

Media environment in Belarus

SUMMARY

The media situation in Belarus has never been easy. With Aliaksandr Lukashenka being elected president of the country for the first time in 1994, the necessary reforms to provide media freedom have never materialised. Instead, over the years various laws have lessened the rights of independent journalists and imposed limits on both traditional and electronic media.

Following the August 2020 presidential election, which ignited a brutal crackdown against the democratic opposition, the situation has worsened. Harassment, a hijacking, and politically motivated jail terms, both short and long, intimidate Belarusians who want to exchange ideas, report wrongdoing or fight for freedom of expression and freedom for the country. In January 2022, the Belarusian Association of Journalists confirmed the presence of at least 32 journalists in Belarusian jails.

On the positive side, new electronic media cannot be banned effectively and absolutely. While the regime slowly expands its presence on the internet, Belarusians trust independent media more and use it more eagerly. However, society's distancing of itself from traditional state-controlled media is increasingly met with an angry reaction from the state apparatus, which in turn further tightens related laws.

The European Union, and the European Parliament in particular, actively support independent media and civil society in Belarus, and the Council of the EU and the Parliament both address the challenges to media freedom in the country. Financial help is also provided to Belarus and was even increased at the end of 2021, with priority areas of support including 'systematically repressed' independent media.



IN THIS BRIEFING

- > Background
- > Old and new challenges faced by media
- > Media popularity
- > EU support for Belarusian media workers and civil society
- > European Parliament activities

This Briefing has been drafted at the request of a Member of the European Economic and Social Committee, in the framework of the cooperation agreement between the European Parliament and the Committee.

Background

The media environment in Belarus is and has traditionally been hostile to independent journalists.

In 2019, the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) placed Belarus on the list of the 10 most censored countries in the world. Moreover, the 2019 [report](#) of IREX's [Media Sustainability Index](#), which provides in-depth analyses of the conditions for independent media, deemed the Belarusian press to be 'unsustainable' and 'anti-free', as the government obstructs media development and opposes a 'free media system'. However, the report noted that Belarus had some media companies that could be perceived as 'generally professional, free and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives', despite the governmental pressure and economic instability.

The situation has worsened dramatically following the falsified presidential elections in [August 2020](#) and a brutal crackdown against Belarusian society, including its independent media. A [Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\) report](#) released in 2021 called Belarus 'the most dangerous country in Europe for media personnel', as prominent journalists and bloggers receive threats, are subject to violence and are frequently arrested. At the same time, the [2021 World Press Freedom Index](#) ranked Belarus in 158th place out of 180 countries due to imminent threats, which are faced continuously by critical journalists, arrests, and censorship of information. The [Belarusian Association of Journalists](#) (BAJ) concluded that, in 2021, there were 113 cases where journalists were detained, 29 journalists were subjected to an administrative arrest, and 146 journalists' houses and offices were raided.

The biggest national printed newspapers are state-owned Belarus Segodnya and Zviazda, while the officially permitted TV stations include TV ONT, NTV Belarus and Belarus 1. The most popular blocked websites, such as [belaruspartisan.by](#) and [belsat.eu](#), and Telegram channels like [NEXTA Live](#) or [Belarus Golovnogo Mozga](#), can be viewed thanks to TOR connections and virtual private networks (VPNs).

Old and new challenges faced by media

As a 'not free' country, according to [Freedom House's 2021 report](#), state-controlled media outlets continue to dominate the information sphere and independent media and journalists regularly experience harassment, raids and even imprisonment.

Legislative and administrative obstacles to free media

In 2008, the Belarusian government [approved](#) a Law on Mass Media which secures the state's control over information concerning political, social and economic developments in the country. This law makes the [Ministry of Information of Belarus](#) (MIB) the primary body for regulating media in the country. In addition, the Criminal Code includes anti-defamatory [provisions](#) to protect the 'honour and dignity' of high-ranking public officials; this law is [used](#) in politically motivated [cases](#).

The [Law of the Republic of Belarus of 5 January 2015](#) determined that information published on the internet would likewise be subject to the Criminal Code. The amendments to the Law on Mass Media approved in [June 2018](#) further tightened the legal environment for media, with the introduction of voluntary registration of online resources, the possibility to block social media and the tightening of rules to receive accreditation, among other things.

