

## The Stalemate of Deepened Integration: Analysis of the Russian Anti-Belarus Disinformation Campaign in 2019



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## Introduction

December, 8, 2019 marked the 20th anniversary since signing the treaty on establishment of Union State between Russia and Belarus. Back in the 1990s, the activists and leaders of the political opposition saw this document as a threat to the sovereignty of Belarus and demanded to stop the process of crawling integration that accelerated in the second part of the 2010s. During the last two decades, Russia has been doing its best to attach its closest Western neighbor to oneself in social, economic and military dimensions. Despite numerous crises in the relationships between the two countries (so-called gas and milk wars), the developments at the end of 2019 were extraordinary, not least of all due to the large-scale information attack, launched by Russia.

During 2019, the political elite of the two countries conducted multiple meetings, where they discussed further progress of the integration process, which was described as a threatening development by Belarusian journalists and political scientists. Amid the difficult negotiations on oil taxes (“tax maneuver”), it was believed that Russia was plotting a plan of annexing Belarus in the same vein as it had done with Crimea. Both public officials and the Presidents themselves frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the way the talks were going, which led to the suspicions that Russia had suggested Belarus should give up sovereignty in exchange for certain economic benefits. Also, the Eastern neighbor was allegedly frustrated by Belarusian independent actions on international matters (e.g. reluctance to acknowledge the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and its position on military conflict with Ukraine) and its attempts to conduct “pendulum policy” (i.e. balance out between East and West). The “deepened integration”, in the view of Russian ideologists,[1] would be a logical development of the process of integration launched in the second half of the 1990s.[2]

Within this article, we are looking into the wave of disinformation articles, generated by the propagandist bloggers on the websites supported by Russia, launched to cover the whole of Belarusian territory with propagandist materials. In particular, we are considering the articles emerged between September and December 2019, the period of intensive negotiations between Russia and Belarus on “further integration”. Within this timeframe, bloggers published dozens of posts, degrading Belarusian culture and history, discrediting political opposition leaders, as well as highlighting the benefits of integration in political, economic and social spheres. In general, those posts were designed to generate fake news, to promote Russia-centered agenda, to provoke the interest of Russia supporters among the Belarusian citizens, and, as the overarching aim, to interfere with the decision-making at the highest level. Fake news got so much attraction within the Belarusian media flow that even the Belarusian President addressed it in his speeches.

The structure of the article is as follows: first, to provide the background, we will briefly describe the history of Belarus-Russia relations since the signing of the Union Treaty in 1996; secondly, we will analyze media reports, published in the network of propagandist media September through December 2019, to a) reconstruct the strategic narrative of “deepened integration” b) to describe the ways the bloggers treated Belarusian political opposition, and, finally, c) to show the process of construction of “meaningful Others”, that is, enemies of the Union State; thirdly, we will provide the policy advice based on the interviews with Belarusian political scientists and sociologists.

## Methodology

This paper relies on the following triangulation of methods: first, the members of the team conducted the desk research, presupposing the analysis of the existing relevant reports and researches, devoted to the examination of the extent of the disinformation and propaganda in Belarus; secondly, articles were analyzed via the lens of *content analysis* to reveal the key nodal points within the articles used by the propagandist bloggers about the key events in the political life of Belarus and the most significant political figures; thirdly, we used *in-depth semi-structured interviews* with the experts to test the findings within the first stage of our research.

Within the desk research, we considered the reports, devoted to the latest wave of disinformation and propaganda, launched by Russia to try and influence the public opinion in Belarus. In particular, we analysed the researches of Yeliseyeu (2019), Yeliseyeu and Laputska (2016), a report submitted by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (2019), etc. All those investigations informed us about the period the disinformation campaign started, and about the most aggressive websites and their owners (see Attachment 1). Another focus at this stage was the revelation of main factors, contributing to the susceptibility of Belarus to the information attacks from the Russian side, as well as consideration of main measures, implemented by the authorities to withstand those attacks.

The content analysis in combination with quantitative analysis made it possible to reconstruct main propagandist narratives, launched strategically to influence public opinion, to discredit opposition leaders and political analysts, as well as to make alliances with other groups (such as pro-Russian Belarusians) in the context of integration talks between Russia and Belarus. In addition, we identified main themes and subtopics, serving as triggers for the bloggers. To do so, we analysed the propagandist materials that emerged in the 'Politics', 'Blogs' and other thematic sections of 10 websites supported by Russia within regional and national scope between September and December 2019 (the peak of the talks on deepened integration).

Finally, we conducted seven semi-structured in-depth interviews with the Belarusian political scientists and sociologists, as well as public figures who took part in the independent observation of the parliamentary elections, and those who campaigned against the integration. Their analyses helped us to test our findings, to reflect on the way the Belarusian media themselves amplify and disseminate the propagandist messages, as well as to formulate policy advice towards the Belarusian authorities on the practices to withstand Russian disinformation attacks. We developed questionnaire touching upon the following topics: a) attempts to interfere with the parliamentary elections in Belarus and integration talks; b) the level of media literacy in Belarus; c) the evaluation of the actions of authorities meant to withstand the information attacks; d) the possibilities of cooperation between state sector and NGOs with regard to information security issues, as well as e) necessity to learn and adopt Ukrainian experience in the relevant situations. To make the interview series unbiased, we talked to the experts from the state sector, NGO sector, as well as to the representatives of various humanities disciplines.

The following experts took part in the interviews: Andrei Yahorau, analyst of the Center of the European Transformation, Yury Hubarevich, politician, leader of the "For Freedom" movement, Yury Shautsou, political scientist, director of the Center for the Problems of the

European Integration; sociologist Aksana Shelest, analyst of the Center of the European Transformation, Andrei Yeliseyeu, political scientist, analyst of the research Center of the Eurasian States in Transition (EAST); Alena Artsiomenka, sociologist, professor at the Belarusian State University, department of the social communication; and professor Andrei Vardamatski, sociologist, analyst at the Belarusian Analytical Workroom. Interviews were conducted in person (with professor Andrei Vardamatski), on the phone and messenger apps (with sociologists Aksana Shelest and Alena Artsiomenka, political scientists Andrei Yahorau and Yury Shautsou, politician Yury Hubarevich), analyst Andrey Yeliseyeu provided written responses to the questionnaires.

The main aim of the paper is to bring to light the main strategic narratives in outlets supported by Russia that generate disinformation oriented towards Belarusian audience, and to formulate policy advice to the Belarusian authorities. This paper contributes to the academic literature analysing how fake news and disinformation influence political discourses in Eastern European countries.

### **Case selection and data gathering**

In his recent research, Yeliseyeu (2019) revealed several important trends that signalize the intensification of the Russian information attacks on Belarus. The main aim of those is to promote Russian agenda and popularize Russian-centric frames, to defame Belarusian opposition, and to degrade the Belarusian language and culture, etc. (2019, p.2-3). The researcher argued that since 2016, the number of web-resources distributing false information messages “has increased to about 40” (Ibid.). More than that, about 15 of them cover the events on the regional level, with about half of them extensively using hate speech: Sozh.info (Homiel region), Vitbich.org (Vitsiebsk region), Podneprovie-info.com and Mogilew.by (Mahileu region), Grodnodaily.net (Hrodna region), Berestje-news.org and Dranik.org (Brest region), and Teleskop-by.org (Minsk region)” (Yeliseyeu, 2019, p.2). Yeliseyeu concludes that the websites were introduced by the Russian organization CIS-EMO that had been launched on the approval of the Russian Presidential Executive Office (2019, p.38). Proceeding from this classification, we decided to concentrate attention on the most aggressive regional websites and analyse the materials that are generated by the bloggers to try and find commonalities shared by various authors, and to identify the main strategic narratives put forward by them. Here is the description of each of the websites under consideration.

*Description of cases.* The regional websites supported by Russia that generate content, oriented towards the audience from Eastern regions of Belarus, i.e. Vitsiebsk (Vitbich.org), Mahileu (Podneprovie-info.com and mogilew.by), as well as Homiel (Sozh.info) and Brest regions ([Berestje-news.org](http://Berestje-news.org)) were made up, using one sample with the minimal variations in design.

In the left upper corner of Vitbich.org, Podneprovie-info.com, Sozh.info, and Berestje-news.org one can find stylized coat of arms of the corresponding region, which was done, apparently, to outline the thematic focus of the content, generated by the website, and to establish trust within the users. This conformity is hardly surprising, taking into account that, according to the Who.is service, the first two websites belong to the same owner – Alexey Semenov, the employer of CIS-EMO organization. The latter, according to Yeliseyeu (2019), observed election process in several countries (most notably, in Crimea, in 2014).

