Belarusian independent media and BigTech, briefing paper, January 2024

Background

Country profile: digital Belarus, 2023. Key facts

- Belarus is a country of 9.2M people
- 80% of the population leave in urban areas
- 54.0 percent of Belarus's population is female, while 46.0 percent of the population is male.
- There were 8.27 million internet users in Belarus at the start of 2023, internet penetration stood at 86.9 percent
- There were 4.27 million social media users in January 2023, equating to 44.9 percent of the total population
- A total of 11.55 million cellular mobile connections were active in Belarus in early 2023, with this figure equivalent to 121.3 percent of the total population
- Most popular OS include Android – 36.6%, Windows – 36.4% and iOS – 18.5%
- Google Search is the most popular search engine – 68.29%, followed by Yandex – 30.47%
- Google.com is the most popular website with 201.9M visits per month, of which 67% using mobile phones
- Most popular Browsers in Belarus: Chrome 56.11%, Safari 20.8%, YandexBrowser -8.08%, Opera 7.74%
- The state has designated most digital independent news resources as 'extremist' and blocked access to them inside the county
- Largest independent media – Zerkalo, Nasha Niva, Euroradio, Belsat, etc – are registered legal entities in the EU (Lithuania, Poland) (commercial and non-profit) due to mass relocations in 2021-2022, but continue to produce content for the Belarusian audience (the share of Belarusian audience across platforms is 50-70%). To reach their audiences, the produce content for multiple platforms, use mirror and cloud services, the AMP project and appeal to users to use VPN
- According to polls, in late 2023 circa 22% regularly consumed independent media and trust them; 38.2% - disengaged audience, avoiding consuming news content. Before the blockings, in 2020, independent media consumption was around 60%.
- Consumption of 'extremist' content is criminalised inside Belarus.

Current media context (January 2024)

State information policies and society

The actions of the Belarusian authorities after August 2020 in Belarus and the full scale invasion of Ukraine unleashed by Russia have completely reshaped the Belarusian media market. The regime pursues unrelenting and systemic repressions against the independent media, which include prosecution of journalists, media managers and civil activists, their arrest, fines, searches of homes and offices, expulsion from the country; internet censorship; labelling them as extremists. As of January 2024, 32 journalists are in prison, some were punished with harsh sentences of more than 10 years in prison. Media consumption is also criminalised: a ban on the storage and distribution of 'extremist' materials is enshrined in law; any public critical statements and comments are subject to administrative and criminal penalties. The regime has effective control over traditional mass communication channels - TV, radio, print media and has introduced heavy restrictions on the Internet.

Belarus authorities have aligned their manipulative narratives with Russia's, eroding national identity and justifying Russia's aggression. Belarusian issues are integrated into the Russian context, portraying Belarus as a subject within a federation. This copy-paste of Russian narratives aims to quell protest sentiments, boost trust in Lukashenka, and legitimise Belarus's involvement in the war. The independent media sector plays a crucial role in providing a truthful and propaganda-free perspective, focusing on the Belarusian context amidst the challenges posed by the state propaganda and disinformation and the increasing influence of the Russian information space.

Independent media ecosystem today

The Belarusian independent media landscape is a multifaceted ecosystem, encompassing exile media, dispersed newsrooms, domestic outlets subject to self-censorship, and independent content producers on social media. These entities operate from various locations, including Poland, Lithuania, Georgia, Ukraine, Germany, UK, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, Portugal, Latvia, and the U.S., with Poland and Lithuania being popular legal bases within the EU. Many Belarusian media outlets are bilingual, with an increasing focus on Belarusian-language or mixed content. Media hubs in Vilnius, Warsaw, Bialystok, Batumi, and Ukraine serve as crucial support organisations, acting as secure resource centres, content production hubs, and accelerators for new media projects.

