

*The Information Strategy is a document,
which defines the role of the information system of an entity/organization
in implementing strategic plans of this entity/organization
and describes how this role should be performed.*

INFORMATION STRATEGY (IS) OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS FOR THE SOCIAL INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

INTRODUCTION AND ANALYSIS

In 2016, the Republic of Belarus ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Its main provisions are in line with the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus and grant persons with disabilities full political, social and economic and personal rights and freedoms.

The Law of the Republic of Belarus *On the Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Belarus* of 11.11.1991, the Law *On the Prevention of Disability and Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities* of 23.07.2008, the State Program *On the Social Protection and Employment Promotion for 2016-2020* and the state information policy, which contributes to their successful implementation, aim to ensure the social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

With the signing of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the approval of the National Action Plan for the implementation of the provisions of the Convention, this topic has been gaining attention at all levels of government and on all public platforms. Outreach activities gained a new focus aiming at raising public awareness about acute problems faced by persons with disabilities and enhancing the communication of persons with disabilities with the outside world.

All this was made possible today thanks to the cooperation among public, international and non-governmental organizations. Educational materials and newsletters for persons with disabilities are published in Belarus including special Braille literature for the visually challenged. Belarusian mass media have regular columns covering the life of persons with disabilities and publish special thematic editions. The country runs information and awareness campaigns.

The proprietary editions of non-governmental associations of persons with disabilities more efficiently incorporate persons with disabilities into professional journalism. The streets in Belarusian towns and cities now have a series of billboards featuring persons with disabilities.

Internet resources are becoming a special information and communication environment for persons with disabilities containing digital libraries with media content on the subject. A number of TV programs are broadcast with sign-language interpretation or rolling titles. The Belarusian Union of Journalists (BUJ) and the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) have increased their influence on editorial policies aiming to integrate persons with disabilities into social life. The Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus together with the BUJ hold an annual nationwide contest in the special categories of Best Media Content and Best Socially-Themed Publication – *Golden Letter* and *Golden Pen*.

At the same time, a number of challenges related to discrimination against persons with disabilities have been identified. Inadequate access of persons with disabilities to mass media and latest information still remains a problem. For example, there is virtually no information field for the hearing impaired. Problems faced by persons with different disabilities receive uneven media coverage – there are comfortable and uncomfortable topics for mass media. The unified information policy for reporting on challenges faced by persons with disabilities has not been fully harmonized. There is a shortage of professional highly skilled specialists in building awareness about the issues of persons with disabilities. There is a dire need for a pool of outreach and communication specialists.

A balanced approach to representing persons with disabilities is not yet in place. The public perception stems from two extremes: the image of “a hero” overcoming difficult life circumstances and the image of “a victim” constantly in need of help and care. This makes it more difficult to perceive persons with disabilities as an organic part of society and hinders fair understanding of the situation. The lack of a common conceptual framework (no common terminology is in place) and the predominance of the medical context (with the emphasis on the medical condition) in reporting on the issues of disability over the social and legal contexts are also a challenge.

The efficiency of the efforts in ensuring the social inclusion of persons with disabilities is undermined by the lack of clear standards for media content.

The fragmented and unvarying, superficial and simplistic public awareness about persons with disabilities does not meet the social needs of society nor does it satisfy the demand for information products and services. Efficient information exchange requires a common information resource.

The transformation of public mind is ensured by sustained efforts in enlightenment, awareness building, implementation of new approaches and behavior models. One of the most challenging problems of the social fabric of a state – full social inclusion of persons with disabilities – should be solved by using all available instruments of informational influence and joining the efforts of all actors in the information process and the whole of Belarusian society.

The informational influence should be focused on creating general favorable environment: raising of public awareness about the life and opportunities of persons with disabilities on the one hand and assistance to persons with disabilities in overcoming the heightened sense of isolation, inferiority and mental discomfort on the other hand. The information about persons with disabilities should be conveyed in the context of relevancy and usefulness for entire society and not only for persons with disabilities.

All of the above highlights the need to create in the Republic of Belarus a common information strategy (IS) for the social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

The Information Strategy serves as the key guidelines for action for all stakeholders over the period of 2017 to 2020.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE IS

Goal:

To promote the transformation of the information space conducting to the full social inclusion of persons with disabilities taking into account the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Objectives:

- To develop and implement standards for media content on the social inclusion of persons with disabilities in 2017–2018;
- In 2018–2019, to create a common nationwide information resource with an interactive database of media content, a communication platform accessible to all target groups and with the involvement of public, international, commercial and non-governmental organizations as part of the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus;
- In 2017–2020, to improve the system of training of outreach and communication specialists working within the framework of the Information Strategy and dealing with social issues by setting up a social PR school and creating a social press pool.