Website Vitbich.org, with a monthly audience of 10,200 users per week (the website was registered on 19.02.2018) also has public pages on Facebook and its Russian equivalent Vkontakte. The categories “Vitsiebsk and region”, “Belarus”, “World” and also “Sport” mostly contain neutral materials (although from time to time one could find some disinformation materials there as well). Articles, promoting pro-Russian agenda, can be usually found within the sections “Blogs”, “Culture and History”. Arkadiy Vertyazin is the most notoriously famous author of this website, “specializing” on articles about opposition and civil society. In general, between September and December Vitbich generated 48 materials (13 on integration, 19 on opposition, 13 on parliamentary elections, 5 on “constitutive Others” – Ukraine and Poland). The website does not presuppose the function of leaving comments.

Website Podneprovie-info.com (registered on 19.02.2018) enjoys attendance of about 9 thousand users per week and has public page on Vkontakte. The categories “Regional news”, “Accidents”, “[Happens] in Belarus” and “Sport” largely contain neutral materials, with the main propagandist content being located within the sections “[Happens] in the world” and “History”. A significant part of those articles was devoted to opposition (13) and integration (3). Website frequently reposts articles from ill-famous resources IMHOclub and sputnik.by. The users are not allowed to leave comments either.

According to the research of Yeliseyeu, Sozh.info belongs to Sergei Lushch, a former chair of the youth organization “Young Rus” (Rus’ Molodaya)[3]. The website is visited by around 10,400 users per week and has public pages on Facebook, Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte. A significant amount of articles in the categories “News”, “Our Homiel” and “Society” contain neutral information, with the disinformation usually being concentrated in the sections “Politics” and “Blogs”. In particular, the major part of those texts was devoted to the events in Ukraine and Poland, while parliamentary elections were covered only by three materials, opposition – by 7 and integration – by 9 articles. It seems that the website does not allow users to comment the materials.

The website Mogilew.by is owned by Active Technologies LLC (the name of owner is not disclosed, with the website being registered on 10.03.2011). The articles in the categories “News”, “Mahilieu News”, “Interesting”, “Accidents”, “Mahilieu History” and “Miscellaneous” are in most cases neutral; the most of propagandist texts are located within the section “For your information”. Specifically, within the period under consideration, the larger half of articles with such content was focused on formation of negative image of neighboring countries – Ukraine and Poland (11). Two texts were dedicated to the parliamentary elections, one – to integration, three – to opposition. Website allows the option of commenting.

The website politring.com positions itself as a discussion platform for a dialogue between political and social groups of Belarus, and its editorial board considers “extremism and radicalism unacceptable”. At the same time, events like anti-integration protests are characterized as a “picket of radicals”.[4] They publish different points of view, including the comments by the independent experts and opposition politicians. It is present in multiple social media, namely on Facebook, Vkontakte, Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, Google news. Attendance statistics is closed.

Domain names of the regional websites Grodnodaily.net, [berestje-news.org](http://berestje-news.org) were purchased on the same day, February 19, 2018, along with two others, Vitbich.org and Podneprovie-info.com.[5] According to the study by Yeliseyeu, the buyer of the domain names, Aleksei

Semenov, was an employee of the CIS-EMO, the organization that conducted observation missions in Crimea during the elections at the referendum 2014 and in the unrecognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia.[6] Both websites are organized according to similar templates, containing sections “In Brest”/ “In Grodno”, “Politics”, “Culture and History”/“History”, “Sports”, “Blogs”. The sections on history contain mainly reprints from other resources that promote pro-Russian narrative, such as “Украина.ру”, and the history narrative is dedicated to the events, associated with the Soviet and the Great Duchy of Lithuania periods. Both resources are present on Vkontakte and on Facebook.

Dranik.org contains the following sections: “Brest and Regions”, “Politics and Society”, “Economy”, “Man and Law”, and “Blogs”. Main content for monitoring was in the “Blog” section. Out of 18 relevant materials only 3 were dedicated to the integration topic, the rest dedicated to cross-sectoral topics on the opposition, elections, and the image of the foreign countries. It is present on Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki.

Website Teleskop.by is a clearly anti-Belarusian information-analytical portal, generating both news and original blog content. The website often reposts news content from other resources, in most cases Russian ones, but also Belarusian, promoting Russian-centric agenda such as imhoclub.lv, sputnik.by, etc. or Telegram channels (e.g. <https://t.me/su2050>). The editor-in-chief of Teleskop.by is a notorious author of multiple biased (and sometimes outright propagandist) publications on Belarus – Lev Krishtapovich. Among the most prolific bloggers there is Vsevolod Shimov, Kirill Frolov, and Panteleimon Filippovich who often write articles for websites promoting extreme reactionary ideology. As a rule, the bloggers generate several articles per day, with users devoid of option of leaving comments under them. According to Yandex.Metric, the website is visited by 40 to 70 thousand users per day.

*Data gathering.* During the preliminary stage, we identified a set of political events that occurred between September 2019 and December 2019 and were accompanied by the increased quantity of materials on the websites under consideration (“trigger events”). Thematically those events could be divided into four categories: a) those related to the “tax maneuver”, integration talks and the Union State (meetings at the highest level, public speeches of the leaders, information leaks etc.), b) those associated with the activity of Belarusian opposition (such as protests, celebrations, etc.), c) those dealing with the parliamentary elections and, finally, d) historical/theoretical materials describing Ukraine, Poland, and the West in general as main enemies. Although the first two topics (96 and 100 materials respectively) proved to be much more widespread, the third and the fourth ones were as important (64 and 62 respectively), because they were associated with the crucial political event within the period in consideration (parliamentary elections) as well as with the attempts to construct the image of the Other. Based on those considerations, we selected 322 relevant articles. The interviews (overall – 10) with the Belarusian experts (sociologists, political scientists and journalists) served as a complementary material for our research.

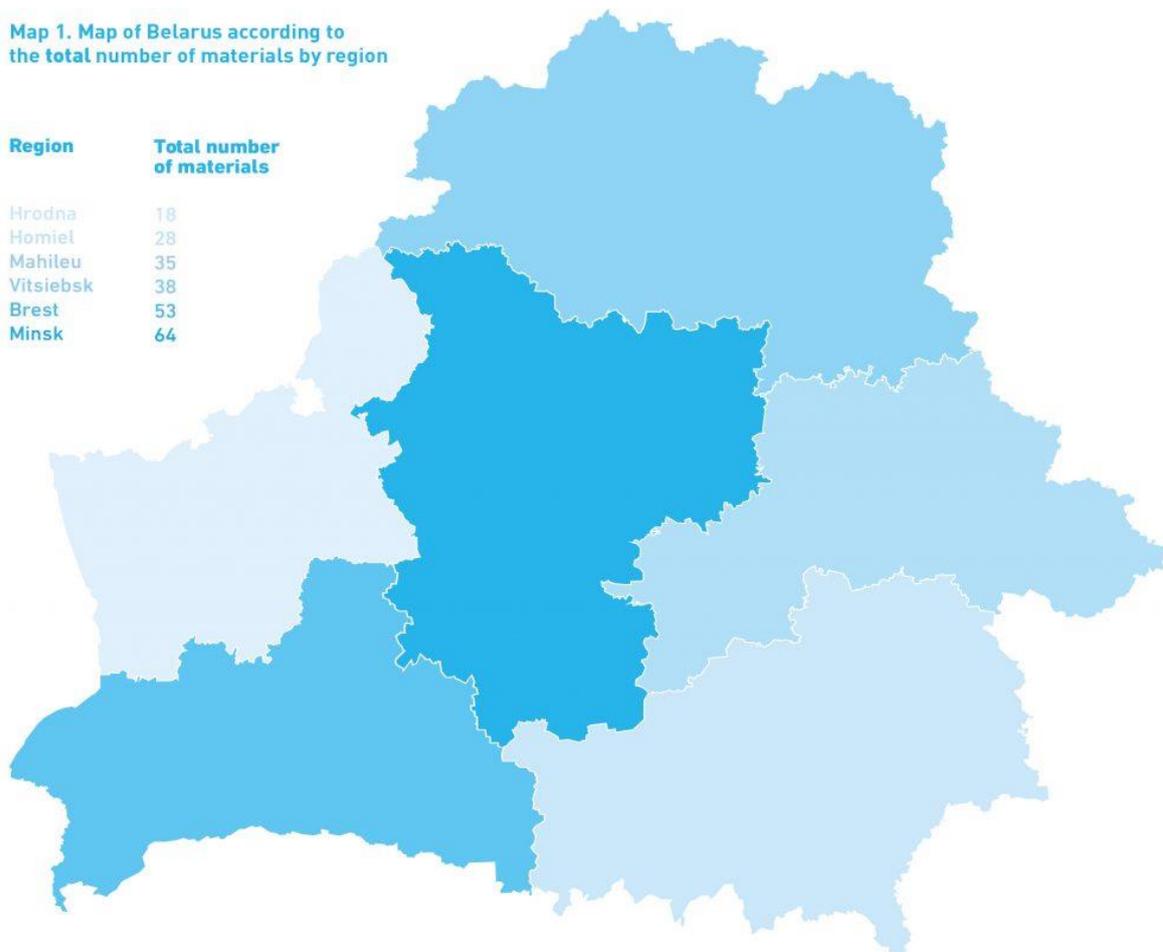
In Table 1 below, we listed the final selection of the relevant materials.