The role of the Belarusian independent media

Despite operating outside Belarus, independent media remains crucial in preserving the nation's self-consciousness, identity, and citizens' desire for independence amidst Russification efforts and Lukashenka's anti-Belarusian policies. Serving as bridges to reality, independent Belarusian media help the population navigate the trauma of the 2020 events. These media outlets act as influential points of contact for democratic actors who cannot operate within Belarus, connecting with mass audiences inside the country. The economic sustainability of these media projects relies on content quality, audience trust, effective management, editorial potential, and donor support.

The impact of Belarusian independent media extends beyond information dissemination to shaping public opinion, providing platforms for open discourse and diverse voices. In exile, these media outlets contribute to transparency, acting as checks and balances crucial for a thriving democracy. Their resilience in the face of challenges reflects a commitment to free speech and press freedom, fundamental aspects of a democratic society. Thus, Belarusian independent media not only convey information but also catalyse democratic progress, fostering a society that values openness, accountability, and active citizen participation.

Previous communication with BigTech

Belarus' independent media community and human rights community has been attempting to engage in a dialogue with BigTech using various formats and at different platforms, including through assistance of USAID, Access Now and within the RightsCon Conference. Most successful attempts have been with Meta and Google, Apple, Cloudflare, Microsoft, some concrete use-case issues have been resolved, but larger issues have not. Communication with other Big Tech companies, such as X, TikTok, Telegram is absent.

Challenges related to BigTech

- **Belarus's information sovereignty is under threat, Russian information influence inside Belarus is increasing** as non-politicised mass audiences increasingly consume Russian narratives disseminated through Belarusian state information channels and Russian-produced entertainment and learning/educational content. This also has a "**crippling Russification** effect" on the Belarusian audience. Inter alia, this happens due to Belarus not being regarded as a separate market.
- **Restricted availability of distribution channels by the independent media due to restrictions by the Belarusian authorities**. Information technology tools are playing an increasing role in **media production and distribution**: content producers are heavily dependent on BigTech (specifically, recommendation services of Meta, YouTube, Google Search/News/Discover, TikTok, etc) for content distribution and are subject to targeted technology-based repression and intervention by the Belarusian (and Russian) state. Potential risks here also include further harsher restrictions on the Internet freedom in Belarus and her likely integration with the "Russian Sovereign Internet".

Specific Issues flagged by the Belarusian media community (primarily concerning Google and Meta, Microsoft)

1. *Digital decolonisation (Google, Microsoft)*

Belarus is a sovereign state heavily dependent on Russia. This dependence is amplified by Big Tech company policies and business decisions. For instance, before 2022 Google's policies regarding Belarus were decided by the Russian office and the Belarusian market was treated as a part of the Russian segment of the Internet, based on the Russian language preferences of the majority of people. With the start of the full-scale invasion and the closure of Google office in Russia, there is no policy at the company level towards Belarus.

Digital decolonisation in the case of Belarus has important cultural and social considerations. Poor understanding of the context and non-existent policies towards Belarus only amplify Russian state policies and speed up the process of Russification in Belarus.

There is a need for services to be tailored to the specific needs and cultural context of the Belarusian society. Big Tech companies could customize their products and services to align with local language, preferences, and user behaviours. We appeal to the Big Tech (Google in the first place) to foster inclusivity and improve user experience, thereby providing the ability to cater to the unique requirements of diverse audiences.

Language localisation of the Belarusian segment as a separate one, which would include both Russian (for Belarus) and Belarusian languages, could be a solution. This should lead to Big Tech services being tailored for the Belarusian audiences seeking reliable and truthful information (ads of Belarusian content for Belarusian users; targeting content for Belarusian audiences; etc.)

Having said that, we would like to refer to the case of Latvia, Estonia and Ukraine as inspiring case studies/show cases, where a search in Russian provides information from local Russian-language media. Also in the case of Belarus it is important to refrain from compliance with repressive state regulations including content censorship, data localization and anti-extremism policies.

Belarusian content for Belarusian users

Localisation of Google services for Belarus (in Russian and in Belarusian) would fit in the decolonisation trend, which is ongoing in the post-Soviet region (Ukraine, Georgia).

