

BELARUS

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1) What is the basic political system in your country (e.g. democratic, semi-authoritarian, authoritarian or other type of hybrid regime)?

Belarus is a presidential republic with an authoritarian regime. Since 1994, Alexander Lukashenko has been the president of Belarus. After the referendum of 2004, the two-term limit for presidency was eliminated. In December 2010, Lukashenko started his fourth term. OSCE observers reported a rigged election. Thousands of people participated in street protests in Minsk, hundreds were arrested. The EU and U.S. resumed sanctions, including a visa ban and asset freeze against senior Belarusian officials.

2) What are the main features of your media landscape? (private/public, print/broadcast/internet usage, ownership concentration, government control, etc.)

According to official information, as of May 2010, 651 newspapers and 585 magazines were published in Belarus. More than two-thirds of them are technically private but they are under strong state control and their owners have some sort of relationship with the state. The daily circulation of national newspapers is more than 650,000 copies. State regional press circulation is about 946,000 copies. Some newspapers are self-supporting, but all official national newspapers are subsidized, while opposition print media have faced increased pressure and have been forced to change name, close down, or publish abroad. Since 2009, according to a new media law, all media except those which have only an online version have to register with the Information Ministry. From now on, after two “warnings” the Information Ministry can suspend any newspaper. And the reason behind a warning can be that media coverage does not “correspond to reality” or “threatens the interests of the state.” So all newspapers have to censor themselves.

At present only a few newspapers with a non-state position have their printed versions. But their circulation is not more than 20,000 copies in comparison with 500,000 copies of SB- Belarus Today (its owner is the Presidential Administration).

As of 1 May 2010, there were 156 radio broadcasting stations and 77 television broadcasting stations. The majority of public radio stations are run by the local authorities. There were 29 FM radio stations, but in January 2011, the Information Minister withdrew the license of Avtoradio, a popular independent station, because of “broadcasting appeals to extremism” (it broadcast a campaign message from presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov. He said that the “destiny of the nation [would be decided] on the street and not in the kitchens”).

There are four national TV broadcasters in Belarus including the international satellite channel Belarus TV. All of them are state controlled. International channels, including Euronews, BBC, and CNN are broadcast via cable TV.

Almost all opposition media now work through the Internet although the Internet is also under tight control. Websites must be registered with the Information Ministry. Therefore, some resources have to use foreign domain names.

3) Where does your country come in the rankings of Freedom House (on freedom of the press) and Reporters Without Borders?

According to [Freedom House](#), Belarus's total score is 92 (189th rank among 196 countries), classified as not free. "Belarus, dubbed "Europe's last dictatorship" is headed by the former president of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus, who keeps a tight grip on society and the press. A burgeoning Internet has only recently come to the attention of the censoring authorities", Freedom House describes it.

The [Reporters Without Borders' report puts Belarus](#) in 154th position among 178 countries. In a country survey it was mentioned that Belarus' level of press freedom remained extremely restricted. "Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of the press, criticism of the president and government is considered a criminal offense, and libel convictions can result in prison sentences or high fines. Judges and police officers regularly used politicized court rulings and obscure regulations to harass independent newspapers during the year".

4) Would you broadly agree with their characterisation of your situation?

Their very good reports covered all cases of state pressure on journalists and political opponents of the regime.

5) a) what are the main challenges facing the media in your country in the next five years (economic, political, technological etc)?

Lukashenko has been reelected, so in the next five years the main challenges for Belarusian media are political. Non-state media can be easily closed down based on an Information Ministry's order. Another popular method to stop any media outlet is to deny it access to advertising.

The pressure on the state media is also growing. The presenter of state TV channel *ONT* Sergey Dorofeev was banned from presenting the discussion program "Vybar" (Choice) after a program on the Election Day when he had openly questioned the Central Elections Commission Chairwoman Lidiya Ermoshina. She was angry because of Dorofeev's questions about violations of the law during the election and about people's right to stage demonstrations, so she left the studio.

b) what are the main limits on the practice of a free press in your country, based on your own practical experience of working there?

Political limits are the same for all journalists of non-state media. The main problem of business journalists is complete isolation of state agencies and state-controlled enterprises from reporters as well as reluctance of private business to become public.

6) What are the main roles that new media play in your country?

Non-governmental Belarusian media were unavailable to most Belarusians, because printed versions are not allowed into the official distribution network. Therefore, the increasing opportunity to have access to the Internet is the only available way to communicate with the audience. Social networks become more and more popular and help spread information. The growth of online media audience helps to attract advertisers and create self-supporting resources.