Website	Region	Monthly audience	Number of materials (Integration)	Number of materials (Opposition)	Number of materials (Elections)	Number of materials ("Others")	Overall
Sozh	Homiel	10,400	9	7	1	11	28
Vitbich	Vitsiebsk	10,147	13	19	3	3	38
Berestje-News	Brest	7,339	7	3	5	0	15
Dranik	Brest	n/a	3	18	16	1	38
GrodnoDaily	Hrodna	10,445	7	9	1	1	18
Mogilew.by	Mahileu	n/a	1	3	0	11	15
Podneprovie-Info	Mahileu	8,762	3	13	4	0	20
Politring	Minsk	n/a	15	4	5	1	25
Teleskop	Minsk	59,607	16	0	3	20	39
<b>Overall</b>			<b>74</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>48</b>	

\*certain articles fit into several categories (i.e. numerous topics are covered), so they are mentioned in several corresponding cells

Map 1. Map of Belarus according to the total number of materials by region

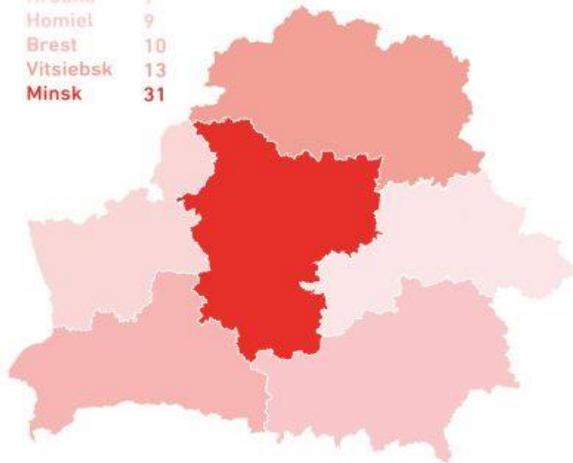
Region	Total number of materials
Hrodna	18
Homiel	28
Mahileu	35
Vitsiebsk	38
Brest	53
Minsk	64



**Map 2. Map of Belarus according to the total number of materials (Integration) by region**

**Region**      **Number of materials**

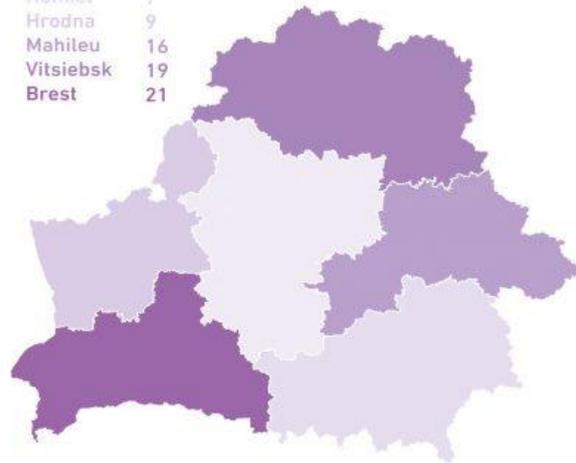
Mahileu      4  
 Hrodna      7  
 Homiel      9  
 Brest      10  
 Vitsiebsk    13  
 Minsk      31



**Map 3. Map of Belarus according to the total number of materials (Opposition) by region**

**Region**      **Number of materials**

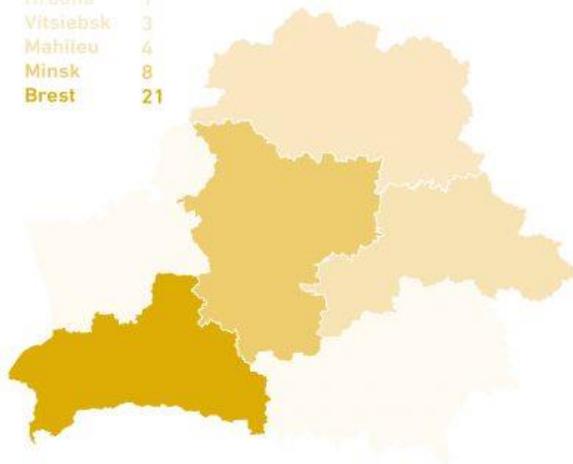
Minsk      4  
 Homiel      7  
 Hrodna      9  
 Mahileu     16  
 Vitsiebsk    19  
 Brest      21



**Map 3. Map of Belarus according to the total number of materials (Elections) by region**

**Region**      **Number of materials**

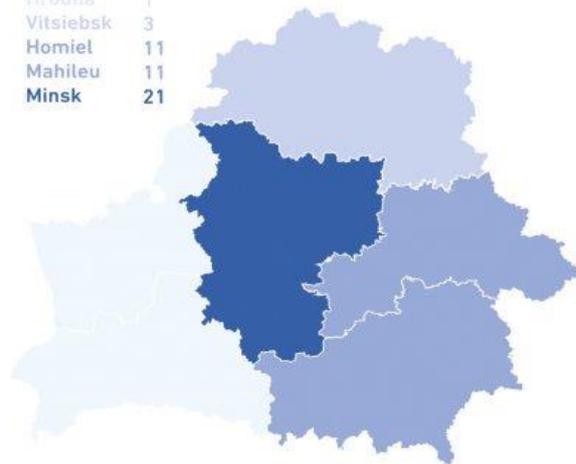
Homiel      1  
 Hrodna      1  
 Vitsiebsk    3  
 Mahileu     4  
 Minsk      8  
 Brest      21



**Map 4. Map of Belarus according to the total number of materials ("Others") by region**

**Region**      **Number of materials**

Brest      1  
 Hrodna      1  
 Vitsiebsk    3  
 Homiel      11  
 Mahileu     11  
 Minsk      21



*Literature review.* Latest independent studies point out the intensification of disinformation and propaganda content, generated by the pro-Russian websites, Telegram channels and social media public pages. For example, experts from international research initiative ‘International Strategic Action Network for Security’ (ISANS) concentrated their efforts on analysis of various dangers Belarus faced in 2019. In particular in the report entitled “Coercion to “Integration”: Russia's Creeping Assault on the Sovereignty of Belarus”[7] they note that Russia has been gradually enhancing pressure in virtual sphere, that is, publishing biased articles and fake news in media space. This information attack, in their view, represents a full-

fledged hybrid war: “state-controlled, quasi-private and non-governmental initiatives form a wide system of interference, aimed at a ‘deep integration’ of Belarus with Russia – effectively coercing Belarus to give up its political, cultural and linguistic sovereignty” (p.1). Later ISANS conducted an analysis of ‘toxic social media communities in Belarus’, presenting their research results in the ‘Map of toxic V Kontakte public pages’[8]. This interactive map, based on the qualitative data analysis of vk.com, presents the largest database of propagandist communities of the Russian-speaking social media, which “discredit Belarusian language, culture, and history, and even put in question the existence of Belarusian ethnicity” (ISANS, 2020, para 1).

Givi Gigitashvili from ‘Medium.com’ (2020) identified anonymous pro-Russian Telegram channels that targeted protests in Belarus, “attacked opponents of integration and spread pro-Kremlin narratives” amid integration talks between the two countries (Trikatazh, Bulba Prestolov, BeloRusski Dialog, Kompromat Belarus, Beloruskii Gambit, Belarusskii Insaider, Vostochnoe Pritvorstvo, and BY-News).

Yeliseyeu (2020) demonstrated website’s ‘Sputnik Belarus’ involvement into disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda campaign and summarized: “Although news on Sputnik contain explicit propaganda and disinformation in relatively rare cases, they [bloggers] often follow a certain political line and ideological instructions” (p.39). These recent studies have helped to shape and characterize the reality of Russian disinformation and propaganda campaign that has been taking place in Belarus for the last several months.

## **1. Integration and the Union State**

### *Background*

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Belarus enjoyed a brief period of “democratic opening:” the country elected its first Parliament and conducted its first free and open Presidential elections won by the charismatic non-partisan corruption fighter Aliaksandar Lukashenka. However, from the very outset of his presidency, Lukashenko sought to bypass the Parliament by taking advantage of poorly defined mechanisms of conflict resolution in the Constitution. In 1996, he won a referendum on the expansion of presidential powers (its results were falsified[9]), which allowed him to establish the one-man rule.

