

BELARUS



Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE
15

In 2020, two major trends influenced the flow of information in Belarus: the government’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis and the repressive aftermath of the August presidential elections. Those trends negatively affected the information space in Belarus. State institutions avoided providing factual information about the pandemic, and independent outlets were fined for spreading “fakes” on COVID-19 while pro-state media spread President Alexander Lukashenka’s dismissive narratives.

For the first time in decades, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians flocked the streets of Minsk and other major cities, demanding free and fair elections. After these protesters were brutally dispersed in August 2020, there were popular demands for investigation into police violence and release of political prisoners. However, the authorities did not relent. The government claimed that the subsequent Internet blackouts in August 2020 were the result of foreign interference, but human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch held the Government of Belarus responsible for this outage as an attempt to quash information about protests and police brutality. Subsequent online censorship deprived millions of Belarusians of access to vital information.

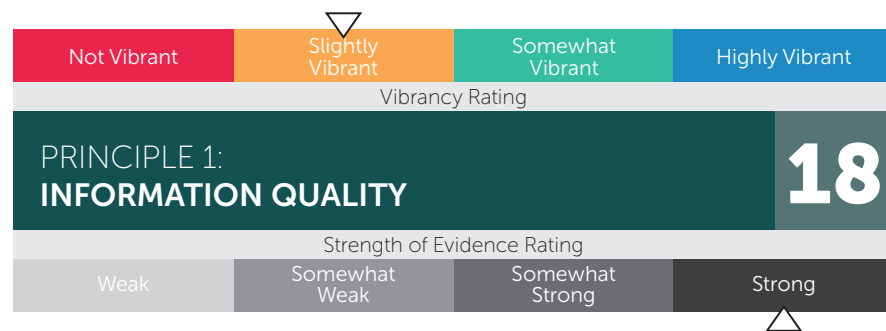
The year of 2020 set a record in the history of modern Belarus regarding repression against journalists and media. The crackdown against civil society that followed the August 2020 presidential election targeted journalists and media from the very first days of the anti-government street protests. The number of cases of repression against individual journalists and media outlets was the highest since tracking began in 1994.

However, according to Nieman Reports, 2020 was also a year of unprecedented growth in trust of independent media. The digital literacy and ICT skills of Belarusians passed the test, with Belarus becoming a world leader in the use of tools to circumvent censorship. According to infopolicy.biz, Telegram, a messenger app that combines features of Twitter and private chats and originated in Russia, became the second most popular messenger app in Belarus, making it possible for many traditional independent

media outlets to overcome web blocks. However, at the same time, it allowed for the spread of hate speech and politicized narratives from both sides of the aisle.

Belarus’ country score is one of the lowest in the 2021 VIBE study. It was challenging for panelists to assess the pre-election period, which was relatively unrestricted, as it is overshadowed by the brutal repressions and censorship of the last five months of the year. Panelists scored Principle 1 (Information Quality) principle the highest (18) due to the outstanding work of independent outlets and freelancers who reported on COVID-19, the election campaign, and the post-election protests in a professional manner. The lowest-scoring Principle 2 (Multiple Information Sources) is driven by long-standing barriers to independent broadcasters’ ability to receive in-country licenses and adverse economic conditions for print media. Despite these challenges, access to the Internet was relatively free, with only some media outlets blacklisted. However, these conditions drastically changed in August 2020 and did not improve until the end of the year, with authorities labelling an increasing number of media channels (including on social media) “extremist,” initiating administrative and criminal cases against independent sources, and massively increasing the list of the websites access to which is blocked.

Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) and Principle 4 (Transformative Action) received scores of 14 and 15, respectively. Principle 3 was the most difficult to gauge, as the regime in Belarus creates hurdles for independent polling, allowing only registered by the state pollsters to operate. On top of that, due to the change in the ways people receive online information caused by blocking websites, it is difficult for media outlets to analyze audience metrics. Despite all of this, the panelists noted that Belarusians actively use censorship circumvention tools in order to access media content and are more active than before when interacting with newsrooms, especially on topics related to health (COVID-19) and politics. Principle 4 showed the continuing trend of governmental agencies to ignore and avoid answering journalists’ or citizens’ requests for information.



