

## National Human Rights Index

<http://index.belhelcom.org>

2021

### The Right to Free Expression:

Expert Commentary

**The score: 1.5**

#### Including scores by component:

- Freedom of opinion and expression 1.2
- Access to information 1.7

The state guarantees the right to free expression in Article 33 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus: "Everyone shall be guaranteed freedom of opinions, beliefs and their free expression. No one shall be forced to express his convictions or to deny them. Monopolization of mass media by the state, public associations, or individual citizens, as well as censorship shall not be permitted"<sup>1</sup>. Such right, as well as some others, may be lawfully restricted under Article 23 of the Constitution.

Assessing the state of the right to free expression in 2021, Index experts gave lower scores than in 2020. The experts' position is explained in more detail below.

In 2021, as a reaction to the August 2020 and subsequent peaceful protests, public dissent against the rigged presidential elections, violence, and torture, significant tightening and limiting changes were made to the basic legislation that regulates the right to free expression:

1.. The Law of the Republic of Belarus of July 17, 2008, No. 427-3 "On Mass Media" (as amended on May 24, 2021, No. 110-3)<sup>2</sup>, Article 8 of which prohibits foreign and anonymous financing of media. Art. 30<sup>1</sup> imposes rights and duties on the owner of an Internet resource, including regulation of comments and responsibility for certain comments. Article 38 establishes types of information that is prohibited for dissemination in the media, such as information from unregistered organisations; information aimed at propaganda of war, extremist activities or containing calls for such activities, pornography, violence and cruelty, including propaganda or incitement to suicide; other information the dissemination of which may harm the national interests of Belarus or is prohibited by legislative acts; results of public opinion polls related to socio-political situation in the country, republican referendums, elections of the President of the Republic of Belarus, deputies of the House of Representatives, members of the

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<sup>1</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, Article 33, <https://pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/normativnye-dokumenty/konstitutsiya-respubliki-belarus/>

<sup>2</sup> Law of the Republic of Belarus of July 17, 2008, No. 427-Z "On Mass Media" with amendments of May 24, 2021, No. 110-Z, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=h10800427>



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Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus, conducted without accreditation. Art. 51<sup>1</sup> regulates the process of restricting access to an Internet resource, a network publication. All of the above mentioned articles are interpreted broadly by the authorities and do not comply with international legal standards<sup>3</sup>.

2. The Criminal Code, as amended and supplemented in 2021<sup>4</sup>, provides for toughening of responsibility for discrediting the Republic of Belarus: dissemination of knowingly false information about the political, economic, social, military or international situation of the Republic of Belarus, the legal status of citizens in the Republic of Belarus, the activities of state bodies that discredit the Republic of Belarus, committed in a public speech, or in a printed or publicly displayed work, or in the media, or in information posted on the Internet, aimed at causing substantial harm to state or public interests (Art. 369<sup>1</sup>, maximum liability - imprisonment up to 4 years with or without a fine); for insulting not only a representative of the authorities, but also their relatives, in connection with the performance of their official duties, committed in a public speech, or in a printed or publicly displayed work, or in the media, or in information posted on the Internet (Art. 369, maximum liability - imprisonment up to three years with a fine). Responsibility was introduced for the dissemination by the owner of an Internet resource, unregistered as an online publication, of information whose dissemination is prohibited on Internet resources in accordance with legislative acts, committed within a year after the imposition of an administrative penalty for the same violation (Art. 198<sup>1</sup>).<sup>5</sup>

The following articles of the Criminal Code also affect the right to free expression, some of which were introduced in 2021 as a response to the events of August 2020 in the form of a repressive mechanism against any dissenting individual or organization: Art. 130. Incitement of racial, national, religious or other social enmity or discord; Art. 130<sup>1</sup>. Rehabilitation of Nazism; art. 130<sup>2</sup>. Denial of Genocide of the Belarusian People; art. 188. Defamation; art. 198. Obstruction of lawful professional activity of a journalist; art. 198<sup>1</sup>. Violation of legislation on mass media; art. 341<sup>1</sup>. Propaganda or public demonstration, production and distribution of Nazi symbols or attributes; art. 361. Call for restrictive measures (sanctions) and other actions aimed at harming the national security of the Republic of Belarus; art. 367. Defamation of the President of the Republic of Belarus; art. 368. Insulting the President of the Republic of Belarus; art. 369. Insulting a representative of the authorities; art. 369<sup>1</sup>. Defamation of the Republic of Belarus; art. 369<sup>3</sup>. Public calls for organization or holding of illegal meetings, rallies, street processions, demonstrations or picketing, or involvement of persons in such mass events; art. 373. Deliberate disclosure of state secrets; art. 374. Deliberate disclosure of state secrets by negligence; art. 375. Deliberate disclosure of official secrets; art. 375<sup>1</sup>. Illegal collection or obtaining of information constituting state secrets; art. 376. Illegal manufacture, purchase or sale of