That same year he signed a treaty on the establishment of the Commonwealth of Russia and Belarus, which eventually turned into the Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus in 1999. This document launched the process of integration between the two countries, which mostly concerns the economic sphere, while the political developments being far less pronounced (the most important meetings, as a rule, are revolving around negotiations on oil and gas prices and usually take place before the heating season). Valeriya Kostiugova (2008) stressed that the integration process has a “cyclic character.” Initially, Russia and Belarus reach certain agreements and formalize them in a document; when it becomes evident that the proposals are impossible to achieve, the two sides revise the agreements and sign a new contract, thereby “raising the integration to a higher level.” (Kostiugova, 2008, para 1).

At the beginning of the 2000s, Russia decided to put relations between the two countries on a pragmatic footing. The Russian president Vladimir Putin famously stated that it is necessary to sort “flies from cutlets”, or the wheat from the chaff. The Russian authorities suggested

intensifying the integration process in both the political realm (through adopting the Constitution of the Union state) and the economic sphere (by introducing a common currency, unifying trade rules, and launching a single natural gas transmission network). During this period, the countries signed multiple documents, treaties, and memoranda, and conducted numerous meetings. However, the informal aspect of the relations overtook the formal: the majority of agreements, adopted at the beginning of the 2000s, have not been realized, and Russia has continued to allocate money to the Belarusian government.

Since the 1990s, Russia has been the main trade partner of Belarus, with import rate being more than 50% throughout 29 years since Belarus gained independence (see Graph 1 in Appendix). By 2004, Russia's import penetration ratio reached 65%, which, as Drakakhrust (2017) stresses, was due to sharp increase of oil price. However, up until now this record has not been renewed. Still, in 2019, the import ration continues to grow and Belarus remains heavily dependent on Russia in economic respect. The Eastern neighbor has been actively using this aspect to try and obtain concessions from Belarus in the political sphere (such as recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 or DPR and LPR in 2014).

In February 2004, a "gas war" between the countries broke out, and Russia ended up significantly increasing gas prices for its Western neighbor (previously the price was the same as in internal Russian regions). Since then, Russia has regularly antagonized Belarus over oil and gas prices, while annually decreasing the level of subsidies. By the end of the 2000s, both countries entered several "market wars," imposing mutual restrictions on the sale of meat and milk because of their allegedly poor quality. After Western countries introduced sanctions as a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war with Ukraine, and Russia retaliated by imposing so-called "anti-sanctions" on certain products, Belarus tried to circumvent the restrictions by selling to Russia importing Western products with Belarusian labels, which created more tension between the two countries. Consequently, by the beginning of 2019, Belarus remained deprived of almost all the economic privileges previously bestowed by Russia.

#### *Analysis of integration topic in the monitored media*

During the period under consideration the topic of deepening integration has been one of the most popular themes, emerged within the materials on the regional websites supported by Russia. This is hardly surprising, given that the talks on the further advancement with the project of the Union State were conducted every month on various levels (both governmental and presidential). The bloggers from the regional websites supported by Russia (in all of the regions, but especially in Minsk) identified a set of problems hindering the talks, with one of them being found within the ideological dimension. In their view, the project of integration started as a purely economic initiative, without meaningful political content. To fix this situation they introduced the ideology of the "Russian World" ("Russki mir") as a hegemonic understanding of the idea of the project, meaning that the peculiar Belarusian language and culture (deemed marginal and insignificant) could be simply substituted by the Russian ones. The assumption at the center of this project was that Russian-speaking population (and Belarusians mostly speak Russian in their everyday life) appears to be a part of Russian community and will be happy to become the citizens of the Russian Federation. Mikhail Suslov stressed that this concept has been used to justify Russia's aggressive foreign policy and its initiatives on annexation of Crimea and subsequent war with Ukraine<sup>1</sup>.

Laruelle notes<sup>2</sup> that the Russian World concept serves as an empty signifier, the term with a blurry meaning, allowing connecting several complex ideas into a coherent ideological narrative (which could be tuned to substantiate various (sometimes contradictory) policies). In particular, she notes: “It serves as a justification for what Russia considers to be its right to oversee the evolution of its neighbors, and sometimes for an interventionist policy. Secondly, its reasoning is for Russia to reconnect with its pre-Soviet and Soviet past through reconciliation with Russian diasporas abroad. Lastly, it is a critical instrument for Russia to brand itself on the international scene and to advance its own voice in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Russian bloggers reiterate that the Russian World could become spiritual bond of the Union State, replacing two influential ideological narratives, established in Belarus by the competing political forces. Those are the project of “official nationalism”,<sup>[10]</sup> built upon the “Soviet national identity” and “nativist project of national identity”, based around the importance of the Belarusian language, history and culture<sup>4</sup>.

The former ideological narrative proceeds from the idea that the contemporary Belarusian people emerged after the World War II, with the Belarusians contributing greatly to defeating the Nazi invaders (according to the estimations of the historians, every third citizen died during the war). Lukashenka himself quite often describes himself as “a Soviet man”,<sup>[11]</sup> who tries to preserve some of the distinctive practices that were prevalent in the USSR: state-planned economy, harsh control over social life, lack of political competition, etc. This political elite’s conceptual commitment to the Soviet legacy has been further reflected in the official symbols: in 1995, as a result of referendum, a slightly adjusted Soviet-style coat of arms and flag replaced the white-red-white flag and Pahonya coat of arms, adopted after the dissipation of the USSR. In conceptual terms, the project of official nationalism was reflected in the state ideology project, which was developed and introduced as an obligatory course at the universities and schools in 2003. As Pikulik (2007) notes, despite the best efforts of the authorities, it did not become the basis for the self-identification among the Belarusians.<sup>[12]</sup>

The latter ideological narrative dates back the emergence of the sovereign Belarus to March 25, 1918, the day, when the Belarusian People’s Republic was established. The nativist project of Belarusian identity prioritizes the national language and culture and traces back the Belarusian history to the Fourth Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The nativist project was promoted and popularized by the Belarusian intellectuals at the end of the 1980s - the beginning of the 1990s, who put forward the idea of the importance of the Belarusian national identity. It became a crucial source for the “street politics” of the 1990s-2000s, when the political opposition tried to change the situation in the country via organization of protests and peaceful revolutions.

Both of those ideologies are perceived as “contradictory civilization projects”, hindering Belarusians from obtaining their “fully-fledged national identity”, with the Russian World seen as an ultimate substitute to both of them. In Krishtapovich’s view, for example, “Russian sovereignty of Belarusians is the foundation for the Union State, only through which the preservation of the Belarusian language and state, and, hence, the restoration of independence and achievement of sovereignty, is possible.”<sup>[13]</sup> In the view of Belarusian ideologists and pro-Russia propagandists, the collapse of the USSR is considered the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe” (to borrow the emotional Putin’s expression<sup>[14]</sup>). They reiterate that Russia, being the direct successor of the Soviet Union, has a historical mission of restoring its influence over the territories, previously covered by the USSR. In this context, the further development of the Union State project is seen as a continuation of the strategy of “gathering the Russian lands”

(started in 2008 by the war in Georgia and continued in 2014 by the war with Ukraine), presupposed by the Russian World concept.[15]

Suslov also stresses<sup>5</sup> that the success of Crimea has been especially tempting to repeat before the presidential elections. Indeed, the difficulty of transit of power amid the decreasing popularity of Putin (so-called “problem 2024”) has been widely discussed by the political scientists and sociologists. The latter suggested various variants of doing this and one of the most viable and likely in their view has been the establishment of the Union State with Putin being proclaimed the head of the newly established formation.[16] It is easy to guess that Belarus played a key role in this scenario, and the pro-Russian bloggers used various narratives in order to justify this.

Some authors developed complicated narratives built upon the distorted interpretation of Belarusian history. This trend is especially characteristic of the blogs of Lev Krishtapovich, who suggests an alternative version of the Belarusian history, in which there is no place for Mindaub and Vitaut, Radzivill, Sapieha, Ahinski, etc., because Belarusian history is “inseparable from pan-Russian, Soviet history. This is a historical choice of the Belarusian people, a centuries-long formation of pan-Russian consciousness, within which the Belarusian statehood emerged and was nurtured”.[17] Hence, the bloggers imagine Belarus as an extension of Russian history and identity[18] and treat the establishment of Belarusian People’s Republic in 1918 (the event is widely treated as the birth of the Belarusian nation by the national historians), merely an amusing historical incident.[19] In such a way, the further development of the Union State project should be a preferred political goal for Belarus, because it is via becoming an integral part of the Russian World, that is, accepting Russian culture and language as their own, that the country will be able to secure the true sovereignty. In any other scenario, it will be either absorbed by the EU and will be devoid of any independent decision-making within the supra-national mechanism, or it will become yet another puppet of the USA.

