

INTRODUCTION

Systematic dissemination of disinformation has been a key component of Russia's information policy - the Russian Federation systematically builds a negative image of Ukraine within its hybrid aggression against the state¹, is responsible, along with China, for 92% of disinformation on the coronavirus pandemic², targets the US and EU in order to weaken Western alliances and polarize and destabilize target societies. The Kremlin's disinformation system works with various target audiences: international, domestic Russian, and local audiences of countries that are targets of information attacks. The situation is particularly complicated in countries bordering the Russian Federation, considered to be part of its sphere of influence, and having a large percentage of Russian-speaking population, since such communities are easier to manipulate due to a low language barrier. According to the Detector Media NGO, in Ukraine, which has been at the forefront of hybrid warfare for years and often becomes a platform for the Kremlin to practice new tactics, factors such as the Russian language and affiliation with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchy) that is actually controlled by the Russian Orthodox Church, significantly increase people's vulnerability to disinformation³.

These factors are also intrinsic to the Republic of Belarus, where the problems related to the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994, came to the fore after the rigged presidential election on August 9, 2020. Another violation of the right to self-determination led to mass protests, the formation of the Coordinating Council of the Belarusian opposition (in exile) headed by protest leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, non-recognition of Lukashenko as a legitimate president by a number of states and increased repression, police brutality, persecution, abduction and torture of protesters, as well as restrictions on freedom of speech. According to the Viasna human rights center, as of July 2021, there were 589 political prisoners⁴ in Belarus, and in 2020, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) registered 480 detentions of journalists, with 97 detentions⁵ since the beginning of the year. At the end of July

¹ "Image of Ukraine on Russian TV", Ukraine Crisis Media Center, May 18, 2018. Available at:

<https://uacrisis.org/en/image-of-ukraine-on-russian-tv>

² "COVID-19 disinformation being spread by Russia, China, say experts", Elizabeth Thompson, Katie Nicholson, Jason Ho. CBC News, May 26, 2020. Available at:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/covid-coronavirus-russia-china-1.5583961>

³ "On the other side of the screen: analysis of media consumption and disinformation in the Ukrainian information environment", NGO "Detector Media", May 18, 2021 Available at:

https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/188114/On_the_other_side_DM_final_UKR_WEB.pdf

⁴ "As of July 29, 589 people were recognized as political prisoners in Belarus," Viasna human rights center, July 29, 2021. Available at: <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru>

⁵ "Parents are being taken hostage. How mass media are dealt with in Belarus," Katerina Prokofieva. Radio Svoboda, July 25, 2021. Available at:

<https://www.svoboda.org/a/roditeley-berut-v-zalozhniki-kak-v-belarusi-raspravlyayutsya-so-smi/31376249.html>

2021, the Ministry of Justice filed a lawsuit with the Supreme Court demanding the liquidation of the BAJ⁶ in addition to other repressive steps taken by the regime in this area, from attempts to liquidate tut.by and Belsat resources to the forced boarding of a Ryanair plane with opposition journalist Roman Protasevich on board and his arrest⁷. It should be noted that there were systematical repressions and suppression of freedom of speech in Belarus even before the 2020 protests, given the authoritarian nature of the regime. Access to independent sources of information for a large part of the population was limited and possible only through the Internet. Belarus has steadily remained at the bottom of freedom of speech rankings. In 2021, it ranked 158th with a result even lower than the Russian Federation, and was recognized by Reporters Without Borders “Europe's most dangerous country for journalists.”⁸

The suppression of freedom of speech, along with police brutality, has been one of the reasons why Lukashenko’s regime remains in power and has a potential to intensify repression. In his struggle to retain the presidency, Lukashenko actively relied on the Kremlin. The Russian Federation, being the largest creditor of the Republic of Belarus, gave Minsk another \$ 1.5 billion loan in the midst of protests⁹, and Lukashenko and Putin announced joint military exercises, including in Belarus¹⁰ (moreover, representatives of the Belarusian armed forces will participate in Russian West-2021 exercises, and Russian equipment and troops are transferred to the country¹¹). Russia's leadership has guaranteed support to Minsk amid Western sanctions aimed at putting pressure on the authoritarian regime¹², and Lukashenko has agreed with Putin that "Russia will provide comprehensive assistance to ensure Belarus' security in the event of external threats, upon first request."¹³

⁶ “The Ministry of Justice of Belarus filed a lawsuit to liquidate the BAJ,” Institute of Mass Media, July 21, 2021. Available at: <https://imi.org.ua/news/min-yust-bilorusi-podav-do-sudu-pozov-pro-likvidatsiyu-bazh-i40346>

⁷ “Who is Roman Protasevich...”, Tetyana Nevedomska. Deutsche Welle, May 26, 2021. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/uk/khto-takyi-roman-protasevych-litak-z-yakym-posadyly-v-minsku/a-57665994>