Google News and GoogleDiscover could consider the option to prioritize Belarusian news resources, including in Belarusian, for those who search for news inside Belarus (current trend is that these services offer a variety of Russian sources and only Belarusian state-controlled sources for Belarusians). That is, so that Belarusian media competed among each other, but not with the Russian media. This could help fight the systemic dissemination of Russian manipulative narratives among Belarusian audiences. (Examples of how Google services work for Belarus: https://mediaiq.info/kak-google-ostavlyaet-belarusov-v-rossijskom-mediapole)

2. *Promotion of disinformation and downrating of independent Belarusian media websites*

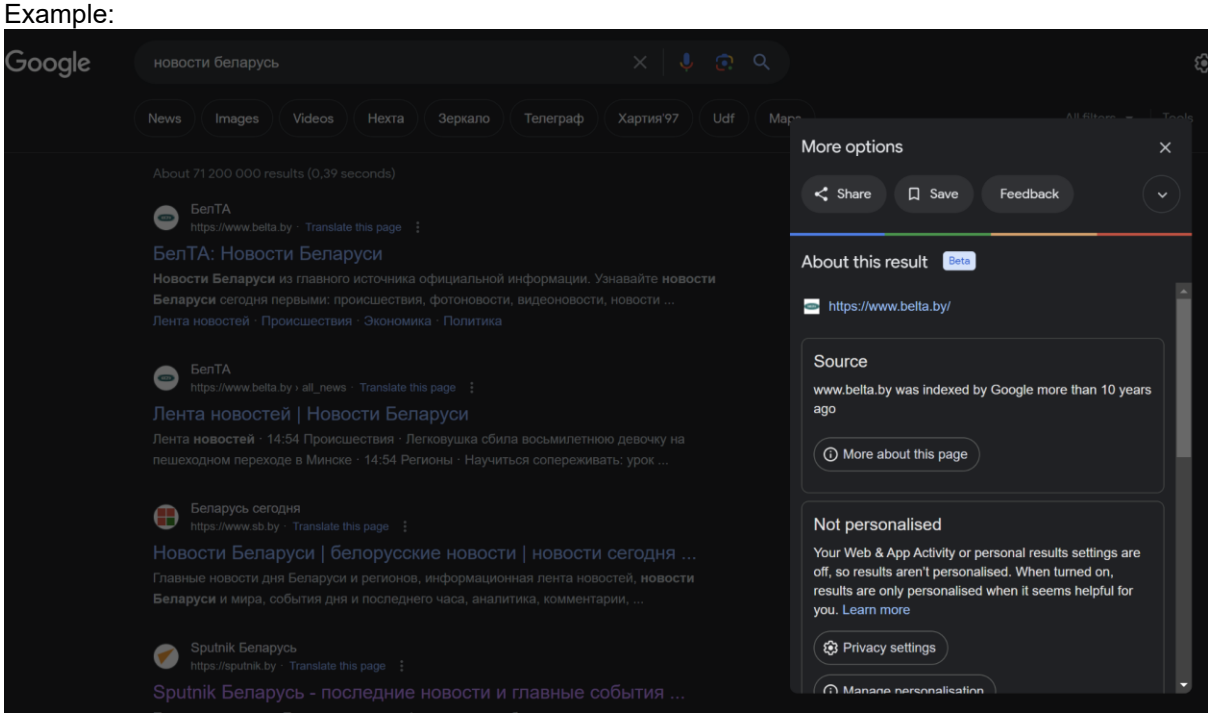
Since Russia started war in Ukraine, Belarus is being used as a proxy to promote *Russian disinformation.* Primarily, this is being done via Belarusian state media and their **Youtube** channels (ONT, Belarus 1, SB Belarus, BelTA, etc). A detailed analysis of how exactly this is done is available here: http://digitalskills.by/en/2023/05/23/kak-rossijskaya-propaganda-obhodit-sanktsii/

Whilst in response to Russian military aggression in Ukraine, many Russian online outlets (websites, social media accounts, Youtube channels) were marked by the platforms as state-owned and controlled to make sure the audience is able to distinguish between independent and non-independent sources of information, this approach seems to be inconsistent in the case of Belarusian state-controlled media.