Panelists scored Indicators 1 (quality information is available) and 4 (content is inclusive and diverse) scored the highest within Principle 1. The relatively unrestricted online space that existed in Belarus prior to August 2020 allowed for quality information to be produced and distributed to the wider population. Despite attempts to block access to independent media, it was still available, and the newsrooms produced quality information on a variety of topics. At the same time, there was widespread availability of pro-Kremlin Russian content on the main television channels, with anti-Western, anti-democracy, pro-Kremlin, and pro-Lukashenka propaganda intensifying after August 2020. This, combined with restrictions in income sources for independent media and a campaign from state media to discredit fact-based media and journalists, contributed to the low scores of Indicators 2 (information is based on facts), 3 (information is not intended to harm), and 5 (content is sufficiently resourced).

Quality information is produced and disseminated first and foremost by nongovernmental media, predominantly online. The government heavily regulates the broadcast industry, not allowing any independent broadcaster to get a license in Belarus, while the print market has shrunk due to both global trends and post-August 2020 repressions against independent publishers.

In the nonstate media, COVID-19 and the presidential election dominated coverage, but other topics were present too, including disability rights, gender equality, climate change, and information manipulation. Still, many of those topics were covered within the context of either COVID-19 or the election.

Due to unprecedented politicization of Belarusian audiences, for some outlets it was challenging to introduce any “common” topics in their agenda after August 2020. As one expert observed, “Even when trying to cover environmental issues, my outlet had to find ways to present them from the point of view of a political struggle.” Although there is not yet a content analysis showing the percentage of political versus everyday news coverage in independent media, experts agreed that overall, for several months following the presidential election, audiences were primarily interested in the protest movement and repressions.

The government continued to obstruct receiving or confirming information from official sources. During the first half of 2020, it restricted any data about COVID-related deaths or incidents, while the official statistics did not appear trustworthy. In the second half of the year, by blocking access to around 20 websites and depriving the leading portal TUT.BY of official mass media registration, it restricted access to information even more. Editors of independent regional outlets were advised to subscribe to state-owned media to receive any quotes.

Constraints in access to official sources for independent media, combined with intensified propaganda campaigns by state outlets, made it difficult to produce and distribute fact-based information. The legislation in Belarus suggests punishment for misinforming the public, but it does not offer equal treatment to nonstate and state media. Article 3-1 of the 2020 version of the Code of Administrative Violations was used against independent regional outlet *Media Polesye*, which was fined in spring 2020 for wrongly reporting the death of a coronavirus patient. In fall 2020, the same outlet was fined for misquoting a teacher of presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. At the same time, authorities did not follow up numerous misleading publications and broadcasts from state or Russia-based media. In the spring, Belarusian governmental media widely circulated the president’s words about dry saunas and farm work being “the cure” for COVID-19 and other statements dismissive of the pandemic that may have caused thousands of people to risk their lives. In November, state propaganda used an approach borrowed from Russia and employed actors to pretend to be interviewees: the same people claimed to have different names and professions.

Belarusian media regularly identified misinformation spread by the government, especially when it came to coverage of COVID-19 and the elections. However, the government refused to follow up and instead continued business as usual. Some websites in Belarus provide fact-checking and analysis of narratives that are spread by Belarusian and/or Russian propaganda. Those websites (e.g., <http://mediaiq.by> and <http://isans.by>) target experts and specialists as their audience. Belarusian experts on disinformation contribute to the European Union's anti-disinformation efforts as well. There is not a nationwide, popular fact-checking platform, although media and journalists engage in fact-checking in their daily work.

Because the current legislation makes media responsible for any information posted in their comments sections online, many outlets either heavily moderate the comments section or have switched off the comments entirely. In this way, they are preventing the spread of misinformation on their platforms. Media outlets also try to avoid distributing false information themselves. "When the government is looking for an excuse to issue a warning or shut you down, you have to verify everything several times to not give them real grounds for that," explained a female expert. But this is largely true only for independent media. State-owned media spread disinformation on both traditional and social media channels.

The post-election narrative from pro-state media increasingly went on to reach new, harmful levels. In its regular publications, the daily newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussiya – Belarus' Segodnya*, owned by the Presidential Administration and one of the leading outlets in the country, spread hate speech directed at pro-democratic forces and independent media.

