Monitoring of hate speech in relation to LGBTQ+ in Belarusian Mass Media in 2021

Results for January – October 2021

'Journalists for Tolerance' Human Rights Initiative

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Contents

Introduction 3

The Monitoring Study and Data Collection Methods 5

The Coverage of LGBTQ+ Issues in Belarusian Mass Media 6

Visibility of Groups withint LGBTQ+ 9

Conclusions 10

## Introduction

'Journalists for Tolerance' regularly conduct monitoring studies of hate speech in relation to vulnerable populations in Belarusian mass media, including annual monitoring studies of rhetoric in relation to LGBTQ+.

The monitoring study is aimed at providing a systematic review on the use of disparaging vocabulary and manifestations of hate speech in relation to vulnerable groups with the special attention paid to the stigmatizing expressions in relation to LGBT-people.

We understand ‘hate speech’ as a special way of linguistic construction of models and practices of social inequality, and we take it as an axiom that disparaging rhetorical strategies are capable of reinforcing (and, in the extreme, generating) discriminatory practices. We believe that the opposite is also true. The correct rhetoric can help to build relationships between representatives of different social groups, based on the principles of equality and mutual respect.

In line with methodic recommendations of human rights organizations in Belarus,[[1]](#footnote-1) we differentiate between the notions of 'hate speech' and 'disparaging vocabulary' in this study. Thus, ‘disparaging vocabulary’ includes stereotypical statements in relation to vulnerable populations, which don’t pose security threats, don’t contain calls to violence, and don’t dehumanize people from vulnerable groups. The uncritical use of stereotypes by journalists can create fertile ground for more dangerous forms of 'hate speech'. At the same time, there shouldn’t be any legal responsibility for such statements.

As for ‘hate speech’, in our vision it includes the kind of statements, which pose security threats, contain calls to violence, and dehumanize people from vulnerable groups.

We divide conditionally manifestations of hate speech in three groups, depending on the level of severity of expression of hatred:

• direct incitement to hatred, incitement to genocide, discrimination and violence;

• threats or insults, motivated by the discriminatory attitude;

• statements containing discriminatory and stigmatizing attitudes.

Thus, separate publications included in the monitoring study may be coded as containing ‘disparaging vocabulary’ or as ‘containing hate speech’. We believe that even minor features of disparaging rhetoric, being widespread, acceptable and accepted by default, are capable of supporting the existing discriminatory practices. Therefore, we strive to record and pay attention to any manifestations of disparaging rhetoric, regardless of their severity.

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

The following issues have been analyzed in detail within the monitoring research:

1. Which categories of media are more likely to use disparaging rhetoric about LGBTQ+ (and, thus, which media representatives should be the main target group for educational activities)?

2. What disparaging rhetorical strategies are most common (and, thus, what should be the content of educational seminars, manuals for journalists, etc.)?

3. How has the use of disparaging rhetoric in relation to LGBTQ + in the Belarusian media changed compared to previous years (and, thus, how effective are educational activities, educational seminars, and manuals for journalists)?

The monitoring results are addressed to the journalistic community, human rights defenders, representatives of vulnerable populations (LGBTQ community in this specific case) as well as to enlightening organizations and initiatives that work with the issue of hate speech.

## The Monitoring Study and Data Collection Methods

The study is based on the clustered stratified sampling that represents online media in Belarus.

The list of monitored media has been formed in line with the following criteria:

1. The media has a Web-site.
2. The media addresses a wide audience (i.e., 'The Chief Accountant' magazine and similar publications were removed from the list; publications for men and women were left on the list, a newspaper for teenagers was left on the list as addressing the audience that is sensitive to the topics of sexuality and gender identity).
3. The media publishes materials on social and political topics (i.e., a newspaper of adverts or jokes could not be included in the list).

We identified 216 media outlets that met these criteria and divided them into 6 clusters depending on the scale (national and local) and the average monthly number of publications (more than 500, from 100 to 500, less than 100).

6 media outlets were selected in each cluster out of the general aggregated list, 36 media, all in all.

The media space of Belarus changed considerably in January – October 2021. Lukashenka's regime closed down the largest Web-portal TUT.BY, recognized as extremist and blocked operation of other independent non-state media.

Out of 36 monitored media, 10 media outlets are currently blocked for public access online and available only in the social media / messengers or through VPN.

Nevertheless, the media continue to operate. And keyword search was conducted on publications in those online media from January to October 2021.

Following the initial selection of all publications on the topic of LGBTQ+, all materials were analyzed for the presence of disparaging vocabulary. Each publication containing disparaging vocabulary was further analyzed for the presence of manifestations of hate speech.

The presence of LGBTQ+ media monitoring archive for the previous years[[2]](#footnote-2) allows making comparisons between the situation in 2021 and the data for 2019-2020.

The consolidated database with all publications, which have been selected for this monitoring study, is attached in the file: *Приложение. Мониторинг «языка вражды», 2021 год.xlsx*.

## The Coverage of LGBTQ+ Issues in Belarusian Mass Media

24 out of 36 selected and monitored online media, including 10 out of 10 media outlets, blocked for public access in Belarus, wrote on the LGBTQ+ topic at least once in January – October 2021. All in all, 272 materials were analyzed within the monitoring study during the period under review. It was almost two times less than during the same period in 2020.

At the same time, we recorded a decrease in the number of publications in 2020, first due to the impact of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then subject to the influence of the political crisis in Belarus, starting in August 2020.