⁸ “Belarus is Europe's most dangerous country for journalists” – Reporters Without Borders, Radio Svoboda, December 11, 2020. Available at: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-bilorus-zhurnalisty-nebezpeka/30995313.html>

⁹ “Following the meeting with Lukashenko, Putin promised Belarus a loan of \$ 1.5 billion,” Novaya Gazeta, September 14, 2020. Available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru/news/2020/09/14/164257-putin-po-itogam-vstrechi-s-lukashenko-poobeschal-belarusi-kredit-na-1-5-mlrd-dollarov>

¹⁰ “Russia announced two joint military exercises with Belarus,” Sergiy Romashenko, Deutsche Welle. March 7, 2021. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/ru/rossija-anonsirovala-dva-sovmestnyh-voennyh-uchenija-s-belarusju/a-56798164>

¹¹ “The first echelons with the Russian military arrived in Belarus for the West-2021 exercises,” Ukrinform, July 21, 2021. Available at: <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-world/3284421-na-ucenia-zapad2021-v-belarus-pribyli-pervye-eselony-s-voennymi-rf.html>

¹² “Lukashenko: Moscow promised economic aid to Minsk,” Kateryna Venkina, Deutsche Welle, July 1, 2021. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/ru/lukashenko-moskva-poobeshhala-minsku-ehkonomicheskiju-pomoshh/a-58122833>

¹³ “Lukashenko agreed with Putin: Russia, upon the first request, will provide assistance to ensure the security of Belarus”, Belsat, August 15, 2020. Available at:

Notably, assistance to the authoritarian regime, with which the Kremlin shares the political project "Union State," which means integration of the two countries and which the Russian Federation relies on to keep Belarus in its sphere of influence, also included spreading disinformation on pro-democratic protests. In particular, after a number of Belarusian media workers went on strike to protest against the regime, Russian technical specialists and journalists, mostly workers of RT, the Kremlin's foreign propaganda mouthpiece, were sent to Minsk¹⁴. According to the preliminary qualitative monitoring, against the background of the protests, the rhetoric of the state-controlled Belarusian media and Belarusian politicians quickly acquired anti-Western features inherent to Russian disinformation. In such circumstances, it is particularly important to determine what narratives about the Republic of Belarus were promoted by the key Russian media and what their dynamics was, as the political goals of both regimes regarding pro-democratic protests were at least partly the same and consisted in the need to suppress them in order to preserve Lukashenko's power and Russian influence in Belarus, which became a single option for the authoritarian Minsk.

This study, which scrutinizes the Russian media landscape, is based on a quantitative content analysis of Russia's most popular television channels, highlights key narratives about the Republic of Belarus on Russian television, analyzes tools for shaping the image of Western powers as an enemy, and traces key message dynamics. The results of the content analysis made it possible to identify 6 main topics about Belarus covered by the selected Russian media in 2020:

- relations between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation;
- their common past;
- presidential election;
- protests;
- coronavirus pandemic;
- detention of members of the Wagner private military company.

The report thoroughly analyzes each of these topics, along with their evolution over time and their correlation with the socio-political context of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation.

METHODOLOGY

<https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-dogovorilsja-s-putinyem-rossija-pri-pervom-zaprose-okazhet-pomosch-po-obespecheniju-402964-2020/>

¹⁴ "How Belarusian television began to work after the employees' strike. How RT helped BT after Lukashenko's request," RBC, August 31, 2020. Available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/31/08/2020/5f44ce2e9a794742baeada1b>

The study is based on quantitative content analysis of three Russian TV channels – Channel 1, Rossiya 1 and NTV. All of them are steadily in the TOP-3 of all Russian channels and are of key importance for the formation of the necessary information agenda. Their target audience is not only the population of the Russian Federation, but also Russian-speaking people in other countries, including the Republic of Belarus with its high level of penetration of Russian content.

Since 1995, Russian has been the second state language in Belarus¹⁵. According to the 2019 census (conducted every 10 years), 7.5% of the country's population identify themselves as Russians¹⁶, and Russian is the mother tongue of 38.1% of Belarusians¹⁷. In 1999, this figure was 14.3%, which points to a gradual strengthening of the role of Russian in the country and, concurrently, a decrease in the role of Belarusian in society - UNESCO classifies it as "endangered"¹⁸. The dominance of the Russian language and deep penetration of Russian content into Belarusian society are caused by integration processes under the 1997 Union State Treaty. Moreover, local state television controlled by Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian regime also makes extensive use of Russian content, and national Belarusian channels can broadcast Russian entertainment and information and political programs. As a consequence, the information agenda of the Russian media on key events and phenomena extends to Belarus as well.