Media often rely on help from users to distinguish true information from misinformation. "Because of the danger, journalists were prevented from covering street protests, and many newsrooms started using user-generated content, which needed to be checked. Big newsrooms started verifying them, and if some untrue information came from users, it was deleted quite quickly. The mechanism relied on other users to verify the claim," one expert said. Hate speech did sometimes appear on the

Telegram channels of large independent media organizations, mostly quoting other sources, but newsrooms generally responded quickly to remove the offending content. Meanwhile, state media continued to feature people like Grigory Azaronak, who puts portraits of opponents under the gallows on a CTV channel that is co-owned by the state. The pro-state Belarusian Union of Journalists has an ethics committee with designated tasks, but they do not evaluate things related to the political crisis. "They mostly provide opinions on the bills and whether members are loyal or not loyal to the government," an expert explained.

A November 2020 analysis by Belarusian State University Professor Inga Voyush of SB.BY's columnist Andrei Mukavozchyk found that in the summer of 2020, 120 of his 200 published articles contained derogatory narratives. "One of the instruments that the author uses is so-called hate speech, which allows the researchers to mark [his] publications as propagandist." Mukavozchyk, prominently featured by one of the most circulated state newspapers in the country, used hate speech against the opposition, representatives of foreign nations, other journalists, scientists, and artists.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The Belarusian nongovernmental organization (NGO) Journalists for Tolerance monitored 26 outlets from July to November 2020 and found 21 percent of all stories related to LGBTIQ topics contained hate speech. The leading outlets were state-owned SB.BY and the state-leaning *Vecherniy Mogilev*, but also the Russian-owned Belarusian version of *AiF*, which has both a print edition and website. Established independent media were more restrained in their narratives—as one of the experts mentioned, "often in fear of disproportionate repressions."

However, the new type of “media” in the form of Telegram channels/accounts often did not follow the same behavior. When pro-governmental sources provoked them, they answered in kind with hate speech and the dehumanization of “opponents,” several experts noted. This resulted in an incident in October 2020 in which Apple demanded Telegram delete three accounts on its platform that spread the personal data of police officers in Belarus. Telegram has been routinely criticized for not reacting swiftly to hate speech or extremist content during recent crises in both the region and globally. Russian media have played a significant role in the post-election crackdown: representatives of RT.com and other Russian outlets came to Minsk to replace state media workers who went on strike in summer 2020.

The dominance of the pandemic and election campaign coverage, plus the resulting repressions, made the content offerings of many media outlets politicized and narrowly focused. The narratives about minorities and vulnerable groups appeared mostly within the context of health or politics. But the rights of those groups were not central in the campaigns of any of the candidates running and thus were not prominently featured by the media. Several protests by people with disabilities resulted in repressions against the Office of People with Disabilities and the arrest of its leader Siarhei Drazdouski, which was reported as part of the overall coverage of the crackdown on human rights.

In terms of the representation of women in non-state newsrooms, many outlets are traditionally female staffed, including within leadership, but this, according to one of the experts, is the result of lower wages in the independent media sector rather than progress in gender equality. Independent media outlets try to provide a balanced picture, although the regime’s representatives are sometimes portrayed negatively. The female perspective is rarely presented equally: women are more often asked for a comment from their personal point of view but not the professional point of view. For example, the female presidential candidate was asked about her favorite meatball recipe.

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National minorities are rarely presented, especially Ukrainians and Poles. Ukrainians are vilified by state propaganda, which follows the Kremlin narrative, and are not given a chance to speak. The Poles were not represented in 2020 and then in the beginning of 2021 became the next victims of political repression, with Andrzej Poczobut, a journalist of Polish origin, jailed.

Access to information in minority languages is limited; there are some Internet-based outlets and publications with small circulations. “If you’re not a member of this minority group, you won’t know about those media,” an expert said. “State TV and radio doesn’t represent any national minorities except for Russians. Religious communities are discriminated against as well; in the fall of 2020, TV broadcasts of Sunday Catholic prayers stopped on ‘technical grounds’ while Orthodox Christian ones continue. Those who are not Catholics or Orthodox don’t have a chance for their sermons to be broadcast,” observed an expert.

In state media, the political opposition is totally underrepresented—they are portrayed only negatively or in a position of weakness.

