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Shannon Green, Assistant to the Administrator
Round Table on Belarusian independent media organizations' challenges with American tech platforms
Friday, September 8, 2023, 13:30-14:00
NDI Office, 4 Islandijos str.

Context

You will have a 30-minute discussion with Belarusian independent media organizations that are experiencing challenges using IT platforms developed and run by American tech companies.

Desired Outcomes

That you have a greater understanding of the challenges that Belarusian independent media organizations face disseminating their media products and creating sustainable business models on IT platforms developed and run by American tech companies, so that you are better positioned to advocate for them.

Participant List and Run-of-Show

This 30-minute meeting will be an in-depth update following USAID advocacy efforts on behalf of Belarusian organizations to American big tech companies, especially Google and Meta. These efforts have been led by Vera Zakem and Amy Malessa, Senior Digital Technology Advisor, OTI. The round table discussion will include BCO's implementing partner supporting independent media, Internews, and two of its local independent media partners: Press Club Belarus, Zerkalo, and Nasha Niva. Translation will not be required.

- Introductions: Edgar will conduct a round of introductions. The allocated time for this segment is 5 minutes.
- Internews, Press Club Belarus, and Zerkalo will brief you on their work that is affected by American tech companies' policies regarding Belarus, how they have tried to address these challenges, future strategies for addressing these challenges, and recommendations on how they envision USAID advocacy could help them. The allocated time for this segment is 20 minutes including your questions.
- Wrap-up session: Edgar will conclude the discussion. The allocated time for this segment is 5 minutes.

Participants:
USAID:
Vera Zakem, Chief Digital Democracy and Rights Officer
Jenna Tajchman, Belarus Country Office Director
Edgar Mason, Belarus Country Office Deputy Director
Meewa Mull, Acting Country Representative, Belarus OTI
Mila Oleksiiuk, Democracy Specialist, USAID/Belarus
Marko Pjevic, Democracy Specialist, USAID/Belarus (on TDY from USAID/Serbia)

Erin McCarthy, Senior Civil Society Advisor, USAID/E&E
Filip Jotevski, Special Assistant, USAID/DRG

Internews:
Greg Kehailia, The Media Activity CoP and Belarus Country Director
Yasia Karalevich-Kartel, Media Advisor

Press Club Belarus:
Natalia Belikova, Head of International Cooperation

Zerkalo (Zerkalo.io):
Aliaksandra Pushkina, Director

Nasha Niva:
Nastassia Rouda, Director

Talking Points

- USAID remains committed to assisting Belarusian organizations which work to promote independent media and its role in a free, democratic Belarus. This includes continuing to advocate on their behalf to American tech companies.

- USAID recognizes that it is critical for Belarusian organizations and people to have equitable access to these companies' services, platforms, and tools. Without such access Belarusian organizations are significantly limited in generating revenue, developing content, and reaching their desired audiences. Such conditions make it extremely difficult to have sustainable business models.

- USAID will continue to follow up with such companies as Meta and Google regarding recognized inequities regarding Belarusians including the lack of Belarusian as an official language on platforms for the purposes of searches and monetization and not restricting access to exiled Belarusian organizations' websites and content.

- For example, Vera has been communicating with Meta's European Policy Team about the future of political ads in Europe given their challenges related to compliance with the Digital Service Act.

- What do you think should be the priorities for USAID advocacy efforts to American tech companies on behalf of Belarusian organizations, including independent media?

- In the digital space, what other areas do you think USAID could focus its efforts to support Belarusian independent media that it hasn't yet been working on?

- How have you been able to overcome the limitations and restrictions that impede your ability to reach audiences through digital media?

- What do you see as likely future restrictions or trends that could make your ability to function in the digital space more challenging?

Red Flags

- N/A

Background

Belarus challenges with Big Tech platforms

In response to an increase in recent concerns, in January USAID/Belarus brought out OTI's Senior Digital Technology Advisor to meet with Belarusian democratic actors and identify the challenges that they are having with U.S.-based technology companies, including Google (e.g. Search, YouTube), Meta (e.g. Facebook, Instagram) and Twitter.

The following insights and recommendations are based on interviews with eleven Belarusian organizations over the course of one week (January 23-27, 2023) in Poland and Lithuania, as well as follow-up conversations. These organizations included major media organizations, leading outlets, political actors, and activist content creators.