The content analysis included more than 2,000 news stories of the following news programs, which are pivotal to the formation of necessary narratives:

- Channel One: Vremya, Novosti, Voskresnoe Vremya
- Rossiya 1: Vesti, Vesti v Subbotu, Vesti Nedeli
- NTV: Segodnya, Itogi Nedeli.

The stories were selected for the period from January 1 to December 31, 2020, which helped to form a comprehensive information picture of the year and trace the dynamics of the main narratives. The primary data were converted to text format and made into a common database with a technical support of the Kwendi Group (<http://www.kwendi.net/>). Content filtering by keywords, such as country name ("Belarus", "Republic of Belarus") and derived demonyms ("Belarusians"), names and surnames of key persons ("Alexander Lukashenko", "Svetlana Tikhanovskaya", etc.) in

¹⁵ "Belarus demands the abolition of the state status of the Russian language," UNIAN, February 21, 2013. Available at: <https://www.unian.net/world/754426-v-belarusi-trebuyut-otmenyi-gosudarstvennogo-statusa-russkogo-yazyka.html>

¹⁶ "The results of the 2019 census of the Republic of Belarus have been summed up," National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus, September 11, 2020. Available at: <https://pravo.by/novosti/novosti-pravo-by/2020/sepember/54414/>

¹⁷ "Belstat: Belarusian is the mother tongue for 61.2% of Belarusians," BELTA, September 10, 2020. Available at: <https://www.belta.by/society/view/belstat-dlja-612-belorusov-rodnoj-jazyk-belorusskij-406281-2020/>

¹⁸ "UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger," United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural organization, N/D. Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/index.php>

different grammatical forms was used to select the stories related to the goal and objectives of the study, thus ensuring the flexibility of filtering. Each selected news item was manually coded by experts and categorized by topics and subtopics determined by information security professionals based on primary data. Since an individual story can relate to several topics simultaneously, this categorization provided the ability to identify from 1 to 5 topics for each story.

MEDIA LANDSCAPE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

The Kremlin keeps exercising and strengthening control over sources of information within the Russian Federation, obstructing the work of independent media and trying to turn the directly and indirectly regime-controlled media into a single source of information for its own citizens. In 2020, Roskomnadzor, Russia's media regulator proposed updating the rules for organizations recognized as "foreign agents"¹⁹ by Russian authorities, a status that had appeared in Russian law in 2012. In April 2021, Putin signed a law²⁰ authorizing fines for organizations that do not comply with these rules. One of the few opposition media outlets, Meduza, was included in the list of "foreign agents." Radio Liberty was included in this list back in 2017 and with the tightening of regulation in 2021 was fined by Roskomnadzor several times in the amount of at least 11 million rubles²¹. The media management claims that working conditions in Russia have become even more difficult and they have even been forced to offer some of their employees to relocate to other countries, including Ukraine²², for security reasons. These steps underscore the general trend to suppress freedom of speech in the Russian Federation and to establish total control over the media field in order to turn it into a tool for shaping the necessary agenda. Government-controlled communications channels have been used for years to spread disinformation, disseminate anti-Western rhetoric, shape an image of the enemy, and legitimize the Kremlin's aggressive policies²³.

¹⁹ "Black mark of 30 words. New restrictions for media - "foreign agents," Olena Polyakovska, July 23,2020. Available at: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30743599.html>

²⁰ "Putin signed a law on imposing fines on media outlets for disseminating messages of other media outlets - "foreign agents" without specifying their status," Meduza, April 30, 2021. Available at: <https://meduza.io/news/2021/04/30/putin-podpisal-zakon-o-shtrafah-dlya-smi-za-rasprostranenie-soobscheniy-drugi-h-smi-inostrannyh-agentov-bez-ukazaniya-ih-statusa>

²¹ "Roskomnadzor fined Radio Liberty 11 million rubles," Vadym Shatalin, Deutsche Welle, February 10,2021. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/ru/roskomnadzor-oshtrafoval-radio-svoboda-na-11-mln-rublej/a-56523423>

²² "All the time we work under a sword hanging over us. How 'foreign agents' live." Viktoriya Safronova, BBC News, June 11, 2021. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-57417259>

²³ "Image of Ukraine on Russian TV", Ukraine Crisis Media Center, May 18, 2018. Available at: <https://uacrisis.org/en/image-of-ukraine-on-russian-tv>

As there are no alternative sources of information, the threat of falling completely under their influence only grows. By constantly creating new platforms and increasing the budget of existing resources (Russia Today TV channel, Sputnik information portal, which includes news websites in more than 30 languages : for example, Sputnik Latvia and Sputnik Kazakhstan and proxy resources: Global Research and Geopolitica.ru), Russian media, both at home and abroad, cover an increasing audience and aim to get their attention for as long as possible (as of 2020, the Russian population spends about 5 hours a day watching television, compared to 4.2 hours a day in 2018²⁴). Television and radio now cover almost the entire population of the Russian Federation (94% and 91%, respectively). In 2020, the budget of the Russian Federation for financing state media exceeded \$ 1.5 billion (of which more than \$ 398 million went to VGTRK media holding, more than \$ 108 to Channel 1, and more than \$ 34 million to Zvezda Channel).