Dozens of independent media outlets in Belarus are blocked by the authorities, including being arbitrarily designated as "extremist", *creating criminal liability* for those who share or repost content.

Independent media are utilising a wide range of tools to make their blocked websites and content accessible to their audiences inside Belarus - through VPNs, mirrors, Cloudfront/Cloudflare and using amp pages. However, unsuccessful attempts by users to reach the blocked websites lead to their automatic downrating by the Google Search engine algorithms or services like Google News and Google Discover. As a result, a user inside Belarus primarily sees only sources that comply with the state information policy, ie Belarusian state-controlled news resources, which are not labeled as state controlled.

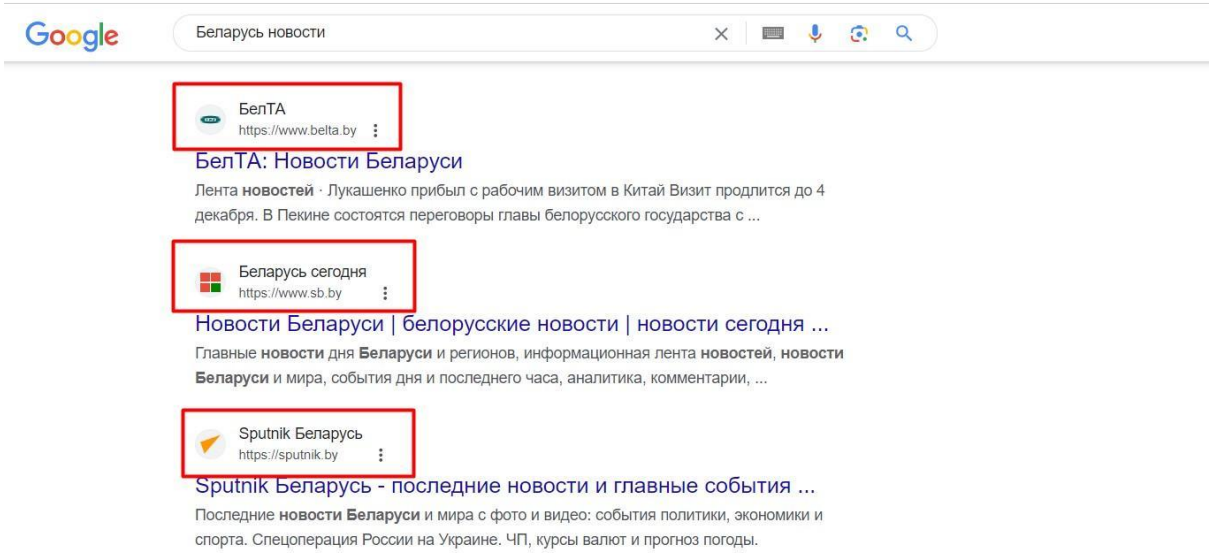
Example:



