

Datafile of Eastern European Telecommunications

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Belarus

Satellite and Cable

Regulations

The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) is in charge of telecoms policy, licensing, certification and harmonisation of equipment and tariff approval. It is also the authorised signatory of Intersputnik, Intelsat and Eutelsat. The use of satellite dishes to receive TV is permitted. Cable and satellite television broadcasters must obtain a licence from the MPT.

Satellite market overview

Beltelecom provides satellite communications in Belarus. The company's Teleport complex went into operation in October 1996 and consists of three earth stations. One station covers the Indian Ocean region via the Intersputnik Express 6 satellite - a civil telecoms and TV delivery platform. Despite its number, Express 6 is the third of the Express satellites (after 1 and 2) and became operational in December 1996, replacing Gorizont 24 at 80°E. It is not clear why the numbering of the Express series jumps from two to six, but Express 2 and 6 are the only ones currently operational. Six new Express satellites are planned and in April 1999 Intersputnik announced that the construction of the first, Express-A1, which will replace Express 6, was nearing completion. Beltelecom uses Intersputnik to link with India and Kyrgyzstan.

Beltelecom's other two earth stations provide connectivity to Eutelsat at 10° East, which reaches the UK, and Intelsat at 342° East, which connects Belarus to North America. Beltelecom also offers connection to Inmarsat's mobile satellite service and claims to have held negotiations with Globalstar and Iridium over the possibility of forging similar service agreements with them.

There are no reliable data available regarding the number of homes in Belarus receiving direct to home (DTH) satellite programming. Due to the prohibitive cost of buying and installing individual satellite dishes, most satellite reception in Belarus is via collective antennae (SMATV and CATV).

Cable market overview

At the beginning of November 1999 the MPT claimed that it had licensed more than 100 operators to design, construct or operate cable networks in Belarus. That said, due to the country's recent economic history and the restrictive operating environment that prevails, many of these licences remain either unused or are used to offer little more than retransmission of terrestrial TV stations from Russia. In 1998, for example, the dominant Russian broadcaster ORT recorded a Belarussian viewing share of 51%, down from 53% the year before.

There are only two major cable operators in Belarus, both of which offer services only in Minsk. Cosmos TV is a joint venture between the US company Metromedia International and the Republican Radio and TV Transmission Centre. It was formed in December 1993 and commercial services via microwave multipoint distribution (MMDS) were launched in Minsk and the immediate surrounding area in July 1996. Initially it offered a 16-channel package of local and imported

(mainly Russian) viewing but this has now been increased to 24 channels. By the start of November 1999 Cosmos claimed 10,000 subscribers, up from 7,500 at the end of 1998. For several years now it has been waiting to be awarded a licence to build a fibre-optic cable network, which is why it currently relies on MMDS. It is still hoping to be awarded such a licence, however, and if and when it is successful, it may extend its coverage beyond Minsk.

The other major cable operator is state-owned Minsk Telecom Network (MTIS) which inherited the capital's 55km of fibre-optic cable networks when it was established in 1990. Originally MTIS rented out its cable networks to private television companies, many of which went bankrupt. According to Cosmos TV, MTIS' outdated cable systems had not had much impact on the Belarussian cable market until the summer of 1998 when it launched a number of new channels and announced its intention to upgrade its networks. Although no subscriber figures for MTIS are available, it is believed that the operator has plans to develop a digital TV network and, according to the Minsk press, has installed a trial digital fibre-optic network which offers fast Internet access in addition to around 40 television channels.

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