The insufficient resources for quality content production could be one of the reasons for the limited content offerings. The system of state funding to media in Belarus is highly centralized and politicized. The government has been providing state-owned media with roughly \$60 million in subsidies¹ annually, of which the biggest share goes to state-owned television. Funding of independent media is restricted by economic inequality (price difference for newsprint and distribution, inability to be registered as Belarus-based broadcasters, limiting web advertising by blocking access to websites), as well as one of the strictest laws on foreign aid. The latter is going to be amended in 2021 to include the definition of a “foreign agent.”²

The media’s share in the online advertising market was 32 percent,

1 <https://reform.by/188247-pravitelstvo-potratit-v-2021-godu-na-smi-156-mln-rublej>

2 <https://112.international/politics/belarus-wants-to-adopt-law-on-foreign-agents-59013.html>

a decrease from 36 percent in 2019.³ In contrast to other countries around the world, Belarus did not lockdown during the pandemic in 2020, and its economy did not directly suffer due to COVID. Moreover, despite limitations in the neighboring countries, businesses were able to move their goods across the borders. However, events in Belarus after the election caused many companies to revisit their advertising and investment plans in Belarus. This intensified when the Lukashenko regime started targeting IT companies, along with small businesses that supported the protestors. As a result and in combination with economic sanctions imposed against Belarus by the EU and US, the country's advertising market is less attractive. However, performance advertising has grown to 68 percent of all online advertising, which includes advertising that is targeted through social media. Advertising placement continues to be politicized, with the government informally advising local companies to avoid independent media.

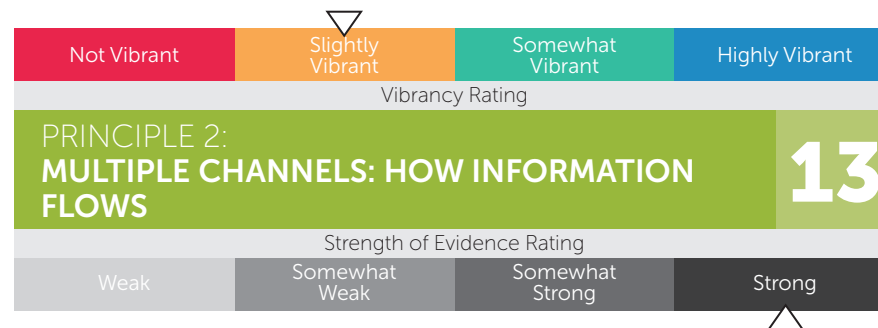
As experts noted, the volatility of the political situation has also influenced advertising contracts from international companies as well, who increasingly choose short-term contracts over long-term ones. Blocking access to more than 20 independent news websites deprives those outlets of click- and audience-related advertising revenues. Independent media outlets have increasingly invested in crowdfunding as a way to overcome revenue shortfalls. *Nasha Niva* runs a reader's club, which is based on a membership model, while *Imenamag.by* was able to collect around \$200,000 through subscriptions and donations for the work of its newsroom.

The EU's adoption of several rounds of sanctions against Belarus has resulted in retaliative measures by the Belarusian government against neighboring countries' embassies and those—including among media and bloggers—whom it considers their “proxies.” On top of that, limitations on leaving the country, presumably to contain coronavirus and imposed in late 2020, have deprived some of the media of access to funds abroad.

Journalists' wages have suffered since the beginning of the post-

3 <https://marketing.by/analitika/itogi-belaruskogo-rynka-internet-reklamy-za-2020-kakie-kanaly-i-klienty-pokazali-rost-a-kakie-padeni/?mobile=N>

election crackdown. Media Solidarity Belarus reports that over the last four months in 2020, it provided support to more than 30 outlets whose incomes dropped. Several regional outlets, including *Brestskaya Gazeta* and *Gazeta Slonimskaya*, had to shut down print editions due to the state's unwillingness to print them and continue to run online only. Minsk-based *Narodnaya Volya* is no longer published due to governmental pressure and now maintains an online version.



Within Principle 2, the average score is a result of a significant gap between the more highly scored indicators that describe the ICT infrastructure and those lower scored indicators that describe a lack of equality in access to and the distribution of information between independent and governmental media or limitations in rights to create, share, and consume information.

The rights of Belarusians to create, share, and consume information as well as their access to channels of information have been severely limited with the Internet shutdowns in August 2020 and the introduction of the most popular Telegram channels on the government's list of “extremists” in October 2020.⁴

Legal protections for journalists formally exist but are rarely practiced. Journalists' rights are protected by the Law on Mass Media that regulates both the work of the outlets and individual journalists. Journalists working for foreign media can do so only if they are accredited, but the accreditations of most Belarusian citizens employed by foreign outlets were withdrawn in October 2020 and not re-issued. In the fall of

4 <https://www.article19.org/resources/belarus-nexta-crackdown/>

2020, some independent outlets published the accounts of victims of beatings tortured in the aftermath of the post-election protests, as well as articles about bonuses paid to the perpetrators of the violence. This led to a number of outlets receiving warnings and others having their sites blocked. In December 2020, a court decision resulted in the portal TUT.BY losing its media license, and in November 2020, police arrested journalist Katsiaryna Andreeva and camerawoman Daria Chultsova while they were livestreaming street protests from a private apartment. Their subsequent trial led to two years in jail.