<sup>3</sup> Article19 and Human Constanta Report, The Right to Freedom of Expression and Restrictions on "Extremism" in Belarus, 2020-2021, <https://www.article19.org/ru/resources/belarus-extremism-report-ru/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=hk9900275>

<sup>5</sup> New Legislative Regulation in the Republic of Belarus as a Response of the Authorities to the Events of 2020, its Relationship with International Human Rights Standards, Center for Legal Transformation of the RPAO "Belarusian Helsinki Committee", 2021,

[https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/novoe\\_zakonodatelnoe\\_regulirovanie\\_bielarus\\_2021\\_2.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/novoe_zakonodatelnoe_regulirovanie_bielarus_2021_2.pdf)



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means for covert acquisition of information; art. 391. Insulting a judge or a people's assessor.

The imprecise wording, the possibility of broad interpretation, and the desire of the authorities to impose the most severe punishment possible in order to intimidate the public, make it possible to punish an extremely wide range of persons. The problem is compounded by the legal default in the country, lack of independence of the judiciary, mistrust in the state and, in particular, in the judicial system. Additionally important is the difficulty of exercising the right to access to legal assistance in Belarus. <sup>6</sup>

3. The Code of Administrative Offences (CAO) No. 91-3 of January 6, 2021<sup>7</sup>, introduces new elements of administrative offences, such as insulting in a public speech, or in a printed or publicly displayed work, or in the mass media, or in information distributed in the Internet, another public telecommunication network or a dedicated telecommunication network. A similar corpus delicti has been introduced for the same actions in respect of an official of a state body (organization) in the exercise of his official powers by a person not subordinate to him (para. 2 art. 10.2). In addition, the following articles were added to the 2021 CAO: art. 19.10, propaganda or public demonstration, production and distribution of Nazi symbols or attributes; art. 19.11, distribution, production, storage and transportation of information materials containing calls to extremist activity or propaganda of such activity; art. 10.21, unlawful organization of opinion polls; art. 23.5, dissemination by mass media of knowingly false information discrediting the honor and dignity of the President of the Republic of Belarus; art. 24.26, illegal use and production of flags, pennants, posters, emblems and symbols, as well as illegal use of the names "Red Cross", "Red Crescent" and "Red Crystal".

4. Law "On prevention of the rehabilitation of Nazism" No. 103-3 of 14 May 2021<sup>8</sup>, in art. 1 contains the basic terms and their definition: Nazism, Nazi symbols and attributes, Nazi criminals, collaborators of Nazi criminals, rehabilitation of Nazism, etc. Article 15 stipulates that citizens are liable for the rehabilitation of Nazism, propaganda or public display of Nazi symbols and materials, including via the Internet or other information network, and the production and distribution of Nazi symbols and materials, as well as the possession or purchase of such symbols and materials for the purpose of distribution, in accordance with the law (see above for articles from the Criminal Code and the Administrative Code, providing specific penalties for such actions). However, in applying the specific article of the Code, it will be necessary to be guided by the explanations contained in this Law.

5. Law "On Amendments to Laws on Countering Extremism" of May 14, 2021 No 104-3<sup>9</sup>, defines the term "extremism (extremist activity)" as broadly as possible, which allows the state authorities to hold a wide range of individuals and organizations, including parties, trade unions, foreign organizations and private entrepreneurs, liable. The law also contains a broad and unspecific definition of an extremist organization and extremist symbols and attributes.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=HK2100091&p1=1>

<sup>8</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12100103&p1=1>

<sup>9</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12100104&p1=1>



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All of the above has a negative impact on the realization of other human rights, such as freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, freedom of association and peaceful assembly, freedom of political participation due to their interconnectedness<sup>10</sup>. The right to free expression in the current Belarusian reality is so limited that it leads to self-censorship of independent media, individuals and organizations.