Key influence groups:

- VGTRK (All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company) - a state-owned media holding headed by Oleg Dobrodeev. VGTRK includes some of the highest-rated TV channels - Rossiya-1 and Rossiya-24
- Gazprommedia (CEOs - Dmytro Chernyshenko (since 2020 - Deputy Prime Minister under M. Mishustin) and former head of Roskomnadzor Aleksandr Zharov) - indirectly state-owned holding (100% of shares belong to Gazprombank), which includes NTV and TNT channels.
- National Media Group (General Director - Svetlana Balanova, with Alina Kabayeva (former State Duma deputy from the United Russia party) on the board of directors. The group is controlled by Rossiya Bank and its main shareholder Yuri Kovalchuk, a person close to President Vladimir Putin. Kovalchuk and Rossiya Bank have been under US government sanctions since 2014. NMG owns stakes in Channel 1, Channel 5 and REN-TV.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense owns the media group Zvezda, which includes the Russian Ministry of Defense's propaganda TV channel of the same name (Zvezda). 100% of the shares are owned by the state.

Three channels: Rossiya -1, Channel 1 and NTV have quantitatively the largest coverage. Their popularity is conditioned, inter alia, by a constant increase in serial and entertainment content, which is the most popular on Russian television (22% of total viewing time among adults). It should be noted that the increase in entertainment content has been observed since 2014, when the Russian

²⁴ loc. cit.

Federation began its armed aggression against Ukraine²⁵. This content helps the Kremlin expand the target audience of its narratives through politicized humor. News content accounts for 10 percent of the total TV viewing time. In 2020, the highest-rated newscasts were those devoted to May 9 (with a pronounced military aesthetics) and those dedicated to quarantine measures in Russia.

According to the FOMnibus (Public Opinion Foundation) poll, despite the growing role of online media and social networks in the distribution of news content, the main source of news for the majority of Russian citizens (63%) is still television (in the 40+ age group this figure only increases). The majority of the Russian population (56%) is still not ready to give up television completely in favor of alternative sources of information, and therefore is constantly under the influence of pro-government rhetoric.

Despite popular stereotypes that television is gradually losing its influence and giving way to online resources and social networks, we should not underestimate its influence on the Russian population (and even young people): starting at age 25, Russian citizens watch television at least 3 hours a day (and during the 2020 spring lockdown, television viewing increased even more in each age group). Most often, Russian citizens learn Russian and international news from 5 channels: Channel 1 (47%), Rossiya -1 (45%), NTV (28%), Rossiya -24 (16%) and REN-TV (13%). All these channels are directly or indirectly controlled by the Russian government, and thus constantly disseminate topics and narratives beneficial to the Kremlin, including the processes taking place in the Republic of Belarus, as it is strategically important for the Kremlin to preserve it in its zone of influence.

MAIN TOPICS AND NARRATIVES: RELATIONS BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

In 2020, Russian TV channels gave most of their broadcast time concerning the studied topic to bilateral relations between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation. This topic took about 36% of the total time devoted to discussing Belarus-related events and processes.

Based on the results of the quantitative content analysis, we can distinguish 7 main narratives within this topic:

- “Russia and Belarus are partners” - 34%;

²⁵ “StratCom laughs: in search of an analytical framework», Žaneta Ozoliņa, Jurgis Šķilters, Sigita Struberga, Solvita Denisa-Liepniece, Ivars Austers, Maksym Kyiak. NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, January 31, 2017. Available at: <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/stratcom-laughs-in-search-of-an-analytical-framework/201>

- “Russia and Belarus cooperate within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Union State” - 33%;
- “Putin and Lukashenko are friends” - 24%;
- “Russia and Belarus conduct joint military exercises” - 22%;
- “Russia and Belarus cooperate in the energy sector” - 17%;
- “Belarus is part of the “Russian world” - 11%;
- “Despite the partnership, relations between Russia and Belarus are not easy” - 9%.

While promoting their rhetoric about bilateral relations, the Russian media regularly used the construct “fraternal peoples”, especially in reference to the Belarusians and the Ukrainians. Russia has traditionally seen itself as a “big brother” who is supposed to play a leading civilizational and political role among the three peoples, often regarded as historically “one people”, thus denying the Belarusians and Ukrainians the right to historical, cultural, and political identity.

