



# Monitoring of hate speech against LGBTQ+ in the media of Belarus in 2023

Results for January-October 2023

"Journalists for Tolerance" Human rights initiative

2023

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## Introduction

‘Journalists for Tolerance’ (further – J4t) regularly monitor hate speech against vulnerable groups in the Belarusian media, including annual monitoring of rhetoric in relation to LGBTQ+. The purpose of the monitoring study is to provide a systematic review of the use of incorrect vocabulary and manifestations of hate speech in the Belarusian media against vulnerable groups.

In 2023, the J4t research team observed rhetorical fallacies and hate speech against LGBTQ+ for ten months, from the beginning of January till the end of October.

Special attention was paid to the statements that stigmatize LGBT persons.

### What is hate speech?

We understand the "hate speech" as a special way of linguistic construction of models and practices of social inequality <sup>1</sup>and take it as an axiom that incorrect rhetorical strategies can strengthen (and, at the extreme, generate) discriminatory practices. We believe the opposite is also true: correct rhetoric can help build relationships between representatives of different social groups based on the principles of equality and mutual respect.

In accordance with the methodological recommendations of human rights organizations in Belarus, <sup>2</sup>within the framework of this monitoring, we distinguish between 'hate speech' and 'incorrect vocabulary'.

By 'incorrect vocabulary' we mean stereotypical formulations regarding vulnerable groups of the population that do not pose a threat to security, do not contain calls for violence and do not dehumanize people from vulnerable groups. The non-critical use of stereotypes by journalists can create a breeding ground for the manifestations of more dangerous forms of 'hate speech'. At the same time, there should be no legal responsibility for such statements.

By 'hate speech' we mean statements that pose a threat to public safety, incite hatred and dehumanize certain groups of people. We conditionally divide hate speech manifestations into three groups, which differ in the threshold of seriousness in the expression of hate:

- direct calls to incite hatred, incitement to genocide, discrimination and violence;
- threats or insults motivated by a discriminatory attitude;
- statements containing discriminatory and stigmatizing attitudes.

Thus, individual publications included in the monitoring may be encoded as containing incorrect vocabulary or as containing hate speech. We believe that even certain signs of incorrect rhetoric, being widespread, acceptable and accepted by default, are able to support existing discriminatory practices. Therefore, we strive to fix and pay attention to any manifestations of incorrect rhetoric, regardless of their severity.

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<sup>1</sup> Индекс (ин)толерантности прессы. Э. Понарин, Д. Дубровский, А. Толкачева, Р. Акифьева // Язык вражды против общества/ Сост. А.Верховенский. - Москва: Центр «Сова», 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Hate Speech. Методические рекомендации правозащитных организаций в Беларуси.

If during the monitoring we classify a publication as containing hate speech, it means that this journalistic material contradicts the corporate standards of the Belarusian media sphere and requires a response from the journalistic community.

#### What mass media are monitored?

The monitoring focuses on the texts circulating in the media space of Belarus. The list of media outlets is formed in accordance with the following criteria:

1. The media has a website or a telegram channel.
2. The media appeals to a wide audience (i.e., the magazine ‘Glavnyi Bukhgalter’ (Chief Accountant) and the like were removed from the list; male and female publications remained, a newspaper for teenagers remained on the list as directed towards an audience sensitive to the topic of sexuality and gender identity).
3. The media publishes materials on socio-political topics (i.e., a newspaper of advertisements or jokes could not get into the list).

We identified over 200 media outlets that meet these criteria and divided them into 4 clusters depending on the scale (national and local) and the average monthly number of publications (up to 300 publications, 300 or more publications).

From the entire list divided in this way, 7 media outlets were selected to each cluster, for a total of 28 resources.

After August 2020, the media space of Belarus has changed a lot: Lukashenka’s regime closed the largest Internet portal tut.by, recognized as extremist and blocked the work of other media outlets, which are independent of the government. More than half of the media that were included in our monitoring study are currently blocked and are only available on social media/messengers or via VPN.