6. Law "On Amendments to the Law of the Republic of Belarus 'On Mass Events in the Republic of Belarus" of 24 May 2021, No 108-3<sup>11</sup> introduces new regulation for journalists present at a mass event: they are subject to the same public order requirements that are applicable to its organizers and participants. The law also introduces a ban on real-time (live) coverage in the mass media, the Internet, or other information networks of mass events held in violation of the established order of their organization or holding, for the purpose of their popularization or propaganda. These norms violate freedom of speech, the right of access to information and dissemination of information.

7. Law "On Amendments of Laws on Mass Media" No. 110-3 of 24 May, 2021,<sup>12</sup> approved new grounds for refusal of registration as mass media, expanded obligations of legal entities, who are editorial boards of mass media, owners of Internet resources and network editions, widened the list of reasons for suspension of mass media<sup>13</sup>, expanded the list of reasons for restriction of access to Internet resources, introduced a ban on publication of results of public opinion polls of any scale, deprived a media reporter of accreditation if he or the editorial board of the mass media violated the accreditation procedure or disseminated information "not corresponding to reality and discrediting the business reputation of the organization that accredited the journalist, or committed an intentional illegal act in the process of professional activity"<sup>14</sup>...

Thus, the legislation exists, but contains too vague wording, which in practice, due to broad interpretation and arbitrary application, become an instrument of state control, censorship<sup>15</sup> and a means of "legal" repression of the Belarusian people, especially after August 2020.

The Republic of Belarus has been a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

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<sup>10</sup> New Legislative Regulation in the Republic of Belarus as a Response of the Authorities to the Events of 2020, its Relationship with International Human Rights Standards, Center for Legal Transformation of the RPAO "Belarusian Helsinki Committee", 2021,

[https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/novoe\\_zakonodatelnoe\\_regulirovanie\\_belarus\\_2021\\_2.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/novoe_zakonodatelnoe_regulirovanie_belarus_2021_2.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12100108&p1=1>

<sup>12</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12100110&p1=1>

<sup>13</sup> New Legislative Regulation in the Republic of Belarus as a Response of the Authorities to the Events of 2020, its Relationship with International Human Rights Standards, Center for Legal Transformation of the RPAO "Belarusian Helsinki Committee", 2021,

[https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/novoe\\_zakonodatelnoe\\_regulirovanie\\_belarus\\_2021\\_2.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/novoe_zakonodatelnoe_regulirovanie_belarus_2021_2.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Article19 and Human Constanta Report, The Right to Freedom of Expression and Restrictions on "Extremism" in Belarus, 2020-2021, <https://www.article19.org/ru/resources/belarus-extremism-report-ru/>



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since 1973<sup>16</sup>, Article 19 of which secures the freedom of expression.<sup>17</sup>

### Freedom of Opinion and Expression

According to experts, the situation with freedom of expression in Belarus has significantly worsened in 2021: publicly expressing one's opinion in any form, if it is critical to the authorities, has become punishable. Any kind of dissent, especially in relation to politics and the current authorities, is subject to repression by the regime. The state has a practice of targeting and holding administratively and/or criminally responsible individuals who, in the opinion of the state, were involved in peaceful protests in 2020 or who are not in principle loyal to the authorities. Restrictions on freedom of expression in 2021 are closely related to an individual's professional sphere: many individuals, such as journalists, human rights activists and teachers, are forced to resort to self-censorship or to leave the country because they cannot work under the total ban on expression.

In 2021, the repressive degrading practice - the shooting by the law enforcement agencies of the "repentant" videos - continues. Official, pro-government or anonymous Telegram channels publish videos of the detained, apparently recorded under duress, in which people admit their "guilt" (in publishing critical or insulting comments about law enforcement officials on social networks, participation in peaceful protests, etc.) and "repenting". Subsequently, the detained are held criminally or administratively liable. In 2021, several "repentant" videos make people disclose information about their personal life. Thus, in December 2021, a video was published with A1 spokesman N. Bredelev and S. Babashkov, marketing director of Hyundai AvtoGrad, where they admit to belonging to the LGBT community.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to prosecution for expressing an alternative opinion in 2021 other forms of persecution of citizens for expressing their opinions continue to be applied: dismissal from work in various spheres (medicine, education, science, culture, etc.); depriving defense lawyers of their license; persecution of owners, founders and employees of private business companies.