The procedure to register is cumbersome and costly. Online media which have [not registered](#) still need to fulfil the obligations for registered media, but are excluded from media rights, as their employees are not considered to be journalists. These include the right to accreditation and a right to keep their sources' identity secret. Moreover, under the June 2018 amendments, website owners are legally responsible for the content of their comments sections and are obliged to provide the technical possibility to identify the authors of these comments.

Aftermath of the 2020 election

The events of August 2020

Following the [election of 9 August 2020](#), the Belarusian authorities began exerting pressure on journalists that involved website-blocking, obstruction of newspaper distribution and confiscating media equipment. For example, following the expression of support by Belarusian state TV journalists for the opposition, the journalists in question were replaced by [journalists](#) sent to the country by Russia.

State bodies [reportedly](#) caused a country-wide internet shutdown to undermine the mobilisation of protestors and restrict reporters' ability to provide accurate information to the general public. Internet disruptions also served as a way to mask several incidents of [police brutality](#) against the protestors. The National Centre for Response to Computer Incidents and Beltelecom (the Belarusian national internet service provider) [blamed](#) foreign actors for the internet disruptions, but an independent [monitoring group](#) attributed them to the Belarusian authorities' interference.

Simultaneously, on 9 August 2020 the [Belarusian Association of Journalists](#) reported blocking of their website. On 21 August 2020, it was [reported](#) that the websites of more than 70 media outlets had been blocked. The government was also [reportedly involved](#) in blocking the censorship circumvention services, such as virtual private networks (VPNs), used by the public to access blocked news portals and websites.

Journalists were also victims of police brutality. During the August 2020 protests, a police officer [shot](#) Natalya Lubnevskaya, a photographer for the newspaper Nasha Niva, despite her wearing a clearly visible press jacket. Although the shooting was documented, the authorities did not open a criminal investigation and even threatened Nasha Niva with a fine 'for untimely notification of state bodies' about the incident, Yagor Martsinovich, the editor in chief, [wrote in a Facebook post](#).

Intimidation of media personnel

The intimidation of media personnel continues in Belarus. As of January 2022, based on the [BAJ's data](#), there are 32 journalists in prison, in police custody or under house arrest, working for TUT.by, RFE/RL, Ej.by, BelaPAN, Nasha Niva and many others. 'Organisation of group actions that grossly violate public order' has been [used](#) as a pretext for sentencing Katsyaryna Andreyeva and Darya Chultsova from Belsat to 2 years in prison for [live coverage](#) of a demonstration over murdered activist [Roman Bondarenko](#) in November 2020. As early as July 2021, content produced by Belsat was labelled 'extremist material', hinting at the possibility that recipients of the information would be subject to administrative liability.

Newspaper and media outlets were hounded in efforts to prevent their covering the large-scale protests that followed the election. For instance, on 18 May 2021 Belarusian police arrested staff and seized equipment belonging to [Tut.by](#) – then the country's biggest news portal – on the grounds of tax evasion. While Tut.by was closed down by the authorities, former employees of Tut.by [established](#) a new platform, [Zerkalo](#), though they operated from [abroad](#).

On 8 December 2021, the police [arrested](#) the editor-in-chief of Yezhednevnik, a popular media outlet, on bribery charges, and in February 2021 [two more journalists](#) stood trial over their reporting of the unrest. In March 2021, journalist and Polish minority rights activist Andrzej Poczubut was arrested on [political charges](#); arrests have also included [journalists](#) for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

In May 2021, Belarusian authorities decided to hijack a Ryanair flight in order to arrest [Raman Pratasevich](#), a 26 year-old blogger and former editor-in-chief of the biggest Telegram channel, NEXTA. In December 2021, [Sergei Tsikhanousky](#), an independent blogger and husband of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Liz Corbin, the European Broadcasting Union's Deputy Media Director has [said](#): 'the journalists imprisoned in Belarus are brave individuals paying an intolerable price for their dedication to reporting the truth about what is happening in the country. It is part of a wider campaign by the government to silence independent journalism and to prevent the Belarusian people from having access to trustworthy and accurate information.'