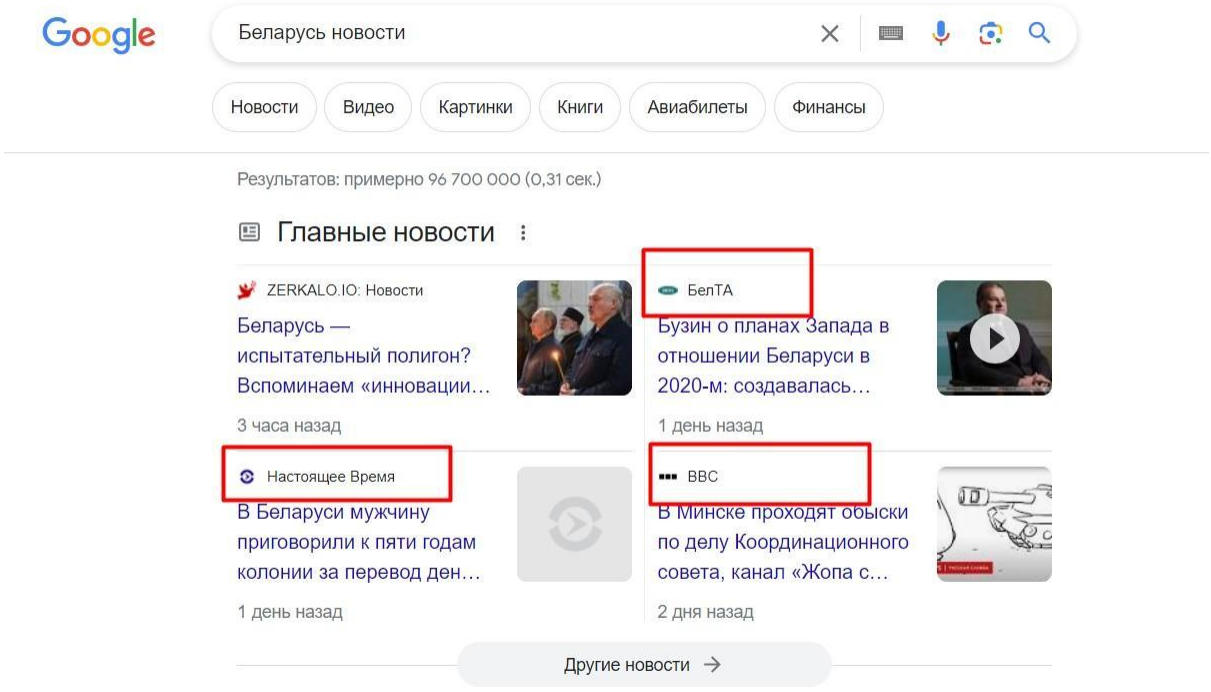
Same problem is observed with Facebook links to blocked websites.

Examples:

a) When you search for news about Belarus in Russian using Google Search, top results are Belarusian as well as Russian propagandistic resources appear (see a screenshot below). The Belarusian daughter of the Russian Sputnik (third line in the screenshot) still opens despite being under the official EU sanctions. Belarusian channels that are controlled by the state and disseminating propaganda and disinformation (a copy-paste from Russian when it comes to anti-Ukrainian narratives) have not been blocked, no sanctions have been applied.



b) The second screenshot shows the topmost results in the latest news ("main news"), on December 3rd, 2023 it looked like this: there are four search results in total. Of these, one is a propaganda resource controlled by the Belarusian state Belta, another is the Russian service of the BBC, the third is the international Russian-language channel "Current Time" and only one, the fourth, is the website of the Belarusian independent media "Zerkalo." If you scroll through the first page of the search results to the end, you will notice that there is practically no Belarusian independent media listed.



3. Safety of users inside Belarus and information reach

Vague ‘anti-extremist’ regulation is being used to ban not only activities of independent media and civil society initiatives but it is also widely used to prosecute their supporters and contributors. On the one hand, sharing, likes, commenting and other interactions with extremist-labeled accounts can be

considered as a criminal offense. On the other hand, not sharing, not liking and not engaging, leads to content being downrated and not reaching the audience.