The law enforcement bodies have detained journalists at least 113 times in 2021, with at least 29 media representatives sentenced to administrative arrest. More than 60 media representatives are under criminal prosecution and 32 are in custody or in prison. Some 146 searches and inspections took place in the offices of the majority of independent national and regional media organizations and in the apartments of their employees, accompanied by confiscation of equipment, documents and money<sup>19</sup>. Thousands of citizens who expressed their opinions or positions in various forms in 2021 were subjected to various forms of harassment, including administrative and criminal charges, dismissal from work, actual expulsion from the country, etc.

<sup>16</sup> Ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by Country,

[https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?chapter=4&clang=en&mtdsg\\_no=IV-4&src=IND](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?chapter=4&clang=en&mtdsg_no=IV-4&src=IND)

<sup>17</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966,

[https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl\\_conv/conventions/pactpol.shtml](https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/pactpol.shtml)

<sup>18</sup> <https://dev.by/news/zaderzhan-pr-a1>

<sup>19</sup> <https://baj.by/ru/analytics/cifry-goda-presledovanie-zhurnalistov-i-media-v-belarusi-v-2021-godu>



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In 2021, arbitrary application of anti-extremist legislation to restrict freedom of expression continued: the largest online news portal TUT.BY was banned by court decision. Moreover, in May 2021, the management of TUT.BY and several journalists were detained on a completely fabricated charges of tax evasion. The portal collapsed, most of the employees were forced to look for another job or leave. Some of them left the country and continued the TUT.BY legacy under the name of ZERKALO<sup>20</sup>.

Persecution of the media not only goes beyond legitimate restrictions on freedom of expression, not complying with the principles of proportionality and necessity. We can speak of a systematic state policy to persecute any independent channels of information. The practice of blocking Internet resources and opposition-minded media has expanded. New laws on counteraction to extremism, amendments to the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Belarus were adopted. These mechanisms supplemented the repressive mechanisms and practices existing and in use in 2020. While in 2020 only few print media faced censorship and recognition of their materials as extremist, in 2021 almost all non-propaganda media faced this problem.

While in 2020 there was more physical violence against HRDs, journalists, bloggers and activists, in 2021 there was less direct physical violence, but more threats of physical violence, forcing most HRDs to flee to other countries for security reasons. Some prominent HRDs were detained, for example Ales Bialiatski, who was detained in July 2021<sup>21</sup>.

Moreover, it became impossible to carry out human rights activities, including educational ones, due to the liquidation of almost all human rights organizations and other public organizations. The same applies to journalists. In general, in 2021 there is a threat of violence from the authorities for performing professional activities "undesirable" to the authorities.

Whereas in 2020 physical violence was widely used during arrests at peaceful protests, in 2021 such violence became pinpoint, applied in individual cases during searches or detention. In 2021, harassment on social networks, pro-government Telegram channels, and state media became widespread. Detentions on fabricated charges are accompanied by the use of psychological violence by the law enforcement authorities, the shooting of "repentant" videos and the publication of such videos in state media and pro-government Telegram channels. Thus, more than 68 media representatives faced violence or were injured in 2021. When detained, Yegor Martinovich, editor-in-chief of the Nasha Niva online edition, was beaten and suffered head injuries<sup>22</sup>. At least four journalists told Human Rights Watch that they were subjected to ill-treatment during or after their detention. This treatment included severe beatings, denial of medical treatment and inadequate detention conditions.<sup>23</sup>

The crackdown on civil society continues. Human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers and activists are prosecuted in fabricated cases and arbitrarily arrested. The state does everything it can to ensure

<sup>20</sup> <https://savetutby.info/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://reform.by/241088-ales-beljackij-zaderzhan-po-ugolovnomu-delu>

<sup>22</sup> <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/09-07-2021-nasha-niva-glavnogo-redaktora-izbili-pri-zaderzhanii-ne-davali-edy-ves-den/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/ru/node/378348/printable/print>