In their articles, the bloggers use not only ideological arguments, but also pragmatic ones. For example, they reiterate that besides political benefits, Belarus will also gain numerous economic advantages from the integration process with Russia, [20] while the end aim of the Union State is to improve the well-being of the citizens.[21] At the same time, they aspire to demonstrate that the attempts of Belarusian political elite to build the mutually beneficial relations with the EU are harmful and in the end will bring only problems in both political and economic dimensions.[22]

Dzermant, Krishtapovich and other bloggers also frequently mention that the USA and their proxy Poland[23] are aggressively trying to interfere with the integration process and are provoking conflicts between the two allies.[24] They do this by dispatching military forces near the borders of Belarus,[25] publishing various “malicious” reports,[26] falsifying the results of general census,[27] providing financial and ideological support to the local political opposition[28] and bloggers (e.g. to NEXTA)[29] or via distribution of Pole’s Card by the Belarusian neighbor.[30] The bloggers react harshly to the attempts of the Belarusian authorities to enhance the information security and delimit the influence of Russian in the media sphere (so-called conception of information security). Such attempts are called “information alienation”.[31]

Summarizing, the strategic narrative on integration of Russia and Belarus has been one of the most heavily presented throughout the materials, generated by the pro-Russian bloggers. In most of them, the integration has been described as a natural process, the logical outcome of

the historical development of relations between the two countries. More than that, according to the bloggers, integration is devoid of any threats to Belarus and holds only advantages both in economic sphere (Belarus will continue enjoying economic benefits), in political and military dimensions (the country will withstand the attempts of the West to absorb it and will retain its sovereignty thanks to the alliance with the bigger brother), in the cultural domain (Russian culture will fill in the ideological lacunae left by the weak national identity) and, finally, in the ideological realm (the concept of the “Russian World” will replace incomprehensible Belarusian ideology).

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Generally speaking, all the strategic narratives, mentioned above, serve several aims: a) to influence the decision-making process and to bounce the authorities into rush decisions; b) to influence public opinion and to win new supporters among the Belarusian population; c) “to test public reaction to certain ideas or analysis thereof” (Hubarevic, interview 1.01.2020). For the latter, for example, the outlets purposefully feed the audience certain information, making it believe that the decision on integration will be sooner or later made (ibid.). One of our respondents, political scientist Yahorau, in particular, mentioned: “Russia indeed would like to influence the public opinion in Belarus, [those people], who support integration [...] They form the public attitudes, and, on the other hand, they are trying to influence the public opinion” (interview 12.01.2020). The interviewee, in particular, recalled the opinion polls, conducted by the Center for Spatial Analysis in International Relations at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), according to which 90 percent of Belarusians support integration with Russia (57,6% backed up the alliance with Russia, while 31,8% preferred partnership based on the international agreements). However, the Belarusian sociologists[32] argued that the authors of the polls did not get necessary accreditation, while the questions were incorrectly formulated. Also, the results contradicted other multiple polls, conducted by the Belarusian accredited sociological centers.

At the same time, from the analysis of the websites it becomes evident that they were not used in a pro-active mode (or as an information warfare), meaning they did not try to actively feed the public certain agenda, but delimited themselves to the legitimization of a certain worldview instead. In other words, they did not offer outright fake news, but constructed narratives, built upon the distorted information. To do this, websites actively exchanged the links to other similar resources, creating echo-chambers, within which only certain narratives were promoted. Mainly, the media outlets tried to create the image of integration as an inevitable process that will bring only benefits to Belarus. Yahorau mentioned: “During the integration processes, one can notice the significant activity of Russian media and structures retransmitting information in Belarus – public pages, bloggers, journalists [...]. Besides, there are expert groups such as IMHOclub or Sputnik. At the same time, this resource was not used to the fullest extent” (interview 3.01.2020).

## **2. The image of the political opposition in the monitored media**

### *Belarusian political opposition: overview*

Belarusian political opposition operates in a complicated environment under the authoritarian regime installed in Belarus in 1994. For the purpose of this article, the term opposition refers

to non-pro-governmental political actors who operate in the public field. Political actors, including registered political parties and organizations which de facto act as such, but are denied official registration, work in the conditions where it is nearly impossible to obtain funding from domestic sources and they rather rely on external funding from foreign donor organizations.

Opposition activists experience pressure by the state and receive fines for their activities. According to the Human Rights Watch, in 2019 the laws and regulations governing public associations remain restrictive, preventing rights groups or political opposition movements from operating freely.[33] Particularly, authorities continued to deny registration to independent groups and opposition parties on arbitrary pretexts. Similarly, expression of public dissent is restricted, e.g. street protests are dispersed by the police, activists are detained, fined, sometimes disposed to brutal treatment in the detention facilities.

Belarusian elections are subject to criticism for unfair conditions for the opposition and violations of electoral standards. Thus, during the parliamentary elections 2019 both domestic and OSCE/ODIHR pointed out the lack of transparency of the vote count and the bias of the electoral commissions.[34] In addition, during the parliamentary campaign 2019 authorities narrowed opportunities for the opposition candidates for campaigning, including scarce media coverage.[35]

#### *Observations from the media monitoring*

The monitored media label a number of actors as the “opposition”, naming as such not only the political parties, but also independent media, bloggers, civil activists, even those campaigning for environmental or human rights causes. The term ‘opposition’ is used as a synonym of nationalism, Russophobia, and radicalism that brings unrest to the society. Some materials contain explicit hate speech. Thus, a blog article on [grodnodaily.net](http://grodnodaily.net) not only criticizes Tatsiana Karatkevich, leader of the Tell the Truth campaign, for her visit to the Brussels headquarters of NATO, interpreting this as a sign of collaboration with the so-called Western aggressor, but the author also states that “in North Korea someone like Tatsiana Karatkevich would be hanged upside down”.[36] This observation of the hate speech content is consistent with the earlier study by Andrei Yeliseyeu who pointed out that the network of the regional pro-Russian resources in Belarus contains hate speech.[37]

During the monitoring period, the media constructed a negative image of the opposition with regard to the following events: Russia-Belarus integration talks and the protests against it, as well as the parliamentary campaign 2019 (the media both criticised the opposition parties in general as corrupted by the West or incapable of mobilizing public support, and conducted information attacks on particular opposition candidates running for the elections). In addition, the bloggers covered other events, the opposition took part in, such as the reburial of the rebels of the anti-Russian uprising of 1863-1864 or the public discussions around the safety of the Astravets nuclear power plant construction.

An example of the defamation against the opposition candidates could be an article on [dranik.org](http://dranik.org) where the local candidate, Sergei Mazan, was called “a clown” who did not have public support among the voters.[38] In a similar vein, another [dranik.org](http://dranik.org) article attacked candidate Alexandr Kabanov, where the anonymous author brought details of the candidate’s personal life in an effort to present him as a bad father, partner, and entrepreneur. The article contains a number of allegations which could not be either confirmed or denied, yet construct

a strongly negative image of the opposition activist, and the material also contains photos of the candidates' housing property and his personal photos that were obtained in an unclear way. It is noteworthy that the article is a reprint from allbel.info, a website that publishes anonymous materials and positions itself as a "group of journalists" who write for "those who are able to think".[39]

Similar materials against the opposition candidates were published across other monitored media. Thus, in an op-ed on berestje-news.org the author not only calls the opposition "political impotents" due to the fact that they did not get any parliamentary seats at the elections 2019, but also claims that the opposition candidates act aggressively at the polling stations and groundlessly report violations during the voting. The author also praises the elected pro-government MPs, stressing their professional achievements, in contrast with the opposition candidates whom he calls shameful.[40] In the similar vein, one of the articles argues that the opposition takes part in the elections only to receive foreign grants and to get publicity.[41]

As to the coverage of the parliamentary elections per se<sup>[1]</sup>, the monitored media covered the parliamentary campaign, the voting period and the work of the electoral commissions and the elections results. According to Aksana Shelest, there was no significant media influence on the parliamentary campaign, given that the Belarusian parliament does not have substantial political powers.[42].

Thus, the analytical articles covered the elections neutrally, describing the advantages of the majoritarian system compared to the party lists[43]; or reporting on the elections turnout and the structure of the newly elected parliament.[44] The general narrative was that the elections were conducted correctly and in accordance with the law. Besides the criticism of the opposition participation in the elections, the media voiced criticism of the observers, both international and local, who reported fraud and violations of the electoral standards. Thus, the observers were labeled as "racketeers from the 90s"[45] and it was claimed they were "bribed by the West"[46]. At the same time, the news sections of the monitored media provided the reports by the Russian and CIS observers who concluded that the elections had complied with the international standards.