Although governmental information freely flows on a variety of platforms, including social media, non-governmental media are forced to exist in a parallel reality. “In my 20 years of observing press freedom violations, this has been the worst year so far,” said one expert. “This year’s pressure is systemic—it concerns all sectors of the media market. Five times more journalists were detained than in 2017, and there have been at least 62 cases of violence against journalists, and I am sure we did not register them all, as well as criminal cases against journalists. But the year wasn’t just marked by violence or detentions. Dozens of websites, including BAJ, have been blocked; printed media, such as *Narodnaya Volya*, *SN+*, *Belgazeta*, and *KP v Belarusi*, have been denied printing and then distribution.”

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As far as existing infrastructure for information flow, Belarus has a multiplicity of channels to receive and share news. According to Hootsuite’s 2020 Digital Report, 82.9 percent of Belarusians used the Internet, while 41.3 percent were active social media users.⁵ The price of Internet connection is affordable and available in nearly all geographical locations, although the quality of connection varies. An unlimited 3G/LTE monthly package costs around \$10 through A1⁶ and MTS,⁷ the leading mobile providers, and broadband connection from the state company

5 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-belarus>

6 <https://www.a1.by/ru/plans/c/tarify-dlya-smartfonov>

7 https://www.mts.by/services/mobile/tariffs/for_smartphone/bezlimitishche_plus/

Beltelecom for private users costs \$7–\$10 monthly.⁸

Government information is widely available via state television and radio (<http://tvr.by>), which are present in the majority of Belarusian households, and state-funded newspapers and their portals, such as SB.BY, zviazda.by, and Respublika.by. Beltelecom’s interactive digital television channel, Zala, is available in 1.8 million households, which accounts for around half of all households in Belarus.⁹ According to the Ministry of Information, there are 214 newspapers and 207 magazines, 137 radio programs/channels, 44 television programs/channels, and 27 websites that are state-owned. The majority of the others, experts note, do not undertake the risk to publish a news agenda that would counteract the government’s position.

Among leading independent news channels there are Belarus-based portals and news sites, such as TUT.BY, Onliner, *Nasha Niva*, *Gazetaby*, and *BelaPAN* news agency, but also exiled or hybrid outlets, such as European Radio for Belarus (Euroradio) or kyky.org. There is also a network of independent regional publishers, United Mass Media, who cooperate on programmatic and business levels and continue to play an important role in the Belarusian periphery. The existence of this diverse independent media market has made it possible to create quality content despite numerous

repressions. The independent outlets are not owned by conglomerates or oligarchs. Some of them belong to the same owner, such as kyky.org and thevillage.me (their owner was incarcerated for his alleged support of protests, while the outlets had to emigrate), or European Radio for Belarus and the weekly *Belorusy i Rynok*. The only dominant player in the media ownership market is the state.

Belarus’ legislation provides for the right to access information for media and citizens, but these rights are increasingly limited. For example, although the law does not require special accreditation from media to

8 <https://beltelecom.by/private/internet/high-speed>

9 <https://www.belta.by/society/view/televizionnyj-reklamnyj-aljjans-vse-uchastniki-rynka-dolzheny-imet-ravnyj-dostup-k-issledovaniyam-379400-2020/>

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

attend press conferences or court trials, in the reality online media and registered independent media are often denied access to those events. Moreover, while the Constitution of Belarus currently guarantees access to information about events of public, social or cultural life for all citizens, the Law on Mass Media allows authorities to limit access to certain type of information, including but not limited to state, commercial, private or other legally protected secrets and details on law enforcement

investigations. At the same time, more than 60 governmental institutions have a right to determine that certain information is ‘secret’.¹⁰