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that investigations are conducted secretly or not at all. On 3 February 2021, human rights defenders and staff members of the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities S.Drozdovsky and O.Grablevsky were detained and questioned in the Investigative Committee. After the interrogation O.Grablevsky was detained for three days and S.Drozdovsky was placed under house arrest. Subsequently, they were accused of "conducting a financial fraud with UN funds"<sup>24</sup>. On July 22, 2021, it became known that the Office would be liquidated at the request of the authorities, as well as other organizations.<sup>25</sup>

The authorities deprived more than 270 public organizations of legal status, including the Belarusian Association of Journalists and the Belarusian PEN Center. Access to more than 100 socio-political and media web-sites has also been restricted. Most national and regional newspapers have been forced to stop publishing in print form, but continue to be published online.<sup>26</sup>

Several opposition bloggers detained during the 2020 election campaign and charged with crimes were tried in 2021. They were all sentenced to prison. As of December 2021, 32 journalists and media workers continue to be held in pre-trial detention centers and colonies<sup>27</sup>.

Legal assistance is almost non-existent, as many defense lawyers have been deprived of their licenses. There is no trust in the judicial system, a person remains face to face with the regime and injustice. Court decisions, including those in criminal cases of "hate speech", are not made public, and descriptions of materials on the list of banned "extremist materials" are so opaque that it is often impossible to understand their content. Courts and law enforcement agencies focus only on the content of potentially illegal speech, while ignoring other critical factors reflected in the six-part test of the Rabat Plan of Action<sup>28 29</sup>.

The state consistently enforces a monopoly on "correct" media rhetoric. Diversity is eradicated through repressive mechanisms and stricter legislation. At least 14 independent newspapers are no longer in print. At least one newspaper, which found a private printing house, reported<sup>30</sup> that the printed edition of one issue had been seized entirely by law enforcement without showing any documents authorizing the seizure. Since the summer of 2020 the state printing houses refused to print the leading non-state newspapers – "Narodnaya Volia", "Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus", "Svobodnye Novosti Plus" and "Belgazeta". "Narodnaya Volia" and "Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus" started printing their circulations outside of Belarus, but the state subscription distribution network Belposhta and the newsstand network Belsayuzdruk, which are de facto monopolists in retail distribution of newspapers,

<sup>24</sup> <https://reform.by/291003-vernemsja-v-peshhernoe-sostojanie-kak-rabotal-ofis-po-pravam-ljudej-s-invalidnostju-i-hto-zhdet-belarusov-bez-nego>

<sup>25</sup> <https://reform.by/243520-vlasti-likvidirujut-rjad-nko>

<sup>26</sup> <https://baj.by/ru/analytics/elektronnyy-byulleten-smi-v-belarusi-no2-64-2021-presledovanie-zhurnalistov>

<sup>27</sup> <https://spring96.org/ru/news/106328>

<sup>28</sup> Article19 and Human Constanta Report, The Right to Freedom of Expression and Restrictions on "Extremism" in Belarus, 2020-2021, <https://www.article19.org/ru/resources/belarus-extremism-report-ru/>

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat\\_draft\\_outcome.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> <https://baj.by/ru/content/omon-prishel-v-redakciyu-narodnoy-voli-izyat-tirazh-segodnyashnego-nomera-gazety>



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refused to distribute them despite the existing contracts. In 2021 “Brestskaya Gazeta”, “Lider-Press” (Salihorsk), “Intex-press” (Baranavichy), “Inform-progulka” (Luninets), “Rehiyanalnaia Hazeta” (Maladechna) and “Novy Chas” stopped coming out in print. This was usually preceded by refusal to distribute through “Belsayuzdruk” and exclusion from subscription catalogs of “Belposhta”. “Gazeta Slonimskaya” and “Otdushina” were unable to resume publication, which was suspended in November 2020 after a search and seizure of equipment. The newspaper “Narodnaya Volya” repeatedly tried to organize printing of its issues in Russia, but it failed: contracts were terminated due to interference from the authorities. Belposhta used this to sue “Narodnaya Volya” for compensation for the shortfall in newspaper circulation since August 2020. The total amount of payments, established at the end of October 2021 by the Economic Court of Minsk, was 108 thousand rubles (more than 42 thousand U.S. dollars). On December 1, 2021, it became known that since the beginning of 2022 Brest printing house refused to print the regional newspaper “Hantsavitski Chas”. The magazines “Nasha Historia”, “Asciarozhna, dzieci!” and “Duda” were refused the possibility to be distributed through state networks. The literary magazine “Verasen” stopped coming out due to the loss of state registration by its founder, “Tavarystva belaruskay movy”, as well as the magazine “Abazhur” after its founder, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, was deregistered.<sup>31</sup> Having been deprived of the possibility to publish printed versions of the newspapers, the majority of editorial offices continued their activities online.