#### What questions does the monitoring answer and whom its results are addressed to?

The following issues were analyzed in detail within the monitoring study:

1. Which categories of media are more likely to use incorrect rhetoric against LGBTQ+ (and, consequently, which media authors should be the main target group of educational and awareness-raising events)?
2. Which incorrect rhetorical strategies are the most common (and, therefore, what should be the content of educational seminars, manuals for journalists, etc.)?
3. How has the use of incorrect rhetoric against LGBTQ+ in the Belarusian media changed compared to previous years (and, consequently, how effective are educational events, educational seminars, manuals for journalists)?

The monitoring results are addressed to the journalistic community, human rights defenders, representatives of vulnerable groups (the LGBTQ+ community, in this particular case), as well as educational organizations and awareness-raising initiatives working with the issue of counteraction to hate speech.

## Methodology and data collection

The study is based on a cluster stratified sample representing online media in Belarus. Both websites and telegram channels are considered as online media.

In 2023, the following media outlets were included in the list of monitored media:

Websites	Telegram-channels
<a href="#">Sputnik Belarus</a>	<a href="#">Zerkalo</a>
<a href="#">SB. Belarus Today</a>	<a href="#">Tea with raspberry jam</a>
<a href="#">Onliner</a>	<a href="#">Radio Svaboda</a>
<a href="#">aif.by</a>	<a href="#">Nash Niva</a>
<a href="#">mensby.com</a>	<a href="#">Pool pervogo</a>
<a href="#">Brest Courier (Brest)</a>	<a href="#">Nick and Mike</a>
<a href="#">Hrodzienskaya prauda (Hrodna)</a>	<a href="#">Strong news (Homiel)</a>
<a href="#">Vecherniy Mogilev</a>	<a href="#">Couloirs of KUKU</a>
<a href="#">/s13.ru/</a>	<a href="#">Yellow plums</a>
<a href="#">Minsk-news</a>	<a href="#">Ugly Koko by</a>
<a href="#">Homielskaya prauda (Homiel)</a>	<a href="#">NEXTA Live</a>
<a href="#">Svetlaye zhytstsiio (Lelchytsy)</a>	<a href="#">Belarus of the Brain</a>
<a href="#">Selskaya prauda (Zhabinka)</a>	
<a href="#">Ranak (Svetlahorsk)</a>	
<a href="#">Astravetskaya prauda (Astravets)</a>	
<a href="#">Luninetskiya naviny (Luninets)</a>	

A keyword search was conducted in the materials published in these media from the beginning of January till the end of October 2023. After the initial selection of all publications on the LGBTQ+ issue, all materials were analyzed for the presence of incorrect vocabulary. Each publication containing incorrect vocabulary was additionally analyzed to find hate speech manifestations.

Having an archive of monitoring regarding LGBTQ+ issues in previous years <sup>3</sup>allows us to compare the situation in 2023 with the data of 2019-2022.

A database consolidation of all the publications selected for monitoring is attached to this report — see the file Appendix. Hate Speech Monitoring, 2023.xlsx.

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<sup>3</sup> See the section "Our research" on the website of the human rights initiative "Journalists for Tolerance": <https://j4t.by/category/issledovaniya/>

## Coverage of LGBTQ+ issues in the Belarusian mass media

In January–October 2023, 22 out of 28 Belarusian online media selected for monitoring wrote at least once on the topic of LGBTQ+. In total, 441 materials published during the specified period were monitored.

This is 1.5 times more than in the same period of 2022. At the same time, in 2020-2022, we recorded a decrease in the number of publications, first due to the influence of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then, starting from August 2020, because of the political crisis in Belarus.

