

Belarus defends its sovereignty against Russian media siege

On 30 April 2019, Moscow recalled its ambassador in Minsk, Mikhail Babich, for having made unprofessional remarks concerning the sovereignty of Belarus. The dismissal of Babich has intensified the debate about Belarus's independence and its relations with its main political ally and economic partner – Russia. The debate is highly affected by Russian propaganda that is widely present in the Belarusian media. Not only the Belarusian opposition, but also the governing political elites, are now actively trying to counter the influence of Russian propaganda on Belarus.

Aliaksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994. One of his campaign slogans was the restoration of closer integration with Russia. Already in 1995, Lukashenka initiated a referendum on several issues, including economic integration with Russia and recognition of Russian as a second official language. In 1996, Moscow and Minsk signed an agreement on the creation of a Union of Russia and Belarus and, in 1999, an agreement on the establishment of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. The agreements implied the future creation of a single currency and common institutions of governance.

Both the referendum and the Union State agreements were products of Lukashenka's political ambition to take a position in the Kremlin. Economic problems and wars in Chechnya had been undermining the authority and support for the Russian president, Boris Yeltsin. Lukashenka hoped that by signing an agreement on tight integration he would have a clearer path to the Kremlin.

This foreign policy was accompanied by brutal suppression of the pro-European and nationalist-oriented opposition in Belarus. Actors and organizations that were associated with the Belarusian language, or that Lukashenka identified with resistance to his 'Union' initiatives, suffered in the first place. From the mid-1990s, educational institutions, public television, radio, and newspapers rapidly began to translate their content into Russian. Civil society organizations and independent media were subjected to an increasing number of economic, political, and legal constraints.

Lukashenka had to moderate his political ambitions when Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia. Meanwhile, the integration rhetoric did not disappear, as Russia remained the main economic partner and sponsor of the Belarusian authoritarian regime.

As a result, the economic dependence of Belarus on Moscow became stronger with every year, while Russian media established more stable positions in the Belarusian media market. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Belarusian authorities have understood that following the loss of economic independence, there is a risk of losing political independence. This has prompted Lukashenka to take steps unfavourable to Moscow. Thus, the Belarusian government did not recognize Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. Lukashenka has also repeatedly stated that Belarus will never relinquish its sovereignty.

Since 2014 the authorities introduced a so-called policy of 'soft Belarusization', which includes more frequent appearance of the Belarusian language in public places and its attribution, with national symbols, to entertainment and cultural events.

Such actions by the Belarusian government immediately enraged Russian politicians and media. Lukashenka was accused of betraying Russia and selecting the 'nationalistic path'.

Both Lukashenka and the opposition had problems resisting the wave of Russian propaganda. The short-sighted policy of the previous years had allowed Russian and Russian-language media to dominate in the Belarusian media market.

Out of the nine channels in the standard TV package, three are Russian and very popular among the Belarusian population while the rest are Belarus-produced, Russian-language channels. Given that about 50 per cent of Belarusians watch television on a daily basis, the influence of Russian media space on the ordinary citizens of Belarus should not be underestimated. Young people tend to consume news online. However, Russian propaganda has also learned how to work on the Internet. A new tool of Russian propaganda is to target young people through chat messages on Telegram, the social media messaging service.

Recent studies show that in Belarus there are about 40 active online media with pro-Russian and anti-Belarusian narratives. A recent study by the Warsaw-based think tank, *EAST Center*, shows which messages promoted by pro-Russian Belarusian media in the first three months of 2019 were most popular:

- Deploy Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus, within the framework of a potential military confrontation with the West;
- Develop Russian organizations that form a 'Russian identity' among Belarusians;
- Introduce the Russian rouble in Belarus;
- Stop dialogue with the West;
- Deploy Russian military bases in Belarus;
- Introduce criminal liability for 'incitement of fear at the expense of Russia'.

In 2017, the influence of these media even forced the Belarusian authorities to arrange a show trial of three authors from the Russian propaganda service, *Regnum News Agency*, on accusations of inciting ethnic hatred.

According to a recent social poll, half of the Belarusian students polled said they have a Russian identity. While the Belarusian language is used for many entertainment activities and events, the educational system remains completely Russified. This shows that Lukashenka is hardly interested in promoting the Belarusian language. Instead, its public use in official meetings has the goal of reaching a particular audience. The Belarusian language is essentially a tool for Lukashenka to send signals of sovereignty and independence to the neighbour in the east.

To deter Russian interference in Belarusian media space, the Belarusian government has introduced a concept of *informational security*. The defining document outlines how Belarus is to be protected from 'manipulation of mass consciousness, discrediting ideas and values, erosion of national sovereignty, [and] instability of the information infrastructure'. The informational concept is targeted at traditional as well as social media channels that use hate speech and disinformation. The document is unique in itself and its appearance is the first documented attempt to restrict Russian intervention in Belarusian media space.

There are several examples that show that the Belarusian government continues to limit opportunities for the development of independent media and to put pressure on independent journalists who, ironically, are actually helping to fight Russian propaganda. Several online edi-

tions were closed when the government classified online media as traditional media. Since December 2018, readers who comment on web pages of online editions have had to identify themselves. In 2018 alone, authorities fined independent journalists 55,000 Euro and rigged a few court cases against them. There are still no independent socio-political television and radio channels. Although only some regions of Belarus have independent newspapers and portals, there is at least one pro-Russian disinformation media outlet in every region of the country.

Today, the Belarusian regime is caught between a rock and a hard place: the independent media and Russian propaganda.

The Belarusian government has focused so much on restricting independent Belarusian journalists and on violating their rights that they have failed to see the big elephant entering the room: Russian media and propaganda. This elephant has every chance of becoming a 'Trojan horse' that will destroy the independence of Belarus, if the Belarusian authorities remain reluctant to mobilise the political will to strongly oppose it. They can only do so with a more independent media.

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