The sources under consideration largely put forward an idea that for opposition the parliamentary campaign of 2019, as well as allegedly all the other previous political campaigns, was "neither a struggle for power, nor a struggle for the promotion of European values, but merely a fight for the Western grants". In other words, opposition is seen as fundamentally corrupted, with cynical leaders only doing USA's bidding. Still, in some cases bloggers generated creative narratives. For example, Panteleimon Fillipovich in the article "Parliamentary elections in Belarus: looking into the depth" [47] puts forward an idea that it will be new pro-Western pro-Catholic deputies who will dominate in the Parliament: "Catholic community will get a significant representation in the Parliament, despite the theme of interconfessional national consolidation [re-emerging in the speeches of political elite]. This majority will be always supporting West, Vatican, Poland with its dreams about the "third Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth" with Kresy Wschodnie and the Polish Roman Catholic church domination over them". Among the main candidates that go from this core, there could be, in author's view, the head of Hrodna regional executive committee Aliaksandar Sanhin, Valery Varanietski and Valery Mitskevich, the confidants of Minister of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makey. Both of them were known for their "Russophobic ideological position". In other words, the Russian World ideologists identify the enemies not only among the Belarusian opposition and civil society, but also within the circles of ruling political elite, namely, Minister

of Foreign Affairs, who tries to build a constructive dialogue with the Western countries. This trend has become especially pronounced in Belarusian foreign policy after the annexation of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

There is a set of articles across all the monitored media where the modern Belarusian opposition is discussed in the context of the history. Thus, a video “How Belarusian opposition media justify Nazis” draws parallels between the Belarusians who collaborated with the Nazis under the occupation with the present day opposition actors who have ties with the West.[48] Firstly, the author aims to discredit the newspaper novychas.by that published the aforementioned article, labeling this medium as the newspaper that publishes biased materials in the Belarusian language. Secondly, the author accuses the medium of justifying the atrocities on the occupied territories during the World War II. In the original novychas.by piece it is argued that although there were collaborators among the local population, not all of them chose voluntarily to work for the Nazi invaders.[49] Although the issues around the life on the occupied territories during the World War II are a sensitive topic and could be a subject to multiple interpretations, it should be backed up by historical evidence, rather than opinion claims. The author of the video makes arbitrary statements, such as that the “collaborators” destroyed villages and murdered people under the white-red-white flag (the historic flag of Belarus and the flag currently used by the Belarusian opposition), thus casting aspersions on the image of the Belarusian opposition.

Among other history-related topics, there is a set of articles dedicated to the reburial of Kastus Kalinouski, the leader of the anti-Russian uprising in 1863 on the Polish, Belarusian, and Lithuanian territories. This event was attended by a number of Belarusian opposition leaders and ordinary Belarusians who consider Kastus Kalinouski to be the fighter for the Belarusian independence in the 19th century. This event drew attention of the monitored media who negatively covered the reburial ceremony and disputed the historical significance of the 1863 uprising. An example of such coverage could be an article arguing that Belarusian opposition artificially borrows Polish heroes such as Kastus Kalinouski and Tadeusz Kościuszko, and claiming that those figures do not have ties with the Belarusian history.[50]

In addition, the bloggers draw attention to the news related to the usage of the Belarusian language. Thus, the public initiative to collect signatures for Belarusian toponymy in Braslau region is presented as ethnic chauvinists’ activities and the author calls for the unity of the Russia-Belarus Union State supporters.[51]

Another example could be the public discussion of the environmental concerns around the Astravets nuclear power plant. The Astravets plant is a subject of a heated debate among the Belarusian environment activists, politicians, and also an issue that complicates relations with Lithuania, where the Lithuanian authorities are concerned about environmental risks and also about the fact that the Astravets plant is being built on the Russian money, thus it can potentially be used as a tool of geopolitical influence both on Belarus and Lithuania. In that regard, the monitored media covered the public discussions on that matter, stating that the opposition, along with the environment experts, serve “Western interests”, while the plant construction is safe and that Russia does not pose any threats.[53]

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Essentially any group or an individual who does not favor the current government’s course of actions and pro-Russian discourse is labeled as the “opposition”. The opposition is used as a

negative term and the synonym of nationalism and radicalism, which is dangerous for the public order. Materials target political parties and particular opposition candidates who ran for the elections 2019. A number of articles were reprinted from other sources, promoting Russia-centered agenda. Some materials were anonymous, while attacking specific opposition activists and aiming to discredit them through publishing details of their personal lives, those details being obtained from unclear sources.

### **3. The formation of negative “Others”: Constitutive role of narratives on Ukraine and Poland**

While conducting the content analysis of (pro-)Russian propagandist outlets in Belarus, we noticed that a solid amount of them were devoted to the events in Ukraine and in some EU countries that are either sharing the border with Russia (e.g. Baltic states) or that the geopolitical giant is having some ideological, territorial or civilizational confrontation with.

Summarizing, we identified the following trends, typical for all of the outlets under consideration: misrepresentation of information, bogus narratives, references to unreliable sources and unverified data, attempts to influence and manipulate the public opinion, usage of hate speech, Russian-centric agenda, and revisionism (biased re-evaluation of the historical events).

Unsurprisingly, Ukraine takes a special place in the materials of the propagandist bloggers in the propagandist outlets supported by Russia. Since 2014, Russia has been at war with Ukraine and has used various instruments in order to influence the public opinion and play havoc with the political process in the neighboring country. In particular, it has launched a series of information attacks, accompanied by a spread of false stories, activity of bot-nets and dissemination of disinformation to undermine the state and national security.

However, Ukraine is not the sole aim of Russian attacks, with the political elite of Russia trying to draw into its orbit other post-Communist states that proclaimed independence in the 90's and became part of the EU family. Poland, in particular, has been another frequently criticized country in the materials under consideration. In an attempt to retain the influence over the neighboring countries (fulfilling the ambition to “gather Russian lands”), Russia attempts to attack Poland, perceiving it as the USA’s proxy interfering with the process of deepening integration with Belarus. At the same time, Russia does not pretend to take control over Poland, but is open to the confrontations with the closest US ally. In some of the most popular materials, devoted to Belarus and Ukraine, Russia cultivates the ideas of the “Russian World” and Slavic triunity, calling the “‘situation of the separateness’ a temporary state”. While speaking about the Baltic states, pro-Russian bloggers recall the situation with the Russian-speaking minority, who “became the hostages of the local ethnocracies in their own countries.”[54]

Again, writing about Poland, pro-Russian bloggers like to speculate on the country’s partnership with the USA, recalling historical context and common legacy. For example, the reluctance of the Polish government to invite Russia to the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World War II breakout led to a huge outcry from the bloggers: “[how did it happen that the country] that liberated Europe from the Nazi domination and suffered huge losses – 26 million people, was not invited to Westerplatte? They try to rewrite history, humiliate our country and take away the great Victory. And this is not the first time, the West does it”.[55].

Regarding the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine and attempts to regulate it, the pro-Russian bloggers reiterate that the aim of the Ukrainian elite is not to find a compromise solution to the solution, but to shift the responsibility for launching the war to Russia.

It is to be noted that the relevant articles emerged in the blogs with regard to such events, as another round of Minsk negotiations or the meeting within the Normandy format in Paris. For instance, one could find the following reaction to the suggestion of the so-called Steinmeier Formula, published on website “Nash Homel”[56]: “Not even tens or hundreds of thousands took part in the protest actions “Let us say ‘No’ to capitulation”. The crowd at Maidan in Kyiv and other cities looked sparse and unconvincing” [57] (the bloggers also used hate speech extensively). In that same article the author said that “the Ukrainian authorities dream that as the result of the reintegration of Donbas into Ukraine, the opposition will be physically annihilated, and the Donbas population will be deprived of their rights”. [58] Correspondingly, the bloggers equal the separatists and Russian military officers to opposition. At the same time, the refusal of the Ukrainian authorities to grant the autonomous status to the occupied territories was represented as “the annihilation of the Russian language in all the spheres of social life”.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Russian intellectuals actively discussed the ideas of Russian messiahship that were later picked up by the Russian President Vladimir Putin. In particular, he called Ivan Ilyin, the author of the concept of Eurasianism, one of his favorite philosophers. This concept lay behind the trajectory of Russian development (Eurasian Economic Union) until the outbreak of military conflict in Ukraine. After the Euromaidan in 2014 Russia launched the project on defending Russian-speaking people and gathering the former Russian territories under the title the “Russian World”. In particular, one of the most prolific bloggers Aleksey Dzermant legitimized this idea in the following way: “First of all, one should take into account that the Russian identity is undergoing a crisis. In fact, after the dissipation of the USSR we were thrown back into the XVI—XVII century with the separation into West and East Rus’, where Muscovy scrambles between gathering lands, isolationism, Western pressures and attempts to turn to the East, while Ukraine and Belorussiya turn into the indecisive frontier and sometimes even the front line (as was at Donbas). Depending on the political and military situation in the border region in the Eastern Europe and West Eurasia, Belarus could be either “caravanserai at the new Silk Road,” controlling and conducting people, transport, goods, services and investments between Eurasia and Europe and getting some profit from it, or a stronghold, collective Brest fortress, closing key routes and opposing the increasingly likely Western aggression”.[59]

At the same time, the bloggers treat Ukrainian measures taken to restore their territorial unity and their response to the Russian military aggression exclusively as the phenomena of integral nationalism. In particular, they state: “Proceeding from the psychoanalytical approach, the phenomenon of the Ukrainian integral nationalism corresponds to the “revolt against the figure of Father”. [60] In other words, Russia is represented as an older brother to Belarusians and Ukrainians. The pro-Russian author Aleksey Kochetkov formulated this in the following way in his book (its excerpts were published by Podneprovie-info and Teleskop): “Today, the representatives of the Western Ukraine set the tone for the Ukrainian political life in general. We witness, how the Ukrainian state quickly moves to its self-annihilation. However, the tragedy of the contemporary Ukraine is that its political elite, who decided to stick to the integral nationalism, does not have the opportunity [to stop this failure]”. [61]

It is to be noted that in general, the news or neutral articles that do not put forward Russian agenda appear to be reposted from other websites. Still, there are some unique materials, with

some of them written under pseudonyms. This is, most likely, due to the threat to be persecuted in Belarus (one can recall the so-called “Regnum case” [62]), because many of the materials could be qualified as actions undermining Belarusian statehood and sovereignty or incitement to ethnic hatred. Given this threat, the reason behind Belarusian authorities’ passive reaction to those materials remains unclear. In an attempt to explain this trend, we interviewed several Belarusian experts, who followed the latest developments closely.

