

## What do Belarusians Think?

### TV and Internet Compete for the Minds of Belarusians

Soon, more Belarusians will be receiving news from the Internet than from TV. However, this does not mean that society will become immune to propaganda. Sociological data shows that media literacy in Belarus remains complicated: people do not notice how influential Russian media is, and rarely double-check the news they consume.

This piece continues the series of analytical articles based on the national representative survey on the attitude of Belarusians to reforms, social contract, foreign policy, gender-related issues, civil society, media and the role of the state. The poll was conducted in August-September 2019.

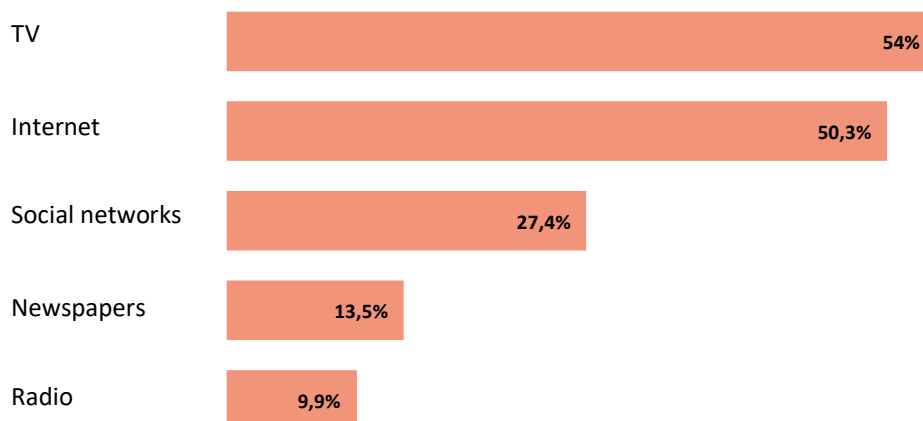
#### Summary findings

- The Internet has almost caught up with television as a regular news source. The younger generation predominantly gets news online, while elderly people still rely on TV.
- Belarusians mainly trust the media from which they receive news, but the TV audience trusts TV a little more than the Internet audience trusts the Internet.
- Survey respondents underestimate the impact of foreign media on Belarusian citizens, and report the influence of Western media almost on par with Russian media.
- Most Belarusians understand that media often advance a certain agenda instead of reporting facts. However, only a small minority regularly double-checks important news against alternative sources. The older generation does this even less often than the youth.

#### Sources of News for Belarusians

As indicated in Diagram 1, the survey results show that the number of Belarusians who get news from the Internet (50%) is nearly the same as those who get them from TV (54%).

Diagram 1: Sources of regular news for Belarusians



The demographic difference between the audiences of the two leading sources of media (TV and Internet) is arresting. Nearly 70% of young people and only 14% of elderly people get their news online. Interestingly, the group that relies on the Internet the most for its news is not the youngest group surveyed (18-29 years old), but the next oldest age group (30-45 years old). While the difference is small - at the level of sampling error, it shows that the youngest generation does not always use the Internet for news despite near 100% Internet coverage.

The opposite is the case for TV: elderly people are the core audience. Among the older generation (61-75 years), the proportion of those who get news from TV is 86%, while among young people (18-29 years old) it is only a quarter.

Curiously, if we disaggregate the latter age group by gender, young women are twice as likely as men to rely on TV as a source of news. It is difficult to find a clear explanation for this phenomenon.

The only source of media with a similar gender gap in the audience is radio. Within the most economically active group of society (30-60 years of age), nearly three times more men than women reported acquiring news from radio. This gap can be explained by the number of women among the main target audience of radio stations – taxi drivers and truckers – which is still vastly smaller than the number of men.

Turning back to the contest between TV and the Internet, Pact's survey findings are unique in that they revealed a record low proportion of those who receive news from TV.

The survey of the Belarusian Analytical Workshop in 2017 [showed](#) that 71% of respondents get “news and information” from state TV. According to the recently closed state-run Informational Analytical Center (IAC) in 2017 and 2018, 72% [said](#) they received “the necessary information about life in Belarus and abroad” from television. Most likely, the difference between these findings and Pact's data can be attributed to the Pact survey's use of the words “regularly” and “as a rule” in the original, Russian-language question that excluded infrequent audiences. Last year's EU Neighborhood East poll [confirms](#) this hypothesis: Belarusians were asked to evaluate how regularly they use TV to acquire information. The “often” and “always” options in total were chosen by 62% of respondents, a finding similar to that of the Pact survey.

In any case, the results of the available surveys, including all of the above, show a clear trend: during recent years, traditional media such as TV and print media are rapidly losing audience, while the Internet audience is growing. According to the IAC, from 2010 to 2018, the TV audience decreased by almost a quarter (from 91% to 72%), the newspaper audience decreased by a third (from 63% to 42%), and the Internet as a source of information became 2.5 times more popular among Belarusians (from 24% to 60%).

### **We trust what we watch**

It is not a surprise that most people who consume a particular type of media trust it rather than not. However, as indicated in Diagram 2, TV viewers have a somewhat higher level of confidence in their source than web viewers do.

The older generation (the prevailing TV viewers) more often believe the notion that “they said it on TV” adds credibility to the news. The same habit is not as widespread among the mostly young audience acquiring their news from the Internet. This is not surprising given the amount of conflicting information online.

Belarusian women report trusting TV news more often than do men (31% vs 24%). This is because – roughly by the same percentage - more women consume news from TV than men. This difference also applies to the printed press.