Further legislative and administrative measures

On 12 October 2021, the Belarusian government decided that 'unregistered groups of citizens, carrying out extremist activities, including on messengers and social networks' may be recognised as [extremist formations](#). According to the Criminal Code, sentences for participating in 'extremist formations' can be up to 7 years in prison. This decision directly affects [NEXTA](#) channel followers, who risk being charged under this legislation; the NEXTA channel, present on Telegram, played a very prominent [role](#) during the August 2020 protests.

Access to the [Deutsche Welle](#) and [Current Time](#) internet sites (run by Voice of America and Radio Free Europe) was [blocked](#) by the state authorities on 28 October 2021, as material published on these sites was [labelled](#) 'extremist'. The situation worsened on 1 November 2021, when the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Security Committee (KGB) also labelled two independent news agencies, BelaPAN and [Belsat](#), 'extremist formations'. In December 2021, BAJ reported that [13 media companies](#) had been identified as 'extremist' in 2021.

There have been attempts to effectively shut down the BAJ – the [Sakharov Prize](#) laureate in 2004 – which is now virtually banned from operating inside Belarus following its formal [dissolution](#) by the Belarusian Supreme Court on 27 August 2021. With the harshening of state policies in the information arena, OSCE Media Freedom Representative Teresa Ribeiro has [repeatedly condemned](#) the government's crackdown on the BAJ, which has been in existence since 1995, but to little effect. The government's actions are seemingly aimed at weakening independent journalism in Belarus and restricting the general public's access to information that is not in line with the government's official propaganda.

Foreign interference and disinformation

The BAJ [conducted a screening](#) of major Belarusian television channels in 2018-2020 and showed that Russian television programmes are more watched than domestic content. The [2020 report](#), in particular, found that Belarus' state channels included elements of pro-Russian propaganda such as that 'Ukraine and the Baltic States have aggressive intentions towards Belarus and Russia and they are puppets of the EU, US, and NATO, that the Belarusian opposition and activist are Western puppets, that Western civilisation is in decay and suffers from authoritarian trends, and that alliance with Russia is the only beneficial way of development for Belarus'.

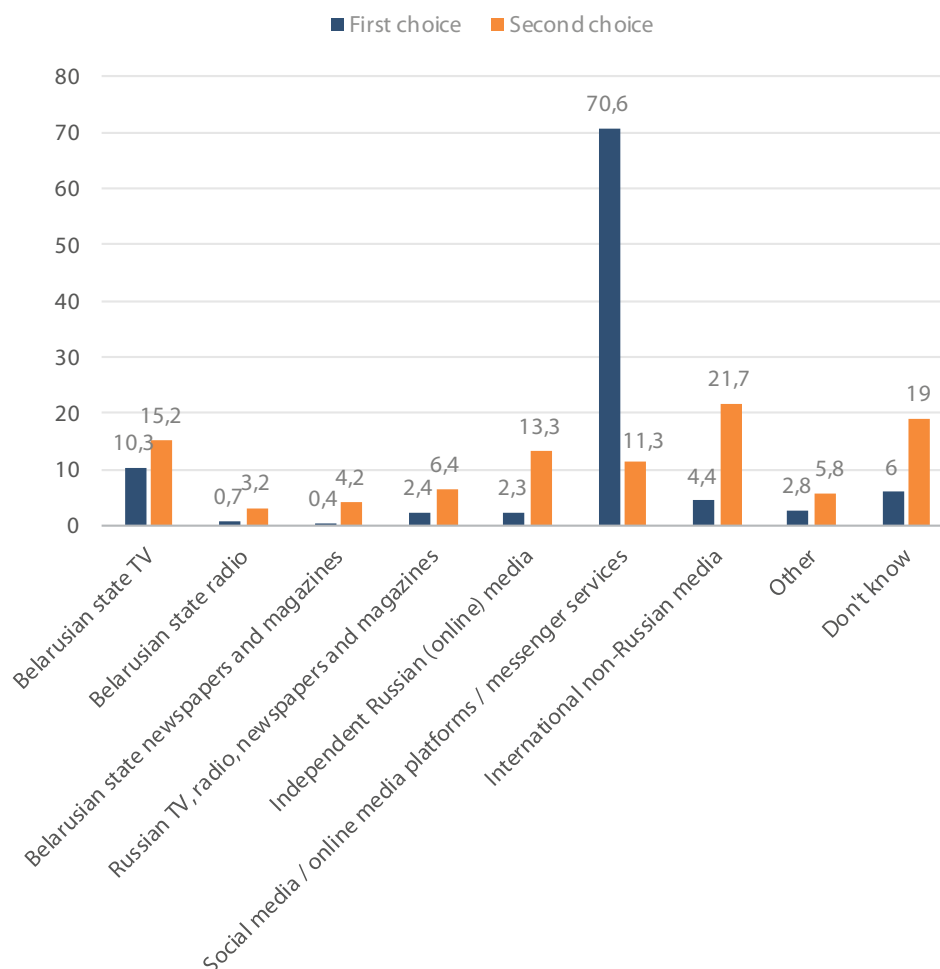
In 2020, the [International Strategic Action Network for Security](#) (iSANS) noted that state-owned television channels such as Belarus 1, ONT and STV mainly invited Russians and Ukrainians in terms of guest commentators, some of whom made their debut appearance only after the 2020 election and mainly voiced disagreement with the pro-democratic protests. On the whole, the [Media IQ project](#) showed that 71 % of news content on the ONT channel contained elements of propaganda and misinformation, giving the impression that Belarusian state media has become a multiplier of Russia's disinformation narratives.