- It is also important to keep in mind that only 40% of the monitored publications were completely devoted to LGBTQ+ people or LGBTQ+ issues, whereas in the absolute majority of materials this topic was touched upon only in one or two sentences or in a paragraph.
- In January-October 2023, the media with national coverage published 8 times more materials on LGBTQ+-related topics than local media. In 2022, the gap was big enough, but still much smaller than in 2023, which indicates that the LGBTQ+ issue is going out of focus of regional media.
- In 2023, the share of correct materials slightly exceeded the share of incorrect publications: 51% of publications contain correct vocabulary regarding LGBTQ+, while 49% – incorrect. Our monitoring showed a steady decline in the share of correct materials already in 2020-2021, but then their share still exceeded the share of incorrect ones. In 2022, it was registered by the J4t research team for the first time after 2018 that the share of incorrect publications exceeded the share of correct materials in the monitored Belarusian media. The results of the monitoring study in 2023 show that the trend of the recent years has not been established completely yet.
- Like in 2022, 60% of incorrect vocabulary cases were found in the materials in which the LGBTQ+ issue was discussed in full or in a significant part in January – October 2023. At the same time, earlier incorrect vocabulary was more common where LGBTQ+ was only one of several issues discussed or where only one or two sentences were devoted to this issue. Thus, if earlier the problem was insufficient attention to the issue, now, the opposite trend is observed with the excessively close focus on it in the state-owned media with the purpose of inciting hostility towards LGBTQ+ people.
- Almost nine out of every ten publications that contain incorrect vocabulary also contain hate speech manifestations in the form of stigmatizing or discriminating statements.
- Whilst previously incorrect vocabulary was not necessarily associated with incitement to hatred, the monitoring results 2023 showed a very strong connection between them.
- Moreover, 7% of publications that contain formally correct vocabulary nevertheless contain hate speech manifestations. For the first time, we observed such a situation during the monitoring study in 2022. And it remained the same in the year of 2023.
- Thus, in 2023, 46% of publications on LGBTQ+ in the Belarusian media contain hate speech manifestations. It is slightly more than in 2022, when hate speech manifestations were found in 44% of publications. And this is considerably more

than in 2021, when hate speech manifestations were observed in 24% of monitored materials. It seems that hate speech in relation to LGBTQ+ in the Belarusian media has reached its maximum, as this year the Belarusian regime in power has seriously promoted the issue of struggling against “LGBT propaganda” on all fronts. However, the alternative representation of the LGBTQ+ community in independent media still prevails.

Since the second half year of 2020, the J4t research team has noticed that the predominance of correct vocabulary over incorrect in the Belarusian media became less stable and continued to weaken in 2021, until the picture changed completely to the negative in 2022. In relatively recent waves of monitoring studies (before the 2020 political crisis), we saw that the nation-wide media used correct vocabulary in relation to LGBTQ+ more and more often, while in local media the use of incorrect vocabulary remained unchanged.

In 2023, we saw that local media largely used incorrect rhetoric, including hate speech, in relation to LGBTQ+, while in the national media the negative trend was reversed to some extent.