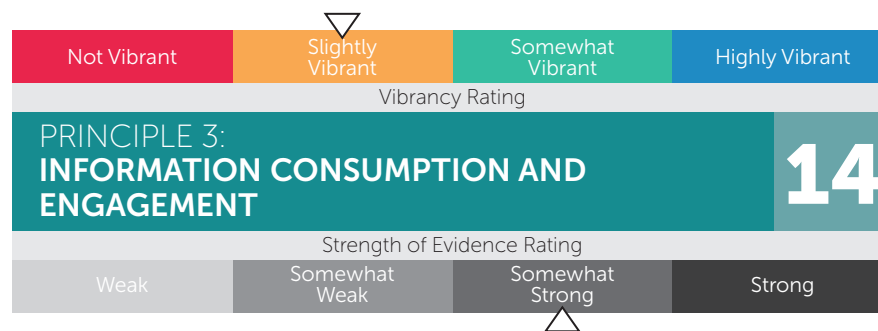
The process for spectrum allocation is transparent but not fair. The market entry and tax structure for media remain unfair, compared with other types of companies, and independent media face more disadvantages than state media. Unlike other businesses, media newsrooms cannot be located in residential homes, and individual entrepreneurs are not allowed to publish any media, including online outlets. An editor-in-chief of a media outlet who applies for registration is required to have at least five years of media management experience. A broadcast media editor-in-chief must pass a special exam on broadcast law knowledge, the technical settings of radio and television broadcasting, and advertising law for his or her outlet to receive a dissemination license. Such licenses are not given to independent broadcasters, like European Radio for Belarus, Radio Racja, or the television channel Belsat TV (run from Poland).

Belarus does not have public-service media. State media provide some educational news and programming but are heavily limited in their

¹⁰ <https://baj.by/ru/content/dostup-k-informacii>

editorial freedom. Several dozen workers from state media left their jobs in 2020 to protest the level of censorship.

There has been discussion among the experts about whether Telegram channels that serve both national and local communities can be considered “media.” Most of these channels are run by activists or journalists who do not hide their political affiliations and, consequently, do not prioritize their independence. There are multiple incidents of the right to information’s being disregarded, including the arrests of journalists from Belsat TV and TUT.BY while they were on assignment. According to statistics from the Belarusian Association of Journalists,¹¹ authorities detained journalists 477 times in Belarus throughout 2020.



Within Principle 3, panelists scored highly the indicator related to Belarusians’ ability to safely use the Internet and circumvent censorship. The overall score of this principle would have been higher if there had been consensus among panel experts on what to consider “local community media.” The majority of panelists marked the indicator related to them as not applicable, although some of them considered nascent Telegram chats as future media of this type. Those who had another opinion were considering niche media or new hyperlocal chats and channels as such.

One expert noted, “The main evidence that Belarusian citizens are advanced in media and information literacy is the total downloads of Psiphon, a tool that helps circumvent web censorship. Between August 9 and 11, 2020, when the Internet was nearly fully shut down, Belarusians

¹¹ <https://baj.by/en/analytics/figures-year-repression-media-and-journalists-belarus-2020>

managed to download this application around 2.7 million times, which is impressive for a country of 9 million.” However, when it comes to privacy protection, post-election events demonstrated a severe lack thereof. “It’s not about the disadvantages of legislation but rather about its blatant violation. When the police beat up or torture detainees to learn their passwords to personal devices and social media, they are breaking the law, but they still do it,” one expert said.

Independent media outlets have access to digital protection instruments and tools, and they have passed trainings enabling them to resist hacking attempts, as well as secure their information. National outlets widely use VPN, two-factor authentication, and encryption; they share tips with audiences on how to protect oneself digitally. Regional media, however, have fewer skills in ICT protection. As one expert said, “During a search, on a confiscated computer of one of the regional outlets, there was a lot of sensitive information not only about the outlet in question but about other regional media.”

Media literacy and the ability to protect privacy were regularly tested in the second half of 2020. Government actors used Telegram channels, both official (Pul Pervogo) and unofficial (Zhelttye Slivy, Shtab Onoshko) to publish degrading and defamatory content about members of the political opposition and civil society actors, while at the same time local communities on Telegram were often a target for hacker attacks, resulting in arrests of their administrators.¹²

The government does not proactively develop media literacy skills. According to the EU Neighbours report, in 2020, “As the government kept ignoring the outbreak of the Coronavirus and did not impose a nationwide lockdown, there were no positive policy interventions observed in the country to promote digital skills or improve remote learning. The good practices so far include the joint support of the international organizations. For instance, the EU, Red Cross, UNICEF, UNFPA, and the World Bank provided a wide range of digital trainings for teachers,