The response of the news content to a political situation is also interesting - during the periods of cooling relations between Moscow and Minsk, which have periodically arose over the years due to Lukashenko's desire to balance between Russia and the West, the newscasts regularly mentioned negative traits and actions of the Belarusian president. In this way, the Russian media can explain temporary problems in bilateral relations to their target audience and at the same time maintain claims to be a “big brother” through a parallel use of the relevant rhetoric mentioned above. Example: “And right now we are once again passing a very painful test of friendship with Belarus, because everyone already understands: we are connected with the Belarusian people not only by the Soviet past, but by common blood, common culture, and common economy. Thus, two weeks of post-election protests in Belarus [are] a test of these ties for us.” (NTV # Itogi Nedeli with Irada Zeynalova, 23.08.2020 19:00).

It is noteworthy that these narratives are most closely related to one of other main topics, namely the common past of Russia and Belarus, which promotes the idea of Belarus as part of the “Russian world.” It is the Kremlin’s quasi-ideology aimed at uniting other countries under Moscow's leadership on the basis of the Russian language, common history and the Russian Orthodox Church. This rhetoric peaked in August-September and closely correlated with narratives about the protests. Anti-Western rhetoric and the message about the West trying to put Minsk and Moscow against each other were widely applied (see below). Messages about Belarus as a component of the "Russian world" were opposed to such rhetoric within the Russian disinformation system.

Henceforth, it is necessary to take into account the complex structure of Russian narratives, which form a holistic logical system with closely interrelated themes and / or narratives. This can be seen, inter alia, in the context of the dynamics of certain narratives: for example, bilateral relations were most intensively covered in September, as that was the time of simultaneous Caucasus 2020 military exercises and the Kremlin's campaign for the “protection” of Belarus.

Russian officials and journalists, when speaking of bilateral relations between the states, always emphasized the need for even greater integration. Example: “The ties between Russia and Belarus are special ties, special relations. They are based on our common history, on the similarity of our cultures, languages, on common spirituality. And the responsibility of the modern generation of politicians is to deepen and expand mutually beneficial cooperation, taking into account each other's point of view and interests” (Rossiya 1, Vesti, 05.03.2020, 20:14). Dmitry Mezentsev, Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the Republic of Belarus, who repeatedly appealed to the thesis of "fraternal peoples" in his speeches, made rather frequent media statements, for example: "The scale of these relations, fraternal, consistent, historically confirmed relations, is such that we should interact even more and move forward” (Channel 1 # Vremya, 07.08.2020 21:13).

The rhetoric about bilateral relations is not only among the key Belarus-related topics on Russian television, but was one of the main in the period from January to September. Later, changes in the socio-political situation caused by post-election protests somewhat shifted the focus of media attention.

MAIN TOPICS AND NARRATIVES: PROTESTS

Although mass protests in Belarus began in August, this topic was the second largest in the Russian media coverage over the entire 2020. The relevant topic can be divided into 7 main narratives:

- “The West tries to control the Republic of Belarus” - 38%;
- “Protests are organized abroad” - 20%;
- “Russia will not allow other countries to interfere in the affairs of Belarus” - 19%;
- “Protesters are aggressive and break the law” - 18%;
- “Protests are small and ineffective” - 14%;
- “Russia discusses the situation in Belarus with other countries” - 14%;
- “Belarusian government is ready for a constructive dialog, but not with the street” - 11%.

Hereinafter, because one message can relate to several topics, the amount may exceed 100%.

Since the protests in Belarus can be considered one of the most important socio-political processes that happened in geographic Europe in 2020, this topic is particularly important for analysis. The coverage of relevant events in Russian media has several key characteristics, most of which are typical of the general rhetoric of Russian media about pro-democracy protests in neighboring countries or in Russia itself. It is primarily overall discrediting of protests as a phenomenon and of activists who represent it. It is characteristic of the Russian media to depreciate the subjectivity of those dissatisfied with authoritarian governments, and impose a view that any protests are inspired or directly overseen from abroad. This approach fits into a broader worldview that Russian propaganda tries to impose on its target audience, where there is virtually no place for liberal democratic values, and any notable political process must be in the interests of certain political players. In this way, the Kremlin primarily seeks to discourage its own population from participating in protests against the authoritarian regime.

Such discouragement through discrediting is linked to another important Russian disinformation concept: the image of an external enemy assigned to Western nations and international alliances. This meta-concept has been used by Russian media and pro-Russian actors in other countries for many years, with the USA and NATO being the most frequent enemy, but anti-Western rhetoric is also used to cover the EU as a whole and individual member states, international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), etc.²⁶ However, often such allegations are not specified and the role of the enemy is assigned to the "collective West".

It is noteworthy that the main narrative on this topic was accusing the West of attempts to establish "external governance" over Belarus. Such rhetoric is typical of the Kremlin in general, especially in the case of Ukraine, which is constantly accused of losing its sovereignty and being under Western "external governance." In Ukraine, this narrative is extensively used by pro-Russian actors, especially the Opposition Platform - For Life, headed by media oligarch and Putin's crony Viktor Medvedchuk. This narrative proved to be effective: in 2020, 45% of Ukrainians agreed with the thesis that Ukraine is under IMF's "external governance" ²⁷. Given its effectiveness, Russian politicians and journalists extrapolated the relevant theses to Belarus as well.