Most organizations have officially appealed these challenges directly to platforms with mixed results, depending on their relationships with platform staff. There are early efforts by OST, the Press Council, International Media Support, Internews and Access Now to advocate more effectively on behalf of all Belarusian partners, including independent media organizations and civil society organizations. USAID can and should complement those international efforts.

Thankfully, as a silver lining, there is no evidence that platforms are using official designations by the Government of Belarus (e.g. the labeling of organizations as terrorist or extremist organizations) to inform their account or content decisions to date.

Here are the **four main challenges and potential responses by USAID**:

1. **Organizations are having their content removed and pages restricted due to violations of Meta's Terms of Service (a.k.a. "Community Standards")**

Organizations are receiving notifications from Facebook and Instagram that their content violates Meta's Terms of Service related to violence, graphic content, hate speech, and adult nudity. These notifications vary in terms of their level of specificity - some link to the post (if it's flagged by a human moderator), most do not (if it's flagged by a platform algorithm) - but none describe the violation in sufficient detail to either fix the violation or prevent future violations.

There are a few contributing factors to this challenge. Terms of Service are broadly defined and enforced mostly by platform algorithms that misinterpret slang and cultural context. Additionally, the algorithms are not subject to public oversight and change frequently without prior notice. It is also unclear how many human content moderators speak Belarusian and where they are located right now.

Why do Terms of Service violations matter? Three notifications result in restrictions against the offending page, including a significant drop in organic distribution or reach (e.g. from 3 million to 100K in one month). Additional notifications put the page at risk of being shut down and losing their entire audience on the platform.

As a result of these violations, organizations are being more cautious in terms of what and how they publish content. For example, partners are choosing to do softer content over hardcore news and publishing less informal or live content which are popular formats.

Organizations are utilizing the official appeal process to appeal these violations with mixed results, depending on their relationships with platform staff. This is a recurrent and labor intensive challenge - successfully resolving one appeal after days or weeks of back-and-forth communication does not make the account immune from future violations.

Potential Response by USAID: USAID/DC can elevate specific cases that have exhausted the official appeal process (e.g. BelSat) back to Meta for further review. Meanwhile, USAID/Belarus can work with the Press Council and Internews, one of Meta's Trusted Partners, to get their "inclusion list" of independent media outlets (originally developed for "Ads for News") admitted to Meta's Cross Check Program (a new program that vets media outlets, so they are no longer flagged for violations). The "inclusion list" will need to be maintained across USAID/Belarus IPs and can be discussed at the upcoming partners meeting. Once the "inclusion list" is updated and ready to go, USAID/DC can share it with Meta.

2. **Inability to promote content in Belarusian language across YouTube, Google Search, Discovery and News, and the suspected down-ranking of content**

Organizations cannot promote or run small dollar ads on content in Belarusian language on Google Display Network, most notably Google Search and YouTube. If accounts are caught trying to promote content in Belarusian language, the user receives an "unsupported language" notification and their ad campaign is turned off. It is unclear if the overall account is penalized.

In addition to content blocked for "unsupported language", content is also being blocked by Google Display Network for covering "sensitive events". Most appeals related to "sensitive events" are successfully resolved in favor of the user, but only after 1-3 days of back-and-forth communication when the content is no longer relevant.

There is speculation that Google Search and YouTube recommendation algorithms are down-ranking content in Belarusian language. It is unclear if that is true and Google staff deny it. The methods used by partners to get content inside Belarus (e.g. website mirrors, external referral links from social media) and their lack of knowledge about search engine optimization can also contribute to the down-ranking of content.

Potential Response by USAID: USAID/DC was notified by OST on February 2 that Google added Belarusian language to their product development calendar for the second half of 2023. This point should be highlighted in future meetings between USAID/DC and Google leadership so that momentum is not lost.

USAID/DC can also ask Google to speed up the appeal process for "sensitive events" from days to hours. USAID/DC can ask Google and Jigsaw about technical options under development to deliver content to citizens living under repressive regimes and encourage partnership with local organizations working outside of Belarus.

Beyond working directly with Google, USAID/Belarus can fund research and development by local emerging technology groups (e.g. Press Council's TechHub) to test and scale alternative content delivery methods that do not down-rank content. USAID/Belarus can also fund independent consultants or commercial digital agencies on retainer to improve partners' knowledge of search engine optimization and how to optimize content for discovery across platforms.

