata,” a Russian word for “cotton,” which is a nickname for a person with pro-Putin views), or [WTF \(Weekly Top Fake\)](#) by Belarusian Investigative Center.

Including hundreds of sources in the government’s list of “extremists” has eased the fears of civil society to engage with the media. “Nowadays, it is rather an exception not to be called an extremist for posting independent content online. Therefore, the so-called ‘extremists’ from

“There is a risk that civil society will stop reacting to misinformation, especially coming from the government, due to fatigue, and this itself could help misinformation to spread,” one panelist expert said.

civil society and media refer to each other more than before,” an expert observed. However, for media that are not yet considered extremist, it is increasingly difficult to find a safe source they can quote, which in turn limits their target groups’ access to information.

Among nonprofessional content producers, there is engagement with civil society, with some of the activists or experts setting their own social media channels. The thinktanks, by website, supported by BEROX expert community, has developed a presence on Instagram. Female political experts Katsiaryna Shmatsina and Lesia Rudnik launched their web presence. A noteworthy initiative started in 2022 is Belaruski Gajun, a Telegram channel that publishes crowdsourced information about the movement of Russian troops and military equipment on the territory of Belarus. The account was set up by the non-professional content producer Anton Motolko.

Civil society efforts in 2022 continued to be concentrated around reporting the worsening situation in Belarus and attempts to improve the conditions for Belarusians forced into exile. “When the war in Ukraine started, many Belarusians were treated unequally compared to Ukrainians in the EU. The efforts of many political and civil society actors allowed for changes in laws in Poland and the Czech Republic, allowing them to make exceptions for large groups of populations.” an expert said.

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

Government press conferences serve a nominal function: The only independent journalists allowed to attend are foreign nationals, and this happens at very random intervals, usually at the invitation of President Lukashenka.

There is a divide between pro-state politicians and the opposition when it comes to using facts to inform political debate. The government has

deployed a variety of Russian state narratives, especially when it comes to the nature of war in Ukraine, while the mostly exiled opposition are effectively barred from dialogue with the government and instead resort to publishing one-sided messages. The exiled office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya leads regular [consultations](#) with Belarusian volunteers who joined the Ukrainian army to fight against Russia, while Belarus state actors describe them as terrorists and war criminals.

**“Any journalist and activist are now labeled terrorists, extremists, or spies. This cannot be grounded on quality information,” said one of the panel’s civil society experts.**

Government actors refer exclusively to state sources when explaining their decisions and ignore content from quality media or information from civil society. They are likely to use misinformation and to misinterpret the facts leading to their decisions. “Any journalist and activist are now labeled terrorists, extremists, or spies. This cannot be grounded on quality information,” said one of the panel’s civil society experts. For instance, the state-owned outlet [SB.BY called](#) jailed human rights defenders from the Human Constanta NGO “a spy network working under cover of volunteer work.” The persecution of those who support human rights and media work through crowdfunding has continued.

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

Given the current environment in Belarus, panelists gave this indicator extremely low scores. ‘Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the space for the government’s reaction to the actions of civil society and media has shrunk,’ an expert said. As a result, the government does not take action to address corruption. Moreover, rather than taking steps to reduce human rights and civil liberty violations, the government and its allies engage in them. Belarusian elections have historically failed to meet international standards of integrity; there is no evidence that quality news and information have any impact on the outcomes of elections.

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

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