The analyst of the Center of European Transformation Andrei Yeliseyev notes that “the Belarusian state does not support those websites and even implements various measures to try and pressurize them – one could recall, for example, Regnum case. Still, on a local level, some pro-Russian initiatives could take place. They are not sanctioned from above, though. There is a common allied rhetoric [between the two countries], which is maintained by the public officials responsible for the ideological legitimization of the political processes. Hence, we witness ambivalent relation [within those circles]: both reluctance [to allow the expansion] of Russian influence, and, at the same time, repetition of the arguments on [deepened] integration”.

The leader of the movement “Za Svobodu”[63] Hubarevich argued that “the authorities do not have instruments to withstand such information influence. Their staff ideologists or those responsible for the formation of the state agenda keep silence, because Lukashenka is the main speaker on the crucial questions in Belarus, and if he does not express his opinion publicly, the others do not say anything as well. This is really dangerous, because it shows that the system is rather fragile. I do not have any doubts that there are threats. [However] it is difficult to say, to which extent elites are aware of this. If there is no reaction from the side of the state or it is not sufficient, it is difficult to understand (evaluate objectively), why this happens. They either cannot deal with this, or think that everything is under control. Independent media operate most effectively in this situation – [in fact] they fulfill the functions, which should have been implemented by the official channels: they check the facts, analyze them, reveal [the dangerous bits], evaluate the reality of threats and thus withstand the information influence from abroad. [In other words] they enact the measures that the state media could not afford themselves to do, because they could be qualified as an attack of allies [...]. The authorities should be interested [in those measures], because there is an opportunity [to oppose the information attacks], without undermining themselves and revealing that this is the official position. That is why it is important to lessen the control over media, grant the opportunity for the independent media to be registered. Possibly, it is important, to a certain extent, to control, who is behind some media outlets (authorities currently do this in relation to pro-Western media), also it is necessary to pay close attention to those [channels] of information influence that originated in the East. In the long run, [the authorities] should grant them the opportunity for registration and free entrance to advertisement services. This could allow Belarusian media to scale up internal resources and not to be dependent on the foreign support, which would help in the situation, when the support of information security is necessary.

Taking into account that Belarus is currently facing such serious information threats, would it be reasonable for the Belarusian authorities to cooperate with the representatives of the civil society? A sociologist, the head of “Belarusian Analytical Workshop”, Andrei Vardamatsky answers negatively to this question: “[the authorities and civil society] have opposing aims: the public officials do not aspire to withstand fakes, but, rather, to disseminate and enhance the official point of view”. To which extent could the foreign information influence (from Russia, in particular) be considered a threat to Belarus, though?

Experts recognize that the risks are serious; they treat the situation differently, however. Political scientist Yury Shautsou, in particular, argues that the Belarusian authorities do not evaluate those threats in adequate terms: “We did not hear any calls to come to the square from the East, as opposed to the West (the interviewee means NEXTA Telegram-channel). Sociologist, lecturer at the Belarusian State University Alena Artsiomentka says, “the current websites could influence the situation only potentially. They are not subjects in Russian Federation [currently], but we can say that they clear the way [for a more serious interference]. All those multiple websites of unknown origin, such as “Nash Gomel”, that are acting on our territory and put forward Russian agenda, at some point could act within Russian smart force. Or, something in this vein, to destabilize the situation in the regions. This is not a purposeful action oriented towards this very moment, but rather a stepping stone to something.

Coming back to the analysis of pro-Russian websites’ content, the authors not only attack Ukrainian statehood, but also dismiss the Ukrainian language as artificial one, using hate speech extensively. In particular, they state: “The freak of the so-called “Ukrainian language” is in fact poor, politically suicidal, linguistically artificial [...]. After thirty years it is still alien to the majority of population of so-called ‘Ukraine’ [...] For any Russian the time has come not to say something along such lines as ‘Oh, I do not like Banderites, but adore the Ukrainian language,’ but to recognize, at last, that the so-called ‘Ukrainian language’ is an enemy assault rifle, aiming at our hearts and minds, hearts and minds of our compatriots.’ [64] The discussions about politically correct use of “Ukraine” or “the Ukraine” has long been present, but the author used the offensive hints in the title to offend the Ukrainians. [65]

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we would like to highlight several aspects.

The strategic narrative on integration between Russia and Belarus has been one of the most heavily presented throughout the materials, generated not by pro-Russian journalists, but by bloggers. In most of them, the integration has been described as a natural process, the logical outcome of the historical development of relations between the two countries. More than that, according to the bloggers, integration is devoid of any threats to Belarus and holds only advantages both in economic sphere (Belarus will continue enjoying economic benefits), in political and military dimensions (the country will withstand the attempts of the West to absorb it and will retain its sovereignty thanks to the alliance with the bigger brother), in the cultural domain (Russian culture will fill in the ideological lacunae left by the weak national identity) and, finally, in the ideological realm (the concept of the “Russian World” will replace the incomprehensible Belarusian ideology).

The monitored media label a number of actors as the “opposition”, thus including not only the political parties, but also independent media, bloggers, independent civil activists, even those campaigning for environmental or human rights causes, as well as independent think tank experts. To sum up, any group or an individual who does not favor the current government’s course of actions and pro-Russian discourse is labeled as the “opposition”.

The term ‘opposition’ is used as a synonym of nationalism, Russophobia, and radicalism which brings unrest to the society and poses a threat to the country’s sovereignty. Some materials contain explicit hate speech against certain politicians.

The monitored media construct a negative image of the political opposition, portraying them as corrupt pro-Western actors who are incapable to accumulate public support and who play a marginal role in the political field. During the parliamentary campaign there was a number of opinion pieces aiming to discredit particular opposition candidates and their electoral programs. Similar characterizations and descriptions appeared during other significant events throughout the monitoring period, such as the integration talks, the calls of the opposition for the street protests. They were presented as a threat to the public order and it was alleged that such calls did not get public support.

In order to withstand information attacks from abroad effectively, it could be useful to analyze the experience of the neighboring countries, Ukraine in particular, because it is against this Eastern European country that Russia has been conducting a hybrid war for more than 6 years. It is difficult to deny that the authorities have made numerous mistakes in domestic policy: Donbas and Crimea, for example, have been on the fringes of the state policy, with Russia steadily increasing its influence in these regions over years. Something similar, although to a significantly lesser extent, we can witness in the Belarusian regions, sharing border with Russia (namely, Vitsyebsk and Mahileu ones). It is there where one can find the largest quantity of pro-Russian resources and initiatives.

The situation has been exacerbated by the ambiguous geopolitical orientation of Belarus, because the authorities prefer not to transmit clearly defined messages to the citizens in the state outlets (sometimes even promoting Russian agenda, which the latest BAJ research has clearly shown). For example, the Belarusian authorities did not recognize Crimea occupation and expressed negative attitude towards the military conflict in Donbas and Russia's role in it. Nevertheless, public opinion with regard to the events in Ukraine has been formed almost exclusively by the Russian media, dominating in the Belarusian media field. It is evident that the political elite did not draw the conclusion about the potential threat of close relations with Russia, and found themselves exposed to danger during the "unexpected" demands to deepen integration in 2019. Still, it seems that the authorities became aware of the risks after the exhaustive discussions on tax maneuver and integration roadmaps, which ended in nothing. One of the signs of this could be Lukashenka's announcement, made as early as in January 2020, that Belarus will launch news channel similar to Euronews. However, this is not enough, because the Belarusian state media has been operating in the conditions of censorship and restricted free speech over the last 25 years. Hopefully, the information policy of "new" state media will be unbiased and objective, as opposed to the current oftentimes propagandist materials, but it remains to be seen.