3. **The verification requirements in order to pay for and geographically target ads for social or political content on Facebook and Instagram**

Meta has a global policy related to the promotion of social and political content (again, broadly defined) in an attempt to limit foreign influence or interference in domestic affairs. The ability to place small dollar ads for social and political content requires page owners to submit a national ID card and use a domestic bank for payment. In addition, the pages that pay for these ads are added to Facebook's public Ad Library for seven years.

At a meeting organized by the Press Council between partners and a Meta representative in November 2022, many organizations were surprised to learn about the existence of the Ad Library. There is growing concern that the Government of Belarus will use the information already on Facebook's Ad Library to detain, torture and persecute page owners or other active users associated with the page.

Right now, organizations are not providing this additional layer of verification and not marking their ads as social or political on Facebook or Instagram for security reasons. If accounts are caught trying to promote social or political content without properly labeling it, the user receives a notification and their ad campaign is turned off. It is unclear if the overall account is penalized.

Potential Response by USAID: Given the security concerns of our partners, USAID/DC could ask Meta to waive the verification requirement for social and political content targeted inside Belarus or remove Belarusian organizations who are at-risk from the Ad Library. This response is politically sensitive since Congress pushed for the creation of the Ad Library to increase public ad transparency and limit foreign interference in U.S. domestic affairs after the 2016 election.

4. **Growing concerns related to coordinated inauthentic behavior (e.g. bot networks, troll farms) across all platforms**

At this time, most of the views, reach and engagement with pro-Regime channels and pages that's driving them up in search results (e.g. trending content) is believed to be organic traffic from human users generated in-country or in the region. But, there's growing concern that state-affiliated actors are using automated means to flood pages / channels and account owners with unfounded complaints, including copyright violations and targeted threats.

There is a strong desire by multiple organizations to have a mechanism for flagging channels that spread "propaganda", so they can be reviewed by platforms against their Terms of Service. Initial attempts to do this have been ad hoc and with limited supporting evidence (e.g. individual anecdotes). There are very few public reports on coordinated inauthentic behavior in and around Belarus that can be shared with platforms right now.

Potential Response by USAID: USAID/Belarus can fund and elevate independent research and analysis (e.g. iSANS, Stop Propaganda, MediaIQ, Digital Skills Coalition Initiative) that demonstrates the origin, methods and impacts of coordinated inauthentic behavior in the context of Belarus. USAID/Belarus can also refer local partners into training programs (e.g. Digital Forensic Research Lab's Digital Sherlocks) to build their capacity related to digital forensics and open source investigations.

Once USAID/DC has access to more credible reporting on coordinated inauthentic behavior, we can ask platforms to review those reports and the related accounts against their Terms of Service. However, USAID cannot ask for specific content or account takedowns. According to U.S. Government policy, USAID can share independent research and analysis, but not dictate the specific course of action.

Attachments

- USAID/Belarus Media Activity information
- Participant biographical information

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CLEARANCE PAGE FOR Shannon Green, AtA for Europe and Eurasia Bureau and Vera Zakem, Chief Digital Democracy and Rights Officer meeting with Belarusian independent media organizations on American Big Tech

Drafter: USAID/Belarus: Mila Oleksiiuk
Approved: E&E/DAA: MSimakovsky - 9/1/2023

Clearances	Clearance Status	Date
USAID/Belarus: JTajchman	(ok)	9/1/2023
USAID/Belarus: MEllis	clear	9/1/2023
E&E/Belarus Desk: SWiese	(clear w/ edits)	9/1/2023
E&E/EECA: CBrearley	clear	9/1/2023
DRG: SSwift	info	9/1/2023

Attachment: Organizational and Participant Biographical Information

USAID Activity: The Media Activity in Belarus (TMA)
Project period:10/01/2019 – 09/30/2026
Total Estimated Cost: $14,996,730
Implementer: Freedom House/ Internews

The Media Activity increases the supply of quality, socially relevant content and increases citizens' demand for accurate, objective information. The Activity supports the production of news, discussions, and infotainment. The activity also strengthens and expands the existing media literacy activities, working with both media practitioners and citizens, exploring new approaches like formal training for educators and civil society activists; integration of critical thinking skills into school subjects. The deficit of empirical data and scientific research on this topic in the country and the ability to implement iterative, adaptive approaches to assistance further intensify the challenges in this area. To this end, the Activity aims to enhance local research-based methodologies to inform advancing the integrity of the media space in Belarus.