With the pressure on independent journalism unfolding, the Deputy Director of Belsat TV, Aleksey Dikovitsky, said in an [interview](#) for Current Time that the elimination of Belarus' biggest media outlets might be exploited by Russia. Nevertheless, when attacked, Aliaksandr Lukashenka's regime also reacts in cases involving Russian journalists. In May 2021, Belarus [revoked the accreditation](#) of two Russian journalists who were reporting on the growing number of Covid-19 cases in the country – a subject that has been [downplayed](#) by the Belarusian government since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

In the [Disinformation Resilience Index 2021](#), Belarus received the second-lowest result among the six [Eastern Partnership countries](#) in terms of societal resilience to foreign-led disinformation campaigns, with resilience to disinformation generally low in all six countries.

Media popularity

Figure 1 – Main sources of information



Source: [ZOiS](#), 2021.

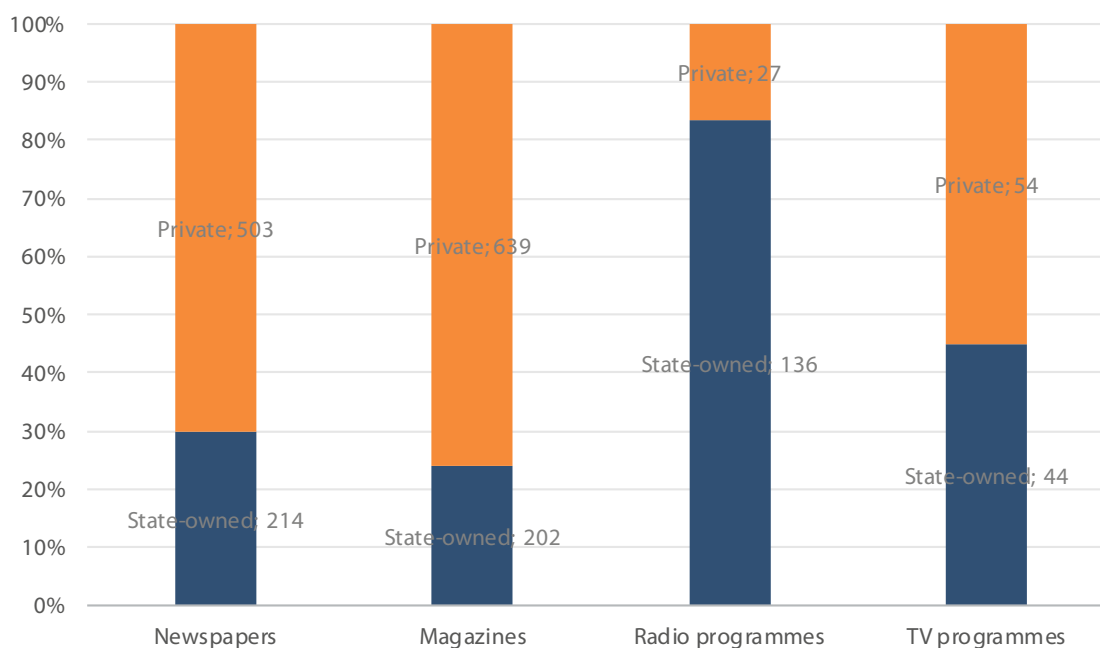
The toughened measures faced by independent and Western media, and the cognitive dissonance between Belarusian citizens and state media might have shifted public perceptions. A March 2021 report by the [Centre for East European and International Studies](#) (ZOiS) shows that 70.6 % of Belarusian citizens use social and online media as their primary source of information; Belarusian state television channels, Russian-backed media and Western media all score lower. According to the report, only 10 % of respondents use state media as their main information source.