They often drew parallels between the two countries, where Ukraine, which is allegedly under the same "external governance" as the West is trying to impose on Belarus, is experiencing a serious decline in the quality of life (ignoring Russian armed aggression and the coronavirus

²⁶ "How Russian media foments hostility towards the West," Ukraine Crisis Media Center, September 14, 2018. Available at: <https://uacrisis.org/en/how-russian-media-foments-hostility-towards-the-west>

²⁷ "Ukrainians mostly believe that Ukraine is under IMF's 'external governance'," Ukrayinska Pravda, September 29, 2020. Available at: <https://www.epravda.com.ua/news/2020/09/29/665676/>

pandemic as causes of economic decline) and the Revolution of Dignity should serve as a negative example for Belarusians of what awaits them if protests "organized from abroad" win in the country. For example: "The Maidan is not a model. People's opinion is changing, because life has become harder in Ukraine, much harder "(Rossiya 1 # Vesti Nedeli, 01.11.2020 22:00).

The need to avoid a recurrence of the "Ukrainian scenario" through Western intervention and calls to prevent Belarus from losing its sovereignty in a similar way can be fancifully combined with a rhetoric that denies Belarus subjectivity - but this time from Russia, which allegedly has the right to protect its interests in a state within its zone of influence. For example: "That is, the Americans, who consider Venezuelas their backyard, cannot but understand that we won't let anyone into our backyard either" (NTV, Itogi Nedeli with Irada Zeynalova, 23.08.2020, 19:00).

To discredit the West, they demonize democratic benchmarks, and it has become traditional for Kremlin disinformation. According to it, Western countries try to impose their "unnatural" values as opposed to "traditional" values, which Russia protects, including in countries that should be within its zone of influence: "Europe is also preparing to adopt devastating sanctions against Belarus. They are followed by a standard democracy support package with its demands for gay parades or pride marches, or whatever they are called. Everything is standard and sorrowful" (Rossiya 1 # Vesti Nedeli, 20.09.2020 20:36).

Protesters are traditionally portrayed as those who behave aggressively, break the law, and leave law enforcement with no choice but apply force against their wrongdoing. Concurrently, there remains a dichotomy between aggression and paucity of protests - pro-democracy protests and rallies, especially when it comes to Russia, are traditionally either silenced by the local media or the number of participants is greatly underestimated. A similar tactic was chosen for Belarus, where "organized from abroad," supposedly aggressive and small-scale protests were opposed to events in support of Lukashenko, thus creating a distorted picture of reality in which an aggressive externally controlled minority tried to impose its position on the majority, which supported the incumbent president.

It is worth noting that although some Russian politicians and officials allowed themselves to criticize Lukashenko in the early days of the protests – in particular, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy²⁸ and Konstantin Zatulin²⁹ - Russian media initially supported the Belarusian regime and Lukashenko. In covering the protests, the Kremlin-controlled media sought to appeal primarily to Belarusian

²⁸ "Zhirinovskiy said that "Alexander Lukashenko would leave," Reform.by, February 14, 2021. Available at: <https://reform.by/201667-zhirinovskij-zajavil-cto-aleksandr-lukashenko-ujdjot>

²⁹ "State Duma deputy criticized the results of elections in Belarus," RBC, August 10, 2020. Available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5f3140179a79473603b34749>

officials and authorities, as well as state-owned Belarusian media, which are also controlled by the authoritarian government. Although brutality of law enforcement agencies attracted minor criticism of Russian media in the first days of the protests, such criticism vanished from Russian TV with the intensification of protests and repression in Belarus. Most of the allegations were related to the obstruction of the work of Russian journalists.

The Belarusian authorities, on the contrary, were portrayed as humane, strong, able to regain control and willing to compromise. Russian media also resorted to manipulations to give the audience the impression that official Minsk had no one to compromise with because protesters behaved aggressively and violently. They used allegations about the “external governance” and made continuous efforts to discredit opposition leaders, primarily, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. In this context, sexist rhetoric and gender discrimination deserve special attention: equating "feminine" in politics with "weakness" and political inaptitude. This helps to build the antithesis of the images: Lukashenko (masculinity, strength, power, confidence) - the opposition "female triad" (inexperience, weakness, indecision). When referring to the situation in Belarus, Russian media often mention members of the Belarusian opposition with extremely derogatory connotations: as "ladies" without any political experience who "found themselves out of place" and who became puppets in the hands of "Western puppeteers."