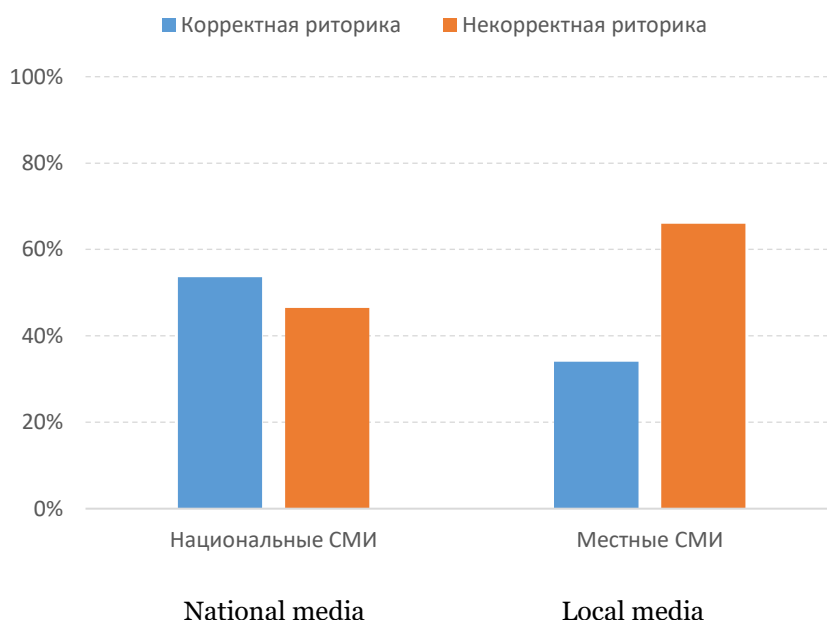
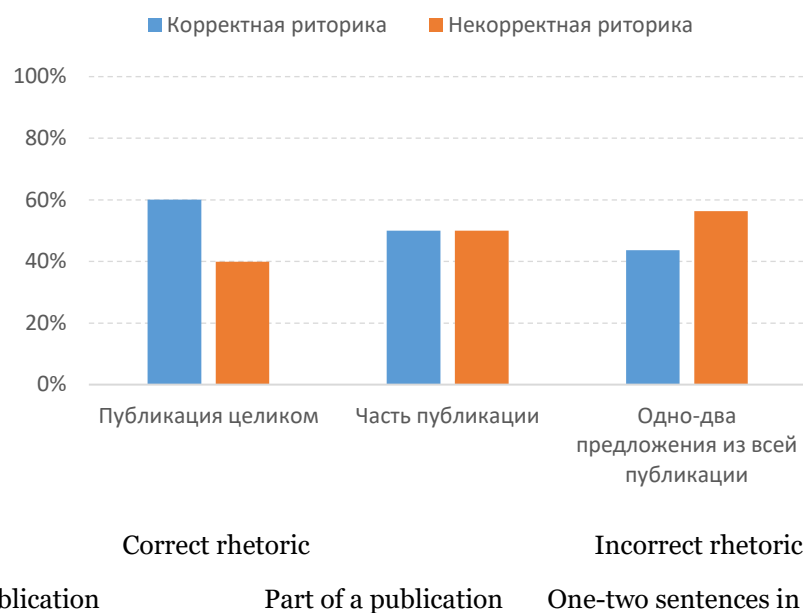


Chart 1. *Breakdown of correct and incorrect LGBTQ+ publications depending on media coverage*

In 2022, the J4t research team registered the drastic reduction of the share of correct vocabulary in the publications about LGBTQ people and other LGBTQ issues. If earlier the publications that were entirely dedicated to LGBTQ people or LGBTQ topics contained correct vocabulary in almost 90% of cases, in 2022, this share significantly dropped. In 2023, the situation remained unchanged. The J4t research team noticed that the publications that deeply cover the issue and contain incorrect vocabulary and hate speech manifestations appeared regularly in the monitored Belarusian media during the period under review.



*Chart 2. Breakdown of correct and incorrect publications on the topic of LGBTQ+, depending on the volume devoted to this issue*

The decrease in the number of publications on LGBTQ+, recorded by the J4t research team since the beginning of March 2020, was steadily accompanied by a simultaneous increase in the share of publications containing hate speech. Moreover, with an increase in the share of publications with incorrect vocabulary of more than 50%, the share of publications containing hate speech manifestations also increased dramatically – almost twice when compared to the 2021 result.

In 2023, we observed almost complete coincidence of the use of incorrect rhetoric and manifestations of hate speech and the unprecedented level of incitement to hatred in the state media. At the same time, the use of hate speech against LGBTQ people didn't increase significantly in comparison with 2022, since parallelly we observed the larger number of publications with correct rhetoric on the issue in independent media.