Overall, the findings indicate that more than 65 % of respondents either 'do not trust at all' or 'rather do not trust' mass media in Belarus. The report notes that, while using 'social and online media sources is not the same as endorsing pro-democracy views ... a shift away from state media highlights a loss of trust in their reporting and leaves a wide-open space for alternative information that can shape public perceptions'. This 'implies a more active engagement with the political world, rather than passive reliance on state media', an unwelcome trend for an authoritarian government.

On 1 February 2022, there were 1 599 printed papers registered in the state mass media register according to the [Belarusian Ministry of Information](#), including 717 newspapers and 841 magazines. Moreover, there are 163 radio programmes and 98 TV programmes. The state owns the majority of

radio programmes (over 80 %) and also owns 45 % of TV programmes. In contrast, the written media is over 70 % privately owned. Still, private ownership is limited by harsh legal provisions and practices, including the possibility of being removed from the state mass media register and being identified as 'extremist'.

Figure 2: Registrations under law on mass media by media and ownership type



Source: [MIB](#), February 2022.

Internet and social media

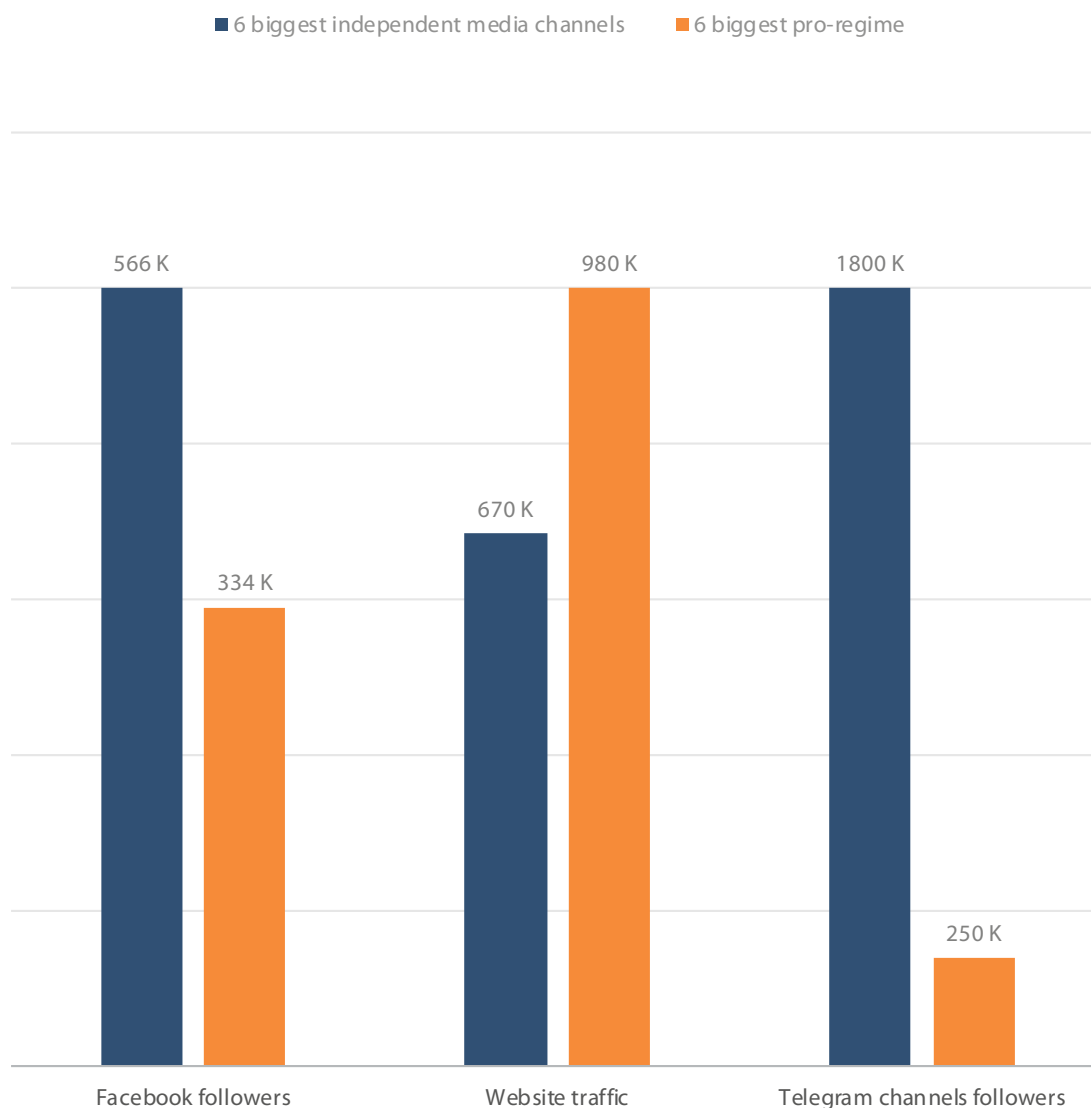
The events which followed the presidential elections of 2020 mobilised new followers for both independent and pro-regime outlets on the internet. According to a [study](#) by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), Belarus' six biggest independent media outlets gained a higher number of new Facebook followers (higher by 22 700) than the six biggest pro-regime media outlets over a period between June 2020 and June 2021. In June 2021, these independent media outlets had 566 000 followers, compared to 334 000 followers for the pro-regime outlets.