PRINCIPLES

General:

- Respect for inherent human dignity, personal autonomy including the

freedom of choice and independence;

- Provision of reliable, evidence-based information about the issues of persons with disabilities;
- Non-discrimination;
- Full and effective social inclusion;
- Respect for the specific characteristics, abilities and individuality of persons with disabilities of all ages and their recognition as an equal part of society;
- Equal opportunities;
- Accessibility;
- Gender equality.

Information and communication-related principles:

- Principle of social and civic responsibility;
- Incorporation of the Information Strategy for the inclusion of persons with disability into the common information strategy of the state;
- Principle of making local, regional and global partnerships (involving international, public, non-governmental and private organizations) to create a common information space ensuring the full social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Principles of ethics and respect for human rights when exerting informational influence:

- Principle of confidentiality;
- Principle of advocacy, protection of the rights and interests of the IS partners;
- Principle of effectiveness of informational influence;
- Principle of sustainable development;
- Principle of taking into account the interests and age, gender and ethnocultural characteristics of society, faith-based and target groups when exerting informational influence;
- Principle of using and promoting proven practices;
- Principle of following modern communication trends and techniques;
- Principle of openness of information;

- Principle of harmonized standards.

CHALLENGES IN THE INFORMATION FIELD

During working meetings, conferences and round tables on the analysis of the effectiveness of the efforts aimed at the social inclusion of persons with disabilities, specialists from public and non-governmental organizations, the media and experts have consistently highlighted a number of challenges to be addresses in the Information Strategy.

The content analysis of the Belarusian media landscape and the publication trends also corroborate the existence of a problematic field: the subject of disability is not perceived in the context of respect for human rights; persons with disabilities are represented as a social minority. The aspects of disability are hardly ever used as the topic for TV broadcasts and talk shows; persons with disabilities are practically never invited to the studio as guests or participants in TV programs. All this prevents from creating an information society of equal opportunities.

The Information Strategy under development addresses the problematic issues that are relevant for both media organizations and key vulnerable populations.

The challenges can be grouped as follows:

The lack of a common information policy for representing disability:

- Lack of national standards for developing media content on persons with disabilities;
- Need for unification (harmonization) of information communications and principles in the media sector with the state parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
- Underuse of mass media as a driver for adapting the informational and other kinds of space to the needs of persons with disabilities and consequently passive information behavior of both persons with disabilities and those responsible for arranging such adaptation;
- Fragmentation of information and PR campaigns, outreach activities promoting socially positive attitude to persons with disabilities;
- Non-regular coverage of the issue of disability (with the International Day of Persons with Disabilities serving as the main annual newsworthy event). As is known, the representation of a given social group in the media increases its social significance and legitimizes its social status

and recognition.

Stigmatization of disability in the media:

- Lack of a common conceptual framework. In their reports, the media use various correct and incorrect nomenclature (*a disabled person, persons with disorders, a mentally or physically challenged person, a person with special needs, physically handicapped persons, etc.*);
- Predominance of the medical context (with the emphasis on the medical condition) in reporting on the issues of disability over the social and legal contexts;
- Reproduction and replication of recurring social stereotypes about persons with disabilities as *persons in need* and *objects of charity*;
- Discriminating attitude: persons with disabilities are represented as objects of sympathy and targeted aid, a symbol of inferiority;
- Lack of a balanced approach to representing persons with disabilities. The media shape the image based on two extremes: the image of a hero overcoming difficult life circumstances and the image of a victim, a sick person constantly in need of help and care. To improve the status of persons with disabilities, the media should help the public see the other side of their lives: their achievements, discoveries, successes in cultural, recreational, professional, household and family and other areas;
- Neglect of the gender aspect. Media reports mainly feature men with disabilities as the symbol of rising above the disability, an epitome of courage, a vivid example of the conflict between manliness and pity. Very little coverage is given to personal and family lives of persons with disabilities, women with disabilities giving birth to children, etc.;
- Frequent lack of modality, predominance of informative, impersonal publications reporting statistical data, regulatory legal acts and comments to them.

Lack of skilled specialists in building awareness about disability:

- Scarcity of quality, updated and innovative information products;
- Lack of special training programs/workshops for journalists, media editors reporting on disability;
- Lack of recommendations, guidelines on communication with persons with disabilities;
- Insufficient counseling of non-governmental initiatives and registered non-governmental organizations/social sector on how to work

with the media.

Lack of access to the full range of information on disability:

- Lack of a common information resource on the issues of disability;
- Inadequate coordination among public, international and non-governmental organizations when developing media content.