Gregory Kehailia is the country director of Internews for Belarus and Chief of Party of the USAID-funded TMA program. He is a political scientist and has worked for two decades and half analyzing political processes and implementing democracy, rights and governance programs in Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Middle East & North Africa. Previously, Greg spent four years representing Internews in the Philippines, with a portfolio focused on tackling disinformation and foreign influence operations and on protecting media freedom and safety. Before the Philippines, Greg worked in Myanmar for over four years as country director of The Carter Center, concentrating on electoral reform and observation as well as on the Myanmar peace process, and as senior program manager of the intergovernmental institution International IDEA, working embedded in the Myanmar's election commission on the 2015 general elections. Formerly, Greg had worked in Washington DC at the headquarters of IFES and IREX, in DR Congo as IFES country director, in Jordan and Iraq for the United Nations, and in Egypt for the intergovernmental institution Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures. Following some years working for grassroots civil society organizations in France, Greg had started his international career as a diplomat of the European Union at the EU Embassies in Syria and Algeria, covering human rights, democratization, violent extremism and forced disappearances. He is based in Vilnius.



Yanina Karalevich-Kartel has 10 years of experience as a journalist, editor, media manager, and journalism trainer. Since 2022 she works as Media Adviser in Internews Network. Before that she was the co-editor-in-chief of CityDog.by, an online Minsk city magazine that is one of the country's most innovative and high-quality outlets, where she started as a journalist and executive editor in 2012. She is also the creator and editor of the multimedia project 90s.by, which explores the transitional period of the 1990s in Belarus through photos, text, and historical artifacts. She holds a

bachelor's degree in Information and Communication from the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences at Belarusian State University.

Press Club Belarus' mission is to foster Belarusian independent media community development in exile. Press Club Belarus' scope of activities includes: community and resilience building for the Belarusian independent media sector; media-related training and education; media intelligence and tech services and support for the community.



Natalia Belikova is the Head of International Cooperation of Press Club Belarus, an umbrella organization for Belarusian independent media outlets, which works to preserve Belarusian journalism and foster media development in Belarus. Natalia, a trained international lawyer, has over 15 years of progressive professional experience in media development, including within UN and OSCE systems. Her professional interests include strategic communications, counteracting disinformation, media literacy, strategic media development and analysis.

"**Zerkalo**" is one of the leading Belarusian independent media. The mission of the Zerkalo portal is to give every user the opportunity to get objective information on his or her interests, expand his or her horizons, and live life to the fullest. For almost two years now, the media has been working in exile. All zerkalo.io content is published on the portal and in iOS and Android apps, social networks, and messengers. "Zerkalo" audience on the portal has more than 2.5 million unique users. The news published on the portal are viewed more than 30 million times a month, and videos published on "Zerkalo" video platforms are viewed more than 60 million times a month. Their total number of subscribers in social networks exceeds 2 million.



Aliaksandra Pushkina is director of Zerkalo. She is one of the team members of former outlet "TUT.BY" who reactivated the largest independent media outlet in Belarus in a new project "Zerkalo". She specializes in communication strategy, PR, fundraising, and development of related products or services. Ms. Pushkina has experience as the PR manager of TUT.BY, Program director of the conference "Business Internet", Brand-manager of Alfa-Bank Belarus, and Press-secretary of the national women's basketball team of Belarus.

Nasha Niva is one of the oldest Belarusian socio-political publications, with more than 115 years of history. Today, Nasha Niva operates entirely online and is the second-most popular online portal in the country and the first among Belarusian-speaking ones. Nasha Niva is a nationally oriented media where the Belarusian language, culture, history, and independence are key values. Nearly all independent media outlets have staff in prison in Belarus. Nasha Niva's former chief editor Jahor Martynovich, released from prison on August 18, 2023 after serving a 2.5-year sentence.



Nastassia Rouda has been working at Nasha Niva for over seven years. At various times, she was a reporter, editor, deputy chief editor, and head of the advertising and marketing department. Since May 2021, she has been the director of Nasha Niva and the host of the interview project on the TOK YouTube channel. Previously, for four years, she worked as a journalist and editor for the regional independent publication Rehiyanalnaja Hazeta.