However, the website traffic analysis on a selected number of independent and state-controlled outlets between December 2020 and May 2021 showed that the state-controlled media were visited more frequently (98 million times) than the independent ones (67 million times).

Interpreting both results, DFRLab suggests that state blocking of independent media harmed their internet traffic, but not their social media presence. Furthermore, the independent Telegram channels, with over 1.8 million followers as of 9 June 2021, were far more popular than pro-regime ones, which had only 250 000 subscribers at that time.

These huge differences explain why the current regime is so determined to [dismantle](#) independent social media, although the popularity of independent social media has diminished – a common phenomenon among protest movements – while the popularity of pro-regime channels has been slowly but constantly growing.

Figure 3: Audiences of the six biggest independent and six biggest pro-regime media internet outlets in June 2021



Source: [Digital Forensic Research Lab \(DFRLab\)](#).

EU support for Belarusian media workers and civil society

In December 2021, the EU decided to provide [€30 million](#) to further strengthen its support for the people of Belarus, their resilience and their capacities; the total support provided to Belarus since the 2020 election is €65 million. The priority areas for support include independent media, through technical assistance, training and establishing a donor coordination structure, as well as support for youth, culture and other areas.

Support for youth includes [scholarships](#) under the 'EU4Belarus: Solidarity with the people of Belarus' programme for young Belarusians to study in Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Czechia. One of the criteria for eligibility is having 'suffered repression during the protests related to the 2020 presidential election and [being] forced to leave Belarus'. Previously, the EU had provided €3.7 million in emergency support for both the victims of oppression and independent media. Between 2016 and 2019, the EU-funded a programme, [Media for a Democratic Belarus](#), which aimed, among other things, to empower a new generation of journalists and improve editorial standards and management practices.

In the Joint Working Document on '[Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities](#)' of July 2021, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) stated that, for Belarus, the EU will 'focus on intensifying cooperation with non-state stakeholders, including notably civil society, independent media'. The document also declares that the EU's aims include supporting independent media, countering disinformation efforts, and strengthening fact-based content.

Looking to the future, the EU envisages support for Belarus' independent media and civil society once a democratic change takes place in the country, and on 28 May 2021 the Commission presented an outline of its [proposed comprehensive plan of economic support to a future democratic Belarus](#), which includes [five flagship initiatives](#). The fifth flagship project ('Investing in a democratic, transparent and accountable Belarus') addresses, among other things, support for civil society and independent media; the project is worth up to €100 million, subject to democratic transition in the country.