TARGET GROUPS

The Information Strategy divides the target groups in two categories:

1. Subjects that create and disseminate information – authors and creators of media content (text, photo, video, audio content);
2. Objects that receive information – *targets*, i.e. target groups, on which information activity is focused.

Below are the target groups that should be classified as category one or two. It should be noted that the same group can belong to both categories. The suggested list should be regularly updated and adjusted.

Target groups:

1. Public organizations including their subordinate public institutions, in particular those providing services to persons with disabilities:

- Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Health of the Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Culture Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Sport and Tourism of the Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Housing and Utilities of the Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Antimonopoly Regulation and Trade of the Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Architecture of the Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Emergency Situations of the Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus;
- Ministry of Industry of the Republic of Belarus.
- Members of the House of Representatives;
- Members of the Council of the Republic.
- Local authorities (executive committees)

2. International organizations:

- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP);
- World Health Organization (WHO);
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF);
- United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA);
- International Labor Organization (ILO).

3. Non-governmental organizations:

- Non-governmental associations, unions, charity and other funds including those providing services to persons with disabilities;
- Faith-based organizations.

4. Mass media:

- State media;
- Commercial media;
- Non-commercial non-state media.

5. Business:

- Commercial organizations.

6. Most vulnerable populations:

- Persons with disabilities;
- Persons closest to persons with disabilities.

7. Public at large.

STANDARDS

The standards are based on generally accepted international standards, are universal and uniform for all kinds of disability.

The standards can be divided into the following groups:

- Ethical, humanitarian standards;
- Gender, ethnocultural, related to special characteristics of target groups, etc.;
- Standards related to nomenclature (a table containing a column with recommended terms and a column with non-recommended terms, e.g. *persons with disabilities* v. *the disabled*);
- "Journalist" standards (approvals, uses of information not clear to the audience, etc., a body, which can serve as a guarantor of the reliability of

information, etc.);

- Standards for public service announcements (to set up a focus group consisting among others of the representatives of UN agencies and to use its findings to inform decisions on the approval of public service announcements by the Ministry of Antimonopoly Regulation and Trade of the Republic of Belarus, other qualitative studies confirming the effectiveness of the information product).

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

1. To develop and to approve the IS monitoring and evaluation indicators, to identify the baseline data;
2. To identify and to test the methods of information collection and data sources, collection frequency, persons responsible for data collection;
3. To set up an Expert Council for monitoring and analysis of media content, discussion and conflict resolution, development and corrected promotion of the IS consisting of the representatives of public, international and non-governmental organizations, the media that are influential in the information and communication sphere and public at large (“Nothing about us without us” principle);
4. To develop a mechanism of monitoring of the common information resource;
5. To determine a mechanism of notification of stakeholders about the monitoring and evaluation results and to ensure feedback;
6. To develop a system of qualitative social and psychological analysis of the information field in the country, the needs of specialists and all target groups affected by the Information Strategy.

SPECIALISTS AND THEIR TRAINING

The Information Strategy is a tool for specialists working in the information sphere. This category encompasses all actors involved in the creation, development, promotion, evaluation and monitoring of the information product including:

- copy writers, authors of photo and video content;
- designers;
- directors;

- script writers;
- cameramen;
- PR specialists;
- press secretaries;
- editors;
- marketing experts;
- website moderators;
- bloggers;
- managers and employees of press clubs;
- customers placing orders for information products in different organizations.

The categorization of specialists makes it possible to identify what knowledge and skills will be needed and how to organize training and advanced training.

Information products refer to text, audio, photo and video content in all formats and on all subjects in relation to persons with disabilities.

The poorly developed social PR, the lack of a training program or a course for specialists in building awareness about the issue of persons with disabilities will be the overall content of the training program for all specialists at all stages of work (development, promotion, monitoring and evaluation). A social PR school may be one of the forms of such training.

The creation of a social pool (community) as an important tool promoting and ensuring the effectiveness and sustainable development of the IS and promoting a dialogue in society will be one of the stages in the training of specialists. Such formations as a press pool and various lobbies are an important instrument of influence, which help protect and promote the interests of certain groups. Without having a rigid structure (based rather on a network principle), this community will also provide consultations at the request of target groups and specialists. The social pool is designed to combine the addresses of speakers and strengthen their position.

Taking into account the relevance and ever-growing popularity of social media (Twitter, V Kontakte, Facebook, Odnoklassniki, YouTube) and their influence on shaping public opinion, training of specialists in this area can be identified as a separate item.

A series of trainings as well as the capacity of the Expert Council and the Common Information Resource will be used to create a pool of specialists, to train and to involve them in the overall processes of the IS.