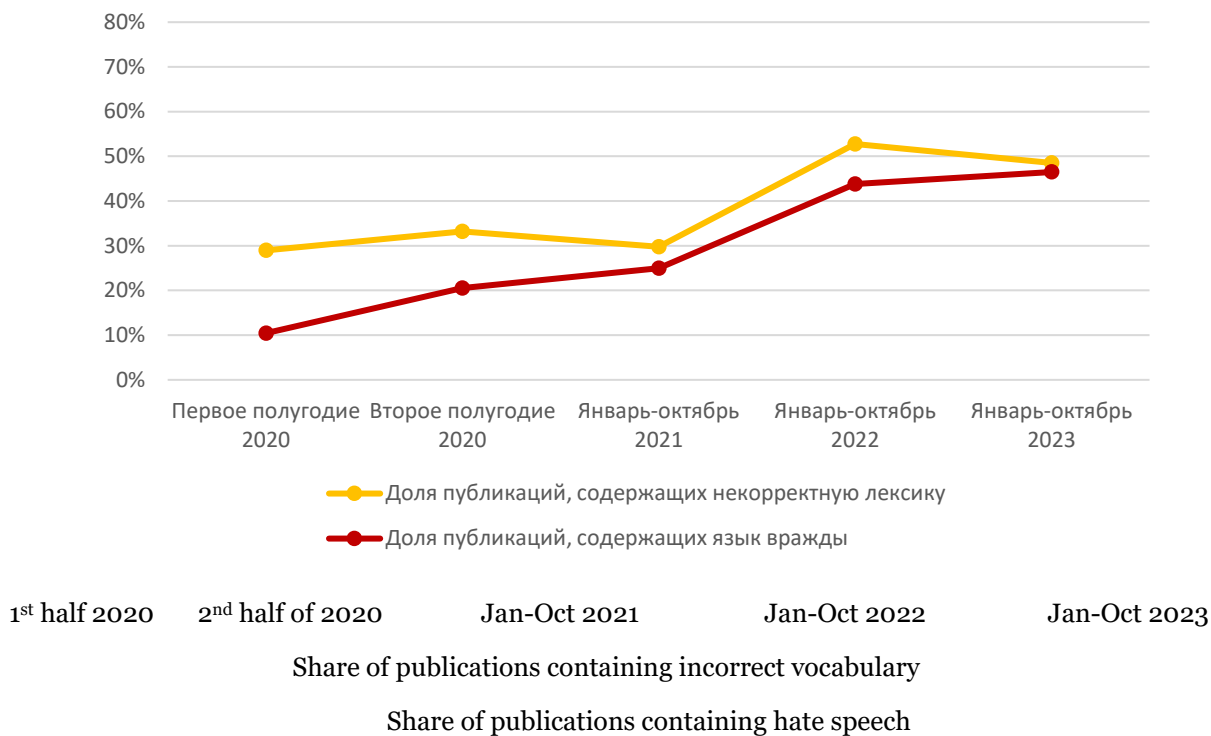


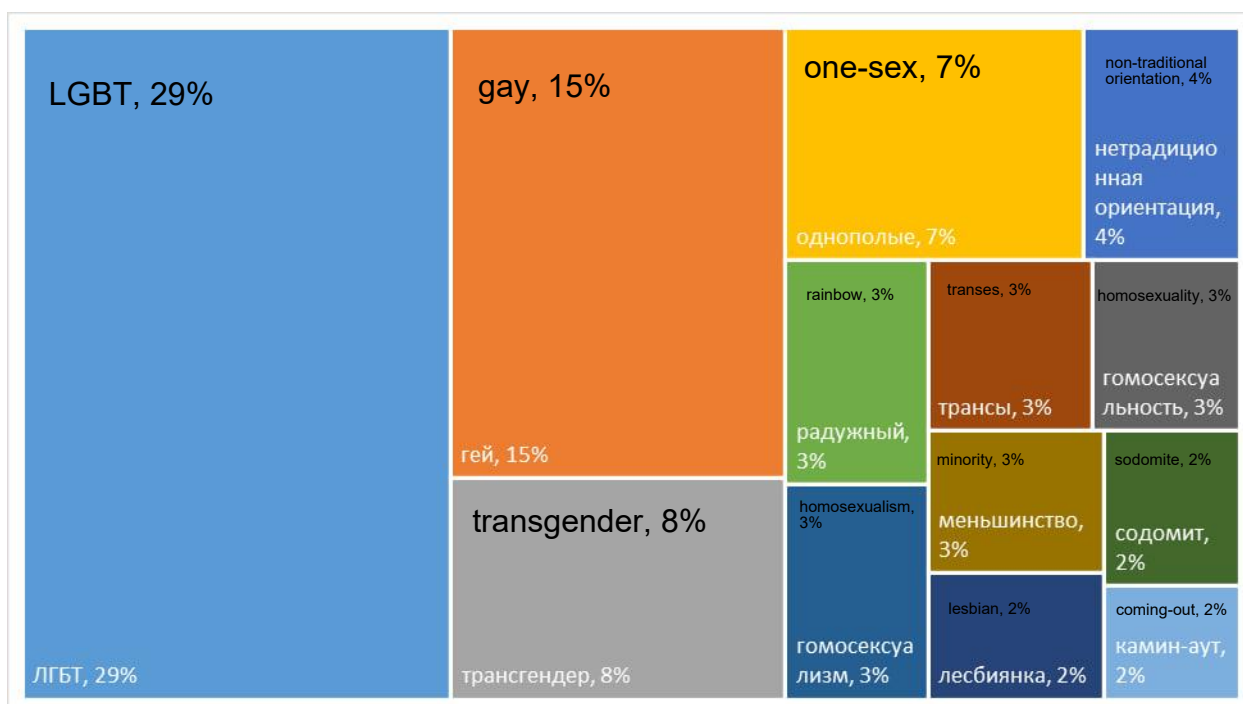
Chart 3. *Dynamics of the share of publications containing incorrect vocabulary and hate speech in 2020-2023.*