The [Mapping Media Freedom project](#), which started in 2020 and is supported by the Commission, continues to monitor threats to media freedom in Belarus, as well as threats in EU Member States and candidate countries.

The EU also helps to fight disinformation through its fact-checker website [EUvsDisinfo](#), a project run by the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force which enables readers to verify information that is available on the internet. Its search engine helps to identify quickly new disinformation on [Belarus](#), while a special section is dedicated to the most prominent cases concerning the [country](#).

Diplomatic support

The EU has been very active on the diplomatic front. On 10 October 2020, HR/VP Josep Borrell [spoke](#) with Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei about the need to respect media freedom and initiate an 'inclusive national dialogue'. In August 2021, Borrell issued a [statement](#) concerning the closure of the Belarusian Association of Journalists and the recognition of media workers as political prisoners, in which he described these acts as 'part of the systematic and continued repression of all independent voices in the country'.

The [Council conclusions on Belarus](#) from October 2020 called on the Belarusian authorities to 'release immediately and unconditionally all arbitrarily detained persons, including political prisoners and media workers' and to end the persecution of independent media altogether. The Council further pointed to the EU's preparedness to 'substantially step up its political engagement, sectoral cooperation and financial assistance to Belarus' and to 'provide guarantees for ... the freedom of media'. Consequently, in May 2021, the European Council [condemned](#) the detention of journalist Raman Pratasevich and called for his release.

In June 2021, the Council introduced the [fourth package](#) of EU sanctions in response to the 'violent repression of civil society, democratic opposition and journalists'. In December 2021, the Council imposed the [fifth package](#) of restrictive measures against Belarusian entities involved in, among other things, the repression of independent media and journalists.

In the United Nations General Assembly's [Third Committee](#), which deals with human rights, a [Joint Statement on the protection of journalists in Belarus](#) was issued on behalf of the EU, its Member States and 20 other like-minded countries in September 2020. The statement firmly underlined the rights of Belarusian journalists, condemned attacks against press freedom, and called 'on the Belarusian authorities to immediately end their assault on journalists and media workers' and to 'release those unjustly detained, and account for those reported missing'.

European Parliament activities

The European Parliament frequently [addresses](#) the situation in Belarus, including the media situation in the country. The Parliament [consequently](#) ‘reiterates the importance of the independent Belarusian media and journalists and the important role they play in Belarusian society’, ‘condemns the suppression of the media and access to the internet’ and condemns human rights violations in the country. When urgent situations arise, the Parliament’s delegation for relations with Belarus issues [statements](#) which address, among other things, politically motivated judgements against journalists and bloggers.

The activities of Belarusian journalists have been honoured by the Parliament, with the [Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought](#) being given to the Belarusian Association of Journalists in 2004 and the democratic opposition of Belarus in 2020. In 2020, the [decision](#) to grant the award mentions, among the opposition representatives, blogger [Siarhei Tsikhanouski](#) and [Stsiapan Putsila](#), founder of the Telegram channel NEXTA.

During the [European Youth Event \(EYE2021\)](#) – which was the culmination of the Parliament’s youth consultation process for the Conference on the Future of Europe – the participants had an opportunity to participate in a Q&A session with [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya](#), to meet Stsiapan Putsila, one of the speakers in a panel on repression and torture of activists and, in a separate session dedicated to the EU Neighbourhood Policy, discuss how to address protests in Belarus.

Selected expert recommendations to the democratic international community and Belarusian journalist community

Recommendations to the democratic international community:

- To continue supporting the Belarusian media and online activist community, particularly regional ones, including relocation assistance to foreign countries and training on digital security and personal safety measures in repressive environments.
- To support citizen reporting, fact-checking initiatives and journalists’ investigations, including on the topics of Belarus-China economic and political relations and exchanges between them on information control and other authoritarian practices.

Recommendations to the Belarusian journalist community:

- More training in digital security and online step-by-step guidelines on digital security measures on Telegram and other social media platforms.
- To increase fact-checking activities on messengers and social media, which increasingly serve as sources of information for Belarusians.
- To promote Belarusian national identity and culture to serve as a shield against ubiquitous foreign narratives in national media.

Source: Papko, A., Belarus, in: [Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021](#).

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