We should remember that Russia's information influence has been related not only to a biased representation of contemporary political and geopolitical events, but to certain interpretation of history. For example, the monitored websites generated multiple "articles-odes," occasioned with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory over Nazis that described how Belarus secures the historical memory about the Great Patriotic War. At the same time, Putin's regime launched another wave of iterating the information timed with the anniversary of the victory. Main aims of this attack have been as follows. First, to exaggerate Russia's role in the war against Nazi Germany (while Belarus and Ukraine, let alone alliance forces, are represented as those playing a minor role). Also, Kremlin makes attempts to redefine the meaning of Holocaust, stressing that it was not only Nazis who were responsible for mass killings of Jews on occupied territories, but their sympathizers from Poland, Ukraine, and Baltic countries are also to blame. The chief aim of that was to deepen controversies and conflicts in Eastern Europe, focusing on issues related to historical memory and weakening partner relations in the EU. The idea behind the strategic

narrative of the “Russian World” is to weaken Europe and to restore Russia’s influence over Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus, as strange as it may seem.

The same goal is pursued by the pro-Kremlin media, when they disseminate fake news about COVID-19, that has been spreading at a lightning speed in the world recently. This has been done to shatter the confidence of society towards the EU healthcare system, the report of the European External Action Service (EEAS) says. According to the document, since January 22, the experts identified around 80 cases of disinformation about COVID-19. They tracked the emergence of the disinformation materials to the fake accounts in social media, which until recently have been actively spreading the news about the events in Syria, protests of “yellow vests” in France, etc. It is to be noted, that the users publish fake news in several European languages (English, German, Spanish, Italian and French).

### **Recommendations of experts**

It is worthy to note that, according to all experts, there was a low information impact during the timeframe of the parliamentary campaign, while the opposite was observed during the Russia-Belarus integration talks. The majority of experts agreed that such influence had taken place and started long before the integration talks took place. Many experts brought up the examples of the publications by Russian newspaper Kommersant, which either leaked the insider information on the integration talks, or published materials the reaction to which aimed to test the public opinion and allegedly attempted to shape the favorable opinion regarding the deepened integration.

### **Advice 1: the risks are not estimated adequately - additional analysis and information work is needed**

The majority of the researchers agreed that the authorities underestimate the risks related to the information security and the external information influence from Russia, although political scientist Yury Shautsou gave the opposite assessment, concluding that the Belarusian authorities overestimate the Russian threat, considering that if the threat exists, it rather comes from the West rather than the East.

Political scientist Andrei Yahorau concluded that in Belarus there are structures that repeat the pro-Russian discourse, such as social media groups and chats, certain bloggers and journalists, media, including Russian medium Sputnik. Besides, there are expert groups such as IMHOclub, but, according to Andrei Yahorau, these are not used for the massive attacks.

Sociologist Alena Artsiomienka believes the authorities clearly lack the proper understanding of the scale of the information attack, conducted by Russia. Still, she believes that in the last several months, the political elite has finally started recognizing the necessity to enhance information security (although no adequate measures have been implemented in this respect). The main problem that needs to be addressed is an abundance of Russian news content. Belarus needs to produce quality national content, but there is a lack of financial sources for this, while Russia, clearly, invests a lot of resources into the information influence: “The existing pro-Russian websites prepare the ground for the potential for the influence. All those numerous

editor teams of unclear origin, such as “Nash Gomel”, that operate in Belarus and promote pro-Russian agenda, rather intend to prepare for the future action in case of necessity”.

Hubarevich notes that the authorities clearly lack instruments to counter the information influence: “Staff ideologists of the people, responsible for the formation of national [news] agenda, keep silence, because Lukashenka is the key speaker on all crucial questions”. If he does not speak publicly, no one risks to take the responsibility upon themselves. This is, in his view, dangerous, because this creates the atmosphere of uncertainty and demonstrates the susceptibility of the system. We can only guess: either the authorities do not react, because they think that everything is under control, or they simply cannot cope with the information attacks. Independent media in this situation effectively implement the function, which is not fulfilled by the state TV-channels: they check facts, analyze the information and the reality of threats, thus withstanding the external influence.

### **Advice 2: the authorities should implement harsh measures to ward off Russia**

The Belarusian experts did not share the same idea on how exactly the authorities should react to the information attacks from Russia. However, they agreed that the actions should be more decisive. For example, Hubarevich says, the government has been using resolute measures against the independent media and political opposition (hence, in some cases, the media have to resort to self-censorship), but is far less audacious when it comes to withstanding Russian influence. He assumes that they simply do not have any instruments at their disposal to be able to struggle against the propagandist bloggers, putting forward Russian agenda.

Yahorau reminds that the authorities do not support the wave of disinformation in general, and adopted harsh measures against Regnum journalists in the past. Still, he believes that the situation is ambivalent, because the political elite maintains the “Union rhetoric” (meaning that they continue reassuring Russian highest ranks of their loyalty), at the same time allowing pro-Russian activities at the local level. Shautsova suggests that in this situation the Belarusian authorities should delimit the influence of Russian media, but to do this, “we should generate our own content. Another aspect is the search for technical solutions (building a system of defence), it is all about political will in the end, however”.

### **Advice 3: to withstand information attacks, one should build cooperation between civil society and state**

The experts have different estimates as to the possibilities for the cooperation between the non-state and state actors in the area of information security. Thus, Andrei Yeliseyeu notes, such cooperation is theoretically possible; the authorities, however, do not express any interest in such an interaction. Alena Artsiomienka does not believe in the likeliness of such a partnership: “Recently established Belarusian Institute of Strategic Research (BISR) declared that they would like to attract independent researchers to develop strategic plan [on withstanding the relevant challenges]; nothing has happened, though”.

Andrei Yahorau considers that such cooperation is possible, and that the authorities should be more open to such a dialogue. At the same time, sociologist Andrei Vardamatski brings to the

attention that the government and the civil society pursue different goals: for the Belarusian authorities, the ultimate goal is not a war on fakes, but rather dissemination and strengthening of the official point of view. Sociologist Aksana Shelest points out the low level of media literacy of the Belarusian population, which is related to the overall political passivity of the society. According to the research, the Belarusian society is susceptible to the Russian television, as is evident from the situation around Crimea in 2014. What is important, is that the recent sociological research conducted by the Center for European Transformation shows that even representatives of the active segment of the society, including opposition leaders and youth activists, hardly ever use the Western media, in part due to the language barrier and due to the easy accessibility of the Russian media.

Sociologist Andrei Vardamatski concluded that it was not only the Russian media who “tested the ground” on the topic of the integration process, but some “fake” sociological institutions did that as well. In his article “I don’t know such sociological organization as MGIMO”, Vardamatski argues that the methods used for the public opinion polling on the issues of the integration are not scientific and that the purpose of such research is to make the idea of integration more popular among the Belarusians. One may conclude that the polling was conducted during the integration talks to manipulate public opinion.

#### **Advice 4: media literacy should be increased**

The majority of experts agreed that the overall level of media literacy in the Belarusian society is low, partially due to the fact that there is no specialized education starting from the elementary schools. Yeliseyeu argues that the literacy level is at the bottom, when it goes about the population and remains low among the journalists: “Even established Belarusian media could uncritically publish materials proceeding from conspiracy theories that reject scientifically proven facts such as global warming”.

Artsiomienka also agrees that even independent media (which are expected to have higher level of literacy and professionalism) often make the same mistakes as the state-funded media.

According to Yuras Hubarevich, in order to improve the situation with the external information influence, the authorities should abolish pressure on the domestic Belarusian media, “giving them an opportunity for the registration and accreditation and free access to advertising services. This would give an opportunity to have internal Belarusian resources and not to depend on external financial support, which would in turn contribute to the information resilience”.

**Yahorau** believes that the media literacy “should be taught starting from kindergartens”. Another thing is the necessity to enhance national identity, which “allows to struggle against foreign interference”, and to remain transparent, which will reinforce democratic institutions.

#### **Advice 5: the conception of information security is good, but not enough**

Another advice consists in the development of information security conception, which was adopted back in the first half of 2019. The document was designed to ward off the information

attacks from abroad and introduced the term of information sovereignty. The latter is understood as an informational sphere, encircled by borders of the Republic of Belarus, which is devoid of any foreign influences. The document specifically focuses on the importance of the Belarusian history and language that lie at the core of the national identity and, hence, of the state's security.

Yahorau believes that this document in itself enlists crucial things, but lacks specific mechanisms on their realization. Hubarevich agrees that the conception simply does not work. Yeliseyeu is convinced that any document in this sphere is not enough and will not solve the relevant problem. For this one needs political will and peculiar steps that have not been implemented up until now: "The problem is not that the measures were spelled out insufficiently, but that they remain on paper".

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[31] <http://vitbich.org/koncepciya-informacionnogo-otchuzhdeniya/>

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- [34] <https://belarusinfocus.info/election-campaign/parliamentary-elections-2019-assessments-domestic-and-international-observers>
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