Russian propaganda also resorts to outright humiliation and discrimination for "inappropriate" appearance: for example, Rossiya-1 criticized S. Tikhanovskaya in a supposedly evening dress during a daytime meeting and used it as a much more global metaphor: the opposition leader is allegedly unable to "master the subtleties of protocol etiquette" and feels as uncomfortable and out of place in her new clothes as in the political sphere. It is unlikely that similar analogies would have appeared in media space if male oppositionists were involved. In addition, similar messages were promoted by pro-government Belarusian media resources, as well as by Lukashenko himself in his speeches.

MAIN TOPICS AND NARRATIVES: COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The following 7 directions can be distinguished within the defined theme:

- Russia and Belarus open / close their borders - 40%;
- "Russia helps Belarus with vaccination and treatment" - 26%;
- Epidemic statistics - 13%;
- "EAEU countries help each other" - 11%;

- "Belarus will be the first to receive the Russian vaccine" - 8%;
- "Belarusian authorities are ineffective in in the context of epidemic" - 7%;
- "Russia helps the citizens of Belarus abroad" - 7%.

The situation with the Covid-19 pandemic in Belarus helped Russian television implement typical narrative strategies, including calling Belarus a "brotherly state" while perpetuating in the media space the image of Russia as a "big brother," the state in which the government is able not only to control the Covid-19 incidence, but also to help more vulnerable and less prepared Belarus fight the epidemic. According to this construct, the "big brother" is merciful but strict: he will always defend his own reputation (in particular, after Lukashenko's criticism of Russian coronavirus tests - NTV, Itogi Nedely with Irada Zeynalova, April 19, 2020), does not lose rationality and above all protects its own citizens' safety: despite generous promises and willingness to help (for example, with the evacuation of Belarusian citizens from abroad and the supply of Russian vaccines to the country), in case of epidemic danger from Belarus, the Russian authorities will act decisively and close the borders.

The launch of Sputnik V in late August helped divert attention from protests in Belarus and discuss medical cooperation instead. At the same time, the thesis that Belarus would be the first country to receive the Russian vaccine helped to maintain a stable narrative of "fraternal peoples" who always come to each other's aid.

The dynamics of attitude to the Covid-19 situation in Belarus is a gradual movement from criticism of government actions and Covid dissidence (spring) to approval of anti-epidemic measures (including cooperation with Russia) and guarantees of Russia's support (autumn-winter). In April-May, Russian TV channels criticized the actions of the Belarusian authorities (7% of airtime on leading Russian national TV channels), and labeled the strategy to counter the epidemic as ineffective. The rapid increase in morbidity is called a "great tragedy", which resulted directly from long-term disregard for quarantine measures (in particular, the mask regime and the closure of borders) and the latest introduction of self-isolation.

The Russian media also use the epidemic situation in Belarus as another chance to demonstrate the difference between the situation in Belarus and Russia (of course, in favor of the latter: "Belarus is outstripping even the UK in the growth rate of identified cases of infection [...] Belarus is also far ahead of Russia 94.19 cases vs. 91.72" (Rossiya 1 # Vesti Nedeli, 03.05.2020) Television presenters and experts emphasize the effectiveness of Russia's strategy to combat the virus and stress that Russia is the "world leader in mass testing" - of course, without mentioning the underreporting of morbidity and mortality in Russia.

Inadequate quarantine measures were sharply criticized in the Russian information space, as it "conflicts with common sense.": "... Belarus actually ignores the deadly epidemic, mass events [...] are not canceled, the movement of citizens is not restricted..." (Rossiya 1 # Vesti Nedeli, 03.05.2020). This criticism is partly explained by the internal political context in Russia, which introduced severe restrictive measures. Under such conditions, it was important to portray the neighboring state with the opposite situation in a negative light.

Special media attention was paid to condemning mass events, which were not canceled in Belarus despite a difficult epidemic situation. The Victory Day parade organized by Lukashenko on May 9 was severely criticized (although a similar parade took place in Moscow, but in June). Appealing to the WHO's recommendations to cancel mass events, Russian television criticizes Belarusian subbotniks, in which Lukashenko also took part. The television presenters resort to ironic connotations, calling Belarus a state in which "people do not die of the coronavirus" and joking about the covid dissidence of Belarusian journalists and the Belarusian president, who "does not believe in the virus he is unable to see." Given the fact that Russian media refused to criticize the actions of the Belarusian authorities regarding the pandemic when the situation with morbidity and mortality deteriorated compared to the spring, it can be assumed that in the context of ongoing protests and a policy of support for Lukashenko Russia's media strategy involved refraining from such criticism.

The Russian media also used the critical epidemic situation in Belarus to contrast it with the situation in Russia and create its own positive image: unlike Belarus, Russia is a state that controls the spread of the virus and takes care of the safety and health of its citizens. Instead, in November-December, when the incidence statistics in both Belarus and Russia increased significantly, criticism of the government's strategies changed to approval and brief news about the opening/closing of the borders of Russia and Belarus and news with statistics (40% and 13% of airtime respectively). Messages that Belarus would be the first country to receive the Russian vaccine (8% of airtime) and those about medical cooperation between the countries were actively disseminated.

