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Freedom of the Press 2016 - Belarus

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Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Legal Environment: 29 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Political Environment: 34 / 40 (↑2) (0 = best, 40 = worst)

Economic Environment: 28 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Press Freedom Score: 91 / 100 (↑2) (0 = best, 100 = worst)

Quick Facts

Population: 9,524,247

Net Freedom Status: Not Free

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 59.0%

Overview

Belarus's media environment remained one of the most hostile in Europe in 2015. The government exercises almost total control over mainstream media through legal restrictions and discriminatory economic regulations, which have been extended to online outlets. Numerous journalists were detained and fined during the year, but reporters were able to cover the October presidential election without significant physical interference.

Key Developments

- The authorities blocked the online journal KYKY.org in June, forcing it to remove articles that contradicted official narratives about World War II.
- More than two dozen fines were imposed on journalists during the year, with the average amount approaching the average monthly salary of workers in Belarus.

Legal Environment: 29 / 30

Belarus's constitution provides for freedom of the press, but the legal framework as a whole remains highly restrictive for the media. Criticism of the president and governmental officials is a criminal offense that carries penalties including imprisonment and fines. In August 2015, an investigation was launched into an article published by the independent newspaper *Slonimskaya Hazeta*, which allegedly defamed President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Provisions of several other

laws, including the media law and legislation banning "extremist" content, allow for arbitrary prosecution of reporters and the suppression of dissent.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) documented 19 cases in which journalists were detained by police while conducting their professional duties during 2015. Many of them were targeted for contributing to foreign media outlets without accreditation, and some were detained repeatedly. For instance, Kastus Zhukowski, a freelance reporter, was detained four times during the year. Journalists were fined in 28 cases, for a total of 147 million Belarusian rubles (\$9,500). The average fine, 5.3 million rubles, is close to the average monthly salary of 6.8 million rubles.

There are no effective legal guarantees of public access to government records. The Ministry of Information serves as the country's media regulator, and its procedures for licensing and registration are opaque and politicized. Legal amendments that extended rules for print media to online outlets came into force in January 2015. They were adopted urgently in December 2014, without public discussion or consultations with the media industry or civil society. The changes give the Ministry of Information authority to block access to any website deemed to be breaking the law if it has received two warnings within 12 months. Prohibited content includes information that "may harm the national interests of the Republic of Belarus." The ministry does not need a court's permission to restrict access, and there is no legal procedure to appeal its decisions. Other provisions of the amendments increased online outlets' legal responsibility for content, including user comments.

Political Environment: 34 / 40 (↑2)

The state-dominated mainstream media consistently promote Lukashenka's image and minimize the political opposition. This was especially clear during the 2015 presidential election campaign, when the incumbent received the majority of coverage and airtime. Most private outlets based in Belarus practice some degree of self-censorship, especially when reporting on the family and business interests of Lukashenka and his closest allies.

Bloggers and online journalists produce more independent or critical content, and the influence of internet-based media relative to mainstream outlets has grown in recent years. The government has responded by expanding its efforts to censor digital media. The state-owned telecommunications firm Beltelecom controls all international data transfers and blocks some critical websites, while the state security service reportedly monitors internet communications.

In June 2015, the Ministry of Information ordered the online publication KYKY.org to be blocked for disseminating articles that contradicted the official position on World War II. The website was reinstated after its editorial board removed the articles in question. news websites and social-networking platforms were subject to blocking and cyberattacks on several occasions during 2015. In October, distributed denial-of-service attacks were launched against BelaPAN, an independent news agency, and its Naviny.by website. The attacks began after the publication of a critical article about an event attended by Lukashenka, and stopped after a few days. According to the Ministry of Information, 40 websites were officially blocked in Belarus during 2015, including 18 for content related to drug trafficking and 11 for distributing extremist materials.

The government and its supporters have often subjected foreign media, local independent journalists, and press freedom activists to various forms of harassment and intimidation. However, conditions improved somewhat ahead of the 2015 presidential election, which the government viewed as an opportunity to burnish its diplomatic and economic relations with Europe and the United States. Arrests and fines of journalists notably dropped off after independent reporters publicly complained of the harassment in August.

Economic Environment: 28 / 30

The government maintains a virtual monopoly on domestic broadcast media. Only state or indirectly state-owned television stations broadcast nationwide. Belarusian-language broadcasters transmitting from Poland, including Belsat television, Radio Racyja, and European Radio for Belarus, employ Belarusian journalists with foreign financial support. Although some three-quarters of officially registered print outlets are privately owned, few produce original journalistic content. Foreign ownership of media outlets in Belarus is restricted to 20 percent.

According to the BAJ, over 85 percent of Belarusians use television to obtain information, while 57 percent get their news online. About 62 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2015. Beltelecom, the state-run telecommunications company, retains a monopoly over internet domains, controls the telecommunications infrastructure, and is by far the largest internet service provider.

Independent media outlets work within severe legislative and economic constraints, making it difficult to compete with state-owned media. The amendments to media legislation passed in 2014 oblige all media distributors to be registered, placing even greater pressure on independent outlets. Most such outlets use private distributors to disseminate their publications, as state-run enterprises often refuse to distribute them for politically motivated reasons. In 2015, Belsayuzdruk, the state-owned distributor, and Belposhta, the national postal service, continued to refuse to sell or deliver several independent newspapers.

The authorities discourage advertisers from doing business with critical outlets. In 2015, the advertising market shrank by at least 30 percent amid broader economic difficulties in the country, and the contraction had the greatest impact on independent media. Over 70 percent of Belarus's gross domestic product comes from state-owned companies, and their employees are required to subscribe to state newspapers. These companies also face administrative pressure to advertise only in state or state-friendly media. State-owned media are supported by tax exemptions and direct subsidies from the state budget. In 2015, the government spent 804 billion Belarusian rubles (\$52 million) to support state media.

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