* It is interesting to note that the topic of LGBTQ+ in the Belarusian media often appears in a non-Belarusian context. The life and general situation of LGBT people in Belarus are touched upon only in 35% of all publications on the issue.
* It should be also taken into account that only 20% of monitored publications have been fully dedicated to LGBT-people or LGBT-thematic, whilst the overwhelming majority of materials touched upon this issue in 1-2 sentences only.
* Nation-wide media outlets published twice as many publications on the LGBTQ+ issues than local media in January – October 2021.
* The share of correct materials still exceeds the share of incorrect publications, but the difference between them is decreasing for the second year in a row. 62% of monitored publications contained correct vocabulary in relation to LGBTQ+. At the same time, 38% of monitored materials contained disparaging vocabulary in relation to LGBTQ+.
* 78% cases of use of disparaging vocabulary were registered in the publications, where the LGBTQ+ issue is touched upon among several disclosed topics or where only 1-2 sentences were dedicated to the LGBTQ+ issue.
* On average, two out of three monitored publications that contained disparaging vocabulary also contained manifestations of hate speech in the form of stigmatizing or discriminating expressions. Thus, 24% of publications on the LGBTQ+ issue in the Belarusian media contained manifestations of hate speech in 2021. It is much more than in 2020, when manifestations of hate speech were registered in 10% of publications in the first half year of 2020 and 20% of publications in the second half year of 2020 after the start of the political crisis in the country. The political crisis continues and hate speech in mass media is further increasing.

We still observe an excess of the share of correct materials over the share of disparaging publications. However, since the second half of 2020, this trend has become less stable and continues to weaken in 2021.

During the media monitoring studies before the political crisis in 2020 we noted that nation-wide media make use of correct vocabulary in relation to LGBTQ+ more and more frequently, whilst the use of disparaging vocabulary in local media remains on practically the same level.

However, presently we note that the difference between the media with national and local coverage becomes significantly smaller. Although the share of disparaging publications in nation-wide media is still lower than in local media, this share is rapidly growing.

Chart 1. *Division of correct and disparaging publications on the LGBTQ+ issue depending on the media coverage*

Moreover, it was registered earlier that correct vocabulary could be found in almost 90% of publications, which were totally dedicated to LGBT-people or LGBT-thematic. The percentage decreased to 60% in 2021. Thus, manifestations of disparaging vocabulary presently can be found in 30-40% of publications, regardless of the level of coverage of LGBT issue. This is an obvious regression in comparison with the situation before August 2020.

Chart 2. *Division of correct and disparaging publications on the LGBTQ+ issue depending on the share of its coverage*

The decreasing number of publications on the LGBTQ+ issue, which has been registered by monitors since March 2020, is still accompanied with the simultaneously growing number of publications, containing hate speech. If the share of publications with disparaging vocabulary is continuously registered around 30%, the share of publications with manifestations of hate speech is steadily growing. It increased by 2.5 times within a year.

*Chart 3. Dynamics of the shares of publications containing disparaging vocabulary and hate speech in 2020–2021*

It is worth mentioning that before the COVID-19 pandemic, only each 25th publication on the LGBTQ+ issues reproduced or supported the stigmatizing or discriminatory statements in relation to LGBT-people. Following the first wave of coronavirus pandemic, every 7th publication on the LGBTQ+ issues contained manifestations of hate speech. Following the beginning of the political crisis, every 5th publication on the LGBTQ+ issues contained hate speech. Presently, every 4th monitored publication on the LGBTQ+ issues contains manifestations of hate speech.

## Visibility of Groups withint LGBTQ+

Different frequency of mentioning certain key words is interpreted by monitors as a sign of different visibility of groups within LGBTQ+. The recent monitoring data indicated the consolidation and use of two key categories as synonyms, most often representing LGBTQ+ as a whole: LGBT and gays. However, in accordance with the latest monitoring results for the period of January – October 2021, it is possible to observe the prevalence of the LGBT category over the rest. The TOP-5 categories include 'one-sex relations/marriages' and 'transgender' this time. The categories are actively used by journalists from the state-owned media, who intend to criticise modern life style of Western democracies this way.



Chart 4. *The mentioning[[3]](#footnote-3) of key words in publications on the LGBTQ+ issue*

In general, the use of such expressions as "non-traditional orientation", "sexual minority" and "homosexualism" has been registered in 19% of cases during the present monitoring study. The disparaging expressions were encountered somewhat less frequently in 17% of cases during the previous monitoring studies in 2019-2020. On another note, it is worth mentioning that the word "sodom" as a noun and as an adjective began to appear in publications about LGBTQ+ again in 2020 for the first time after several years break. In 2021, the disparaging word was registered, too.

## Conclusions

* 62% of monitored publications contained correct vocabulary about LGBTQ+ and 38% of monitored publications contained disparaging vocabulary about LGBTQ+ in 2021. The share of correct publications in mass media still exceeded the share of disparaging publications, but the trend was negative.
* The disparaging vocabulary was encountered as frequently in nation-wide media as in local media in 2021. It was a significant regression compared to the situation before the onset of the political crisis in Belarus.
* Every 4th publication on the LGBTQ+ issues in the Belarusian mass media contained manifestations of hate speech in 2021.
1. Hate Speech. Методические рекомендации правозащитных организаций в Беларуси. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Web-section 'Our Studies' on the Web-site of 'Journalists for Tolerance' Human Rights Initiative: <https://j4t.by/category/issledovaniya/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This chart shows the ratio of mentionings of certain keywords in publications that touch upon the topic of LGBTQ+. Information on the absolute values for this indicator can be found in the consolidated database, which is attached to this report – see the file *Приложение. Мониторинг «языка вражды», 2021 год.xlsx* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)