12 <https://euroradio.fm/en/can-police-hack-your-telegram>

“Nonstate media rely on audience data and feedback, while the state media are more closed and never acknowledge their mistakes,” said one expert.

pensioners, people living in remote areas, people with disabilities and special needs.” Another sign of the state’s animus toward media literacy was the arrest of six media managers of Press Club, an educational NGO that runs a Media IQ project aimed at helping to identify Russian propaganda narratives and other manipulative content in Belarusian media.¹³

There are no established local or state initiatives to enhance public knowledge about misinformation or fake news. Moreover, freedom of expression is heavily limited by media law and Internet legislation. As one expert put it, “There are no platforms to foster discussion and influence decision-making. Instead, the state makes them up in order to imitate the dialogue about already pre-determined political steps.”

There were several initiatives by the state aimed at demonstrating dialogues between the authorities and the population, such as face-to-face meetings in Minsk with pro-Lukashenka loyalists or public conversations spurred by activist Yury Voskresenskiy’s release from pre-trial detention¹⁴. This “roundtable of democratic forces” was preceded by a visit by President Alexander Lukashenko to the pre-trial detention center, where his main political opponents were held, and having a ‘dialogue’ with them. All of these attempts are

13 <https://cpj.org/2021/01/belarus-authorities-detain-at-least-6-in-tax-investigation-of-local-press-club/>

14 <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=263221&lang=ru>

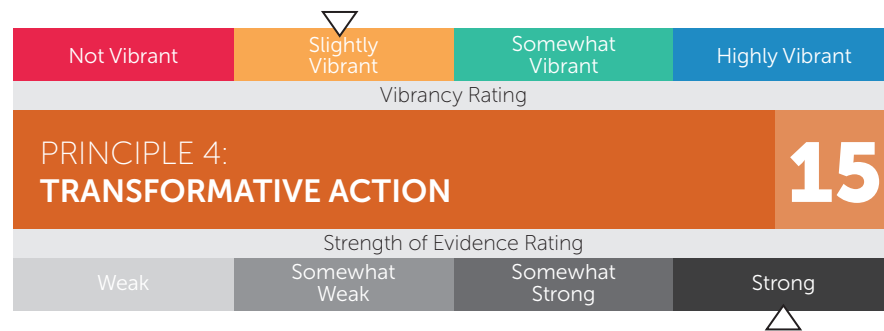
Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

top-down, and they do not provide space for inclusive participation of the civil society or nonstate media.

But experts said nonstate media nevertheless attempt to engage with their audiences using a variety of online tools, including comments sections on websites, live chats and live streaming shows, and analyses of audiences’ behavior in real time. It is possible to participate in most of those streams ad hoc and with no prior registration. “Nonstate media rely on audience data and feedback, while the state media are more closed and never acknowledge their mistakes,” one female expert said. Amendments on the Law on Internet from late 2018 make media outlets responsible for the content of comments on their web pages and ban anonymous comments, which have subsequently restricted audiences’ engagement.

The majority of experts questioned the existence of community media in Belarus, though some suggested that such outlets somewhat exist. This might be related to the relatively low spread of the community media model in Belarus. The nascent Telegram channels that have formed around micro-communities have not yet transformed into media outlets, and traditional media mostly cover larger regional or thematic audiences.



The most polarized results for VIBE in Belarus relate to Principle 4. The indicators relating to individuals, civil society, and (mostly independent) media, score 20 or higher. However, indicators relating to state actions, public policy, and democratic rights, score below 10.

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Until mid-August 2020, there were attempts by pro-state actors to cross ideological lines. For example, the state-controlled Belarusian Union of Journalists had a meeting in the Belarusian parliament with the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) in order to design a joint statement condemning excessive post-election violence. On August 13, 2020, more than 250 state and nonstate journalists jointly signed an open letter requesting an end to the violence. But in the following months, the government took a clear ideological position and included media and journalists in its list of targets. BAJ’s managers became the focus of criminal

investigations, while officials searched the organization’s office and seized equipment in early 2021. Moreover, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic did not enhance information-sharing. Interviewed experts mentioned extreme defensiveness by the Belarusian state institutions on the issues related to public health.