The situation with representation of LGBTQ-community in the Belarusian mass media remains to be dangerous. It was only every 25th publication on this issue that reproduced and supported the stigmatizing or discriminating attitudes towards LGBT people before the COVID-19 pandemic. After the beginning of the first wave of COVID-19, every seventh publication on the topic contained manifestations of hate speech. It was every fifth publication after the beginning of the political crisis, every fourth – in 2021, and almost every second publication in 2022 and 2023 that contained hate speech at that.

## Visibility of groups within LGBTQ+

The J4t research team interprets the different frequency of keyword mentions as manifestation of different visibility of groups within LGBTQ+. The monitoring data till 2020 indicated the consolidation and use as synonyms of two key categories, often representing LGBTQ+ as a whole: LGBT and gays. However, since 2021 till the present moment of time, it has been possible to observe the predominance of the LGBT category over the rest.

At the same time, the TOP 5 categories included 'transgender', 'same-sex relationships/marriages', and 'non-traditional orientation' in 2023. These categories were actively used by journalists from the state-owned media when criticizing the contemporary lifestyle of Western countries.



#### 4. Keywords mentioning <sup>4</sup>in LGBTQ+ related publications

In general, the use of incorrect expressions 'non-traditional orientation', 'sexual minority' and 'homosexuality' occurs in 15% of cases, which is similar to previous year's level. At the same time, in 2023, we registered the considerably increased use of such expressions as "rainbow" and "trans" to define LGBTQ+ representatives. It is also worth noting that, starting in 2020, again, for the first time after a break of several years, the words 'Sodom' and 'sodomite' began to appear in publications. In 2023, these words still occurred.

<sup>4</sup> This chart shows the ratio of mentions of individual keywords in publications that touch on LGBTQ+ topics. Information about absolute values for this indicator can be found in the database consolidation, which is an appendix to this report – see the file "Appendix. Monitoring of the "language of enmity", 2023.xlsx».

## Summary

- In 2023, 51% of monitored publications in the Belarusian mass media on LGBTQ+ issues contained correct vocabulary and 49% of such publications contained incorrect vocabulary. However, the situation seems to be very unstable.
- Incorrect vocabulary became less common in the Belarusian nation-wide media in comparison with local media in 2023. It was significant progress compared to 2022. At the same time, the LGBTQ+ issue practically disappeared in local media, and if covered there, the group was represented in the context of inciting hatred only.
- Just like in 2022, almost every second publication on the LGBTQ+ issue in the Belarusian media contained manifestations of hate speech in 2023. However, the trend of exponential growth of hate speech that characterized 2020-2022 was suspended.
- In 2023, again, just like in 2022, the J4t research team observed a situation where correct vocabulary was used to incite hatred in relation to LGBTQ+. As for incorrect vocabulary, in most cases it was accompanied by manifestations of hate speech.