In 2021 the accreditation of foreign journalists was used very selectively, only to those events where the authorities wanted them, for example, the press conference on the landing of the Ryanair plane and the arrest of R. Protasevich. Accreditation for foreign journalists was given, if at all, only for a short time.

### Access to information

According to experts, the situation with access to information deteriorated in 2021. Despite its legislative enshrinement, in practice, its limitations are intensifying. Fewer and fewer legal acts that concern human rights are presented for public discussion; those that toughen existing norms are adopted by the regime non-publicly. Public discussion of draft laws is organized formally. Often draft laws that have already been approved in the first reading are published for discussion, or are not published at all. Imitation discussions are more actively organized when it comes to laws that are important to the regime. For example, the issues of changing the Constitution were supposedly discussed by the public during 2021, but everyone saw the text of the draft only in December 2021. Simulated discussion is not the realization of the right of access to information. According to experts, there is still difficulty in obtaining information about the draft laws, the quality of information provision in accordance with the legislation on information and appeals of citizens and legal entities has deteriorated.

In 2021 the state continued its practice of restricting access to information on the Internet, including by blocking websites of independent media and sites of civil society organizations, compulsory removal

<sup>31</sup> <https://baj.by/be/analytics/elektronny-byuleten-smi-u-belarusi-no4-66-2021-abmezhavanne-svabody-drukavanyh-smi>



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of critical content, recognizing independent information resources as "extremist materials" and bringing to justice for distributing "extremist materials".<sup>32</sup>

Also according to the world ranking of Internet freedom, compiled by Freedom House and published in 2021, Belarus, along with Myanmar and Uganda, was among the countries with the greatest deterioration of Internet freedom. Belarus' position on the list has fallen by 7 points compared with last year - it has received only 31 points out of 100.<sup>33</sup>

The state does not allow independent statistical research. There is only the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Belstat). Experts note the distrust in Belstat data. The practice of "closing" the data is also spreading. If in 2020 they still published statistics on coronavirus deaths on a regular basis, then in 2021 they hid them. Belstat did not indicate the number of pensioners in the country in the compilation "Social and Economic Situation of the Republic of Belarus in January - November 2021. In previous compilations, this information was available (Belstat referred to the data of the Ministry of Labor). Also, Belstat stopped providing data on the average old-age pension (it publishes only the average assigned pension), data on the demographic and economic situation in the country, in particular, the mortality rate for the past year .

There is still no separate law on access to socially significant information. The law "On Information, Informatization and Protection of Information" gives state bodies the right to restrict the dissemination of socially significant information at their discretion. Moreover, public authorities restrict dissemination of information even in cases when it contradicts the law. Thus, access to information on the activities of state bodies, their budgets, on certain facts of violation of law, on the rights of citizens is restricted. In order to find any normative legal act, one needs access to the Internet and a subscription to a legal resource, such as the legal system ETALON-ONLINE or pravo.by. There are frequent failures in the work of the websites of state bodies. Websites of some state bodies of Belarus are inaccessible from abroad, for example, the website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which makes it difficult for Belarusians who are abroad. The social networks of government agencies and officials and MPs often disable comments under their publications. In 2021, state bodies and pro-government propagandists started opening channels in the messenger Telegram, which are engaged in propaganda, encouragement of violence and justification of violence using hate speech.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://bai.by/ru/analytics/elektronnyy-byulleten-smi-v-belarusi-no3-65-2021-ogranicheniya-svobody-media-v-internete>

<sup>33</sup> [Belarus: Freedom on the Net 2021 Country Report | Freedom House](#)



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