Non-partisan media exist among magazines and websites that refuse to cover politics, non-state news-oriented actors such as BelaPAN news agency, or leading websites such as tut.by, nn.by, euroradio.pl, onliner.by and others. At the same time, the government does not consider these websites non-partisan and persecutes them as its ideological enemies, e.g. by withdrawing licenses, imposing fines etc. Sports website tribuna.com was blocked by the authorities as soon as it started covering statements of sportswomen and men who did not support the violence

after 2020 protests¹⁵. “The moment one dares to provide balanced information about the current affairs the authorities consider them taking sides”, a female editor interviewed for the chapter said.

Despite these obstacles, non-governmental media are able to keep in contact with their engaged audiences. The growth of the Telegram platform’s users has brought soaring audience figures to many outlets, and as a result thematic chats have formed on these platforms. Through these chats and special chatbots, people send user-generated content, suggest topics for new shows and articles, and discuss publications. Live streaming on YouTube by svaboda.org, belsat.eu, and euroradio.pl is routinely accompanied by reading out and commenting on inputs from the viewers. Discussions on those platforms are led by people with varied ideological stances and views. “Sometimes it was evident that some of the participants were third party-sponsored trolls, but often there was a meaningful conversation among supporters and opponents of the regime,” a media analyst noted. As a result, trust in independent media significantly grew¹⁶.

Despite an ideological standoff, Belarusians were able to demonstrate their ability to make choices based on quality information. “In spring 2020, when President Alexander Lukashenka called COVID-19 ‘a psychosis,’ many urban dwellers chose to self-isolate themselves despite the official news,” one expert said. Belarusians registering en masse to the Russia-based independent election watchdog GOLOS platform also demonstrated public distrust in official information. Citizens would ultimately send photographs of their voting bulletins to GOLOS in August 2020. The historic protests that gathered hundreds of thousands of people illustrated people’s reliance on quality information.

GOLOS, as well as dozens of other platforms that united Belarusians

15 <https://telegraf.by/sport-news/mininform-zablokiroval-tribuna-com-reportery-bez-granic-pomogli-zapustit-zerkalo-kotoroe-dostupno-bez-vpn/>

16 <https://www.dw.com/ru/issledovanie-lish-chetvert-belorusov-doverjajut-prezidentu-strany/a-56514991>

for the sake of civic action, were based on years of expertise from civil society actors, both formal and informal, combined with the creative potential of the well-developed IT sector and a large Belarusian diaspora. When the crowdfunding initiative #BY_help started in 2017, it celebrated \$50,000 in donations as success. In 2021, the same initiative

“The moment one dares to provide balanced information about the current affairs the authorities consider them taking sides”, said a female editor.

collected more than \$3 million¹⁷ to support tortured and injured protesters. Similar initiatives, such as BySOL and Media Solidarity Belarus, demonstrated huge fundraising potential as well. The latter, set up in September 2020 to cover the most urgent needs of independent media outlets and journalists, has raised more than

\$300,000 and distributed two-thirds of funds.

The government, however, launched an offensive against producers of quality information and went further to deprive Belarusians of their democratic rights.

Press conferences continued to be limited primarily to state media. When TUT.BY lost media outlet status and the government blocked the websites of independent media, reporters from those outlets faced difficulties in receiving official comments and attending press briefings.

The government does not refer to quality media, nor quote them in presenting its decisions or reacting to criticism. Some independent media even received recommendations to subscribe to the state-owned outlets to get reactions from local government. Government actors often use misinformation when explaining their decisions—for example, referencing the supposed plan by the West and NATO to invade Belarus, criticizing the “extremist” nature of paying the fines for protestors, or calling independent media and pro-democratic forces puppets.

The government does not react to the media’s uncovering of corruption or wrongdoing, although it praises the work of the police in uncovering such cases. When sources reveal human rights violations, the

17 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/22/we-raised-2m-in-days-the-donations-helping-protesters-in-belarus>

government then attempts to silence those sources (e.g., by directing them to remove publications about human rights violations, as in the case of Naviny.by and *Nasha Niva*).¹⁸ As such, it is difficult to say such reporting reduces the number of human rights violations. There was no evidence of quality information contributing to free and fair elections and, in fact, quite the opposite occurred. However, it contributed to people's awareness of the widespread election fraud and subsequent violence against peaceful protesters.

The panel was not possible due to security concerns, but 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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¹⁸ <https://euroradio.fm/ru/miniform-otvetil-za-cto-zablokiroval-sayty-nasha-niva-i-navinyby>