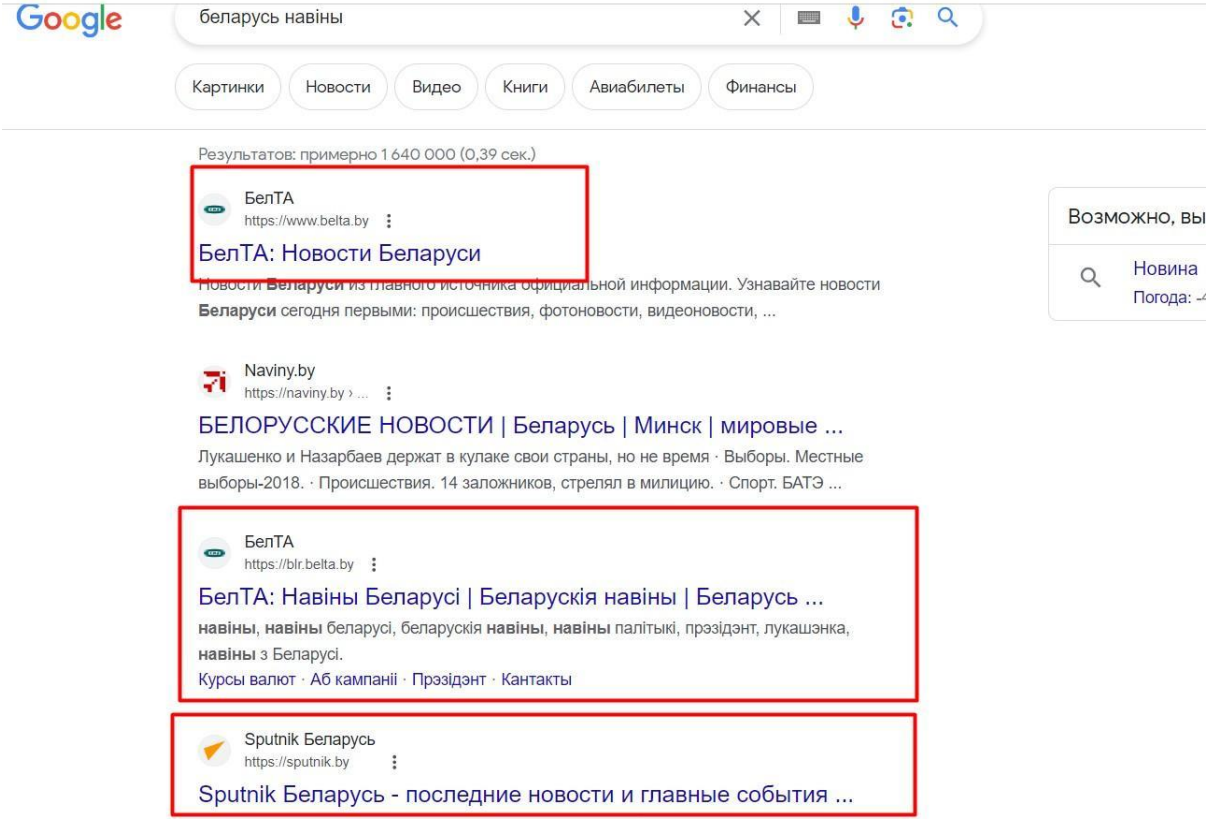
Positive: good practice of cooperating with AccessNow helpline to suspend compromised accounts (Google, Facebook, Instagram, Apple) of detained activists, journalists and HRDs.

4. Belarusian-language content and its moderation (Youtube, Google Ads, Meta)

Belarus is a country with two equally official languages – Russian and Belarusian. This means, content is produced in Russian, in Belarusian and simultaneously in Russian and Belarusian. However, for the purposes of Google services' reach, Belarus is regarded as part of the Russian-language segment of the digital market. Such status quo renders it almost impossible for Belarusian-language or bilingual Youtube content to get properly moderated and promoted. It also prevents content-creators (websites) from benefiting from Google Ads services, making it harder to grow an audience for creators, who speak Belarusian, and disincentivizing them from creating content.

Also it is unclear how content moderation of the Belarusian segment of Facebook and Instagram is implemented. In our experience, it often fails to refer to a local context and links to which moderators refer, are from Russian media. This is an important point of the digital aspect of decolonization.

Example: If you type "Belarus news" in the Belarusian language in Google Search bar, you will get a list of Belarusian and Russian propaganda resources in Russian in the first positions and only one Belarusian independent media (screenshot below). The newsrooms cannot use targeted advertising in the Belarusian language either on Google or YouTube. There is simply no such option.