### **Skepticism and Belief in one nation**

In addition to investigating *where* Belarusians get their news from, it is important to determine *how consciously* they consume the information. The survey results show a contradictory picture. On the one hand, Belarusians do not fully realize which foreign media influences Belarus' information agenda; on the other hand, they realistically assess the objectivity of the content they consume.

**Diagram 3: Belarusians' assessment of the influence of Western and Russian mass media in Belarus**

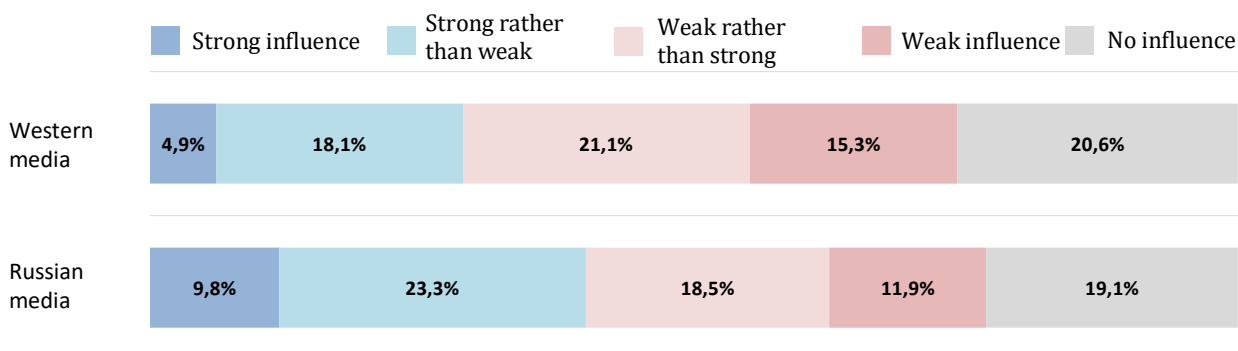


Diagram 3 shows a difference in survey respondents' assessments of the influence of Western and Russian media, but it is relatively small. In reality, the audience of both Russian websites and TV in Belarus exceeds the audience of Western media by an order of magnitude; this has been confirmed by IAC polls, [according to which](#) about half of Belarusians watch Russian TV, while the most popular Western TV-channel, *Euronews*, is not even included within the top ten. Therefore, we find that Russian media's much larger presence in Belarus does not directly translate in Belarusians' perceptions about media influence.

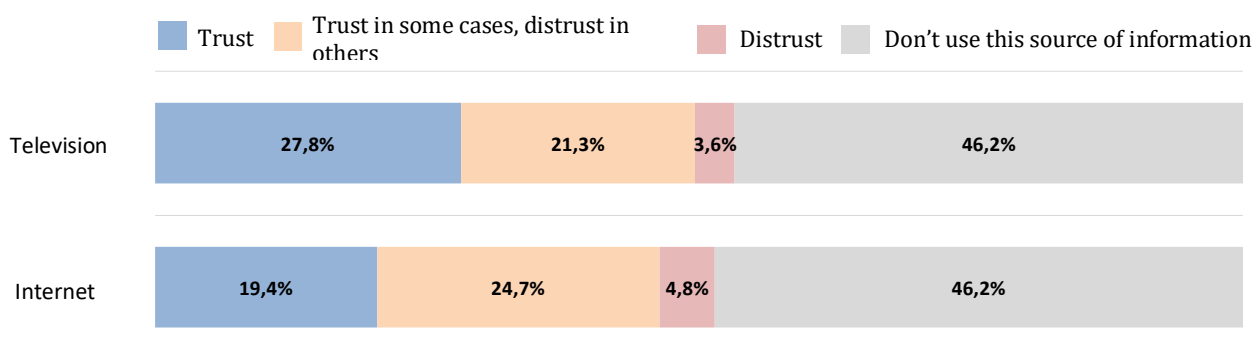
At the same time, Belarusians have a rather sober assessment of the objectivity of the news content they consume. Almost 54% of respondents agreed with the statement "Most people notice that media sometimes advance a specific agenda instead of reporting facts"; only 27% did not.

Attentiveness to media bias decreases with age: among young people the percentage of those who notice opinion statements made by media is 13 percentage points (p.p.) higher than among the oldest age group. In addition, men turned out to be notably more skeptical than women (60% versus 49%).

However, Belarusians' suspicious attitude does not mean that they always take steps to verify the media content. Only 9% of respondents report "always" referring to alternative sources to double-check important news, while 37% report doing so "sometimes" and 48% report "never" having done so. Here, it also should be noted that respondents in such questions tend to present themselves in a better light due to social desirability bias. Therefore, respondents are likely to actually double-check the news using alternative sources even less often than they report.

Women by 6 p.p. more often than men bypass double-checking news information. Similar to many questions on this topic, the greatest differences are age-related. Only 5% of older people (61-75 years old) say they always resort to alternative sources of information for verification. 63% of them do not do this at all, which is 1.5 times higher than among the youth.

**Diagram 2: To what extent do you trust or distrust the news from different sources?**



The relative majority of Belarusians (47%) support the introduction of a media literacy course in schools.

Given the results of Pact's survey, the issue of media literacy appears to be not as urgent for youth as it is for their grandparents. This distinction in behavioral patterns is important because according to the data from both Western and post-Soviet countries, middle-aged and older people are more politically active and show the largest voting turnout. The political future of Belarusian society – when its electoral behavior starts to have an impact on the government's policies – will largely depend on the ability of the older generation to filter out fake and biased information.

*The national public opinion survey referenced in this paper was commissioned by Pact from MIA Research and funded by USAID. The survey was conducted in the form of face-to-face interviews at the respondents' place of residence. The survey sample of 1,507 people interviewed was fully representative with the permissible sampling error of 3%.*

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