5. .BY domain zone administration fully controlled by the state

In Belarus, the Operational and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration (OAC), a security agency, whose head is under the EU sanctions, is the administrator of the .BY domain zone (and the less popular Cyrillic .бел). This agency is the successor of the Minsk Special Center of the State

Technical Commission of the USSR, changed its name several times and since the mid-90s received the right to administer the .BY domain.

The OAC is directly involved in repressions in Belarus. In 2023, quoting formal grounds, the OAC started taking away domain names from independent media. For instance, the OAC deprived the independent publication EX-PRESS.BY of its domain name, requiring the owner, who fled from repression, to personally appear at the OAC to confirm the domain registration data. Using a similar scheme, the domain was taken away from BAJ and a number of other independent media.

In 2022, in Belarus, at the height of repression, the technical administrator of the .BY domain zone changed. Since 2010, it has been the "Reliable Programs" company (hoster.by), affiliated with the TUT.by portal, the largest Belarusian media. In 2021, the portal was destroyed, the editorial staff was partially arrested, and partially fled from Belarus. The leaders of the Reliable Programs Unitary Enterprise also went to prison. They were released, and a few months later transferred the right of technical administration to Belarusian Cloud Technologies LLC, which is associated with the authorities.

We believe, the Internet governance procedure and ICANN procedures could be used to deprive the OAC of the right to administer the .BY domain zone, since the OAC violates the main principle underlying Internet governance - the balance of interests of civil society, authorities and business. In Belarus, the government is illegitimate, and business, media, and civil society are subject to targeted, methodical repression.

Proposals and recommendations:

1) The key is the beginning of a dialogue between the Belarusian media community, representatives of human rights organisations, researchers, international organizations and Big Tech with the mediation of the European authorities in order to ensure that the Belarusian case – when technology companies unintentionally pessimize quality resources blocked by the Belarusian authorities and promote channels disseminating propaganda became the subject of discussion and development of a strategy to solve this problem.

2) We propose to create a working group, comprised of representatives of DGConnect, representatives of the Belarusian media sector, organizations involved in the development and monitoring of journalistic standards, researchers and human rights activists, as well as representatives of international organizations and BigTech to develop specific solutions: from the possible labeling of channels affiliated with the state, as potentially harmful or spreading disinformation, to helping to elaborating additional quality criteria for content in difficult and uncontested environments. We are convinced that this work should be systematic, transparent and regular. It cannot be reduced to negotiations between individual representatives of the Belarusian media sector and representatives of BigTech, and the decisions should not depend on individual personalities.

3) Ultimately, we are convinced that the Belarusian case is not unique, but perhaps one of the first in a series of cases when technology becomes a tool for totalitarian and authoritarian regimes to put pressure on civil society. And it requires a proper strategic approach, which is also taken into account by European regulators.

4) We would like to emphasize that a cautious, human rights-centred approach when working with Belarus should be implemented. Users already face draconian criminal charges for engagement on social media or consumption of independent content delivered via social media and search engines, while authoritarian regimes continue to spread propaganda and fear on those platforms. Big Tech must recognise the role their products play and actively strive to mitigate the harm.

Potential issues that could also be discussed within the proposed working group and specific proposed solutions:

- Develop due diligence plans and policies to prevent harmful overcompliance.
- Transparent policies and guidelines regarding content quality used by different BigTech companies for content moderation.
- Enabling to hide a list of subscribers/followers for independent media, bloggers or other sensitive profiles.
- Enable the use of AMP pages for Google Discover so as it helps to overcome some of these blockings, especially using Google News service. The service Google Discover currently does not allow the use of AMP pages, however, we think this could be a good practice helping the Belarusian independent media to overcome the blockings inside Belarus.
- Additional safeguards needed for Facebook users when allowing Belarusian users to download an archive of personal data under GDPR - this functionality may be used by police to restore deleted posts, messages, analyze likes and other content interactions.
- Meta: to introduce the option to hide a list of subscribers for media, bloggers and other sensitive profiles.
- Support civil society organisations and independent content producers through offering grant or discount support for the use of Google Cloud services.