MAIN TOPICS AND NARRATIVES: COMMON PAST

The Russian media rhetoric devoted to the theme of common past can be divided into 3 main narratives:

- "Russia and Belarus preserve the historical truth" - 75%;

- "Russians and other peoples together liberated Belarus" - 21%;
- "Belarus' contribution to the fight against Nazism" - 3%.

The content analysis shows that a disproportionately large share of airtime on the theme of common past concerns joint efforts of Russia and Belarus to preserve the "historical truth." This is due to a significant role of historical narratives in the system of Russian disinformation and the importance of historical myths in the ideological strengthening of the Russian regime. It is largely based on the cult of the "Great Victory" over Nazism/fascism (Soviet and, later, Russian historiography for the most part does not distinguish between these concepts), which is partly the basis for the new militarism. By appropriating the victory in World War II and positioning itself as the successor state to the USSR, which defeated the absolute evil of Nazism, Putin's Russia formulates its historic duty to continue defending the world against it. Media readily dub entire states as Nazi or fascist, especially if the policies of this state contradict the interests of the Kremlin

³⁰.

The authoritarian regime chose "whitewashing" of the totalitarian past and the image of the USSR instead of comprehending the Soviet era mistakes, which explains the construct of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 as opposed to World War II 1939 - 1945. This approach makes it possible to avoid discussions about the role of the USSR in unleashing the war and especially about issues related to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Instead, Russian disinformation accuses Western nations, especially Poland, of beginning World War II³¹. Not only Vladimir Putin personally pays attention to the historical component of Russia's information policy, writing manipulative articles on this war³². A corresponding trend is enshrined in the legislation, which provides for imposing civil and criminal penalties for "rewriting history", equating the USSR with Nazi Germany and denying the role of the USSR in the victory in World War II. According to the Agora International Human Rights Group, of all the court verdicts related to accusations of "rewriting history", the most dangerous is the subject of World War II³³.

Russian media portray Belarus as one of the few states that, along with Russia, is concerned with "preserving" the historical heritage at a time when Western countries are allegedly trying to rewrite it. For example, "And the common task of both countries is to combat falsifications of

³⁰ "Russian media claims that everyone is a Nazi", Ukraine Crisis Media Center, April 30, 2020. Available at: <https://uacrisis.org/en/ru-media-claims-that-everyone-is-a-nazi>

³¹ "Putin's Big Lie", Ann Applebaum, The Atlantic, 5 січня 2020-го року. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/putin-blames-poland-world-war-ii/604426/>

³² "On Putin's Vision of WWII Lessons", Ukraine Crisis Media Center, 19 червня 2020-го року. Available at: <https://uacrisis.org/en/on-putin-s-vision-of-wwii-lessons>

³³ "How people in Russia are tried for 'falsifying history': Agora report," Meduza, May 10, 2018. Available at: <https://meduza.io/feature/2018/05/10/kak-v-rossii-sudyat-za-falsifikatsiyu-istorii-doklad-agory>

history. Everyone has stomped on the topic of World War II and the Great Patriotic War, and only for Belarus and Russia this war is sacred "(Rossiya 1 # Vesti Nedeli, 25.10.2020 21:11). It is the news that Moscow and Minsk are joining forces not to allow other countries to "slander" history that dominates the defined topic. This rhetoric intensified in May-June 2020 due to a large concentration of dates associated with World War II, especially May 9 - Victory Day. In June, Putin and Lukashenko took part in the opening of a memorial near Rzhev, which also involved increased media activity.

As noted above, the theme of the common past is closely linked to the narratives of bilateral relations between Russia and Belarus, as well as to the use of the ideological construct of "fraternal peoples." Many stories, in fact, every fifth news item on the topic was about how the USSR and, above all, the Russians, liberated the Belarusians from the Nazi occupation. However, only 3% of airtime is devoted to Belarus' contribution to the struggle and its losses, which accounted for almost a third of the population. Thus, the image of Belarus in news stories about the common past plays two roles for the target audience: a partner in the common struggle for the historical truth (anti-Western sentiment runs through such rhetoric indirectly, and sometimes directly), but a younger, weaker and Russia-dependent partner, one that owes a historical debt to Russia - and this should once again strengthen the leading role of Moscow.

MAIN TOPICS AND NARRATIVES: ELECTION OF THE PRESIDENT OF BELARUS

Until August 7, Russian TV channels did not broadcast rallies, arrests, clashes with police and special purpose police units, or disconnection of mobile Internet in the center of Minsk. Only current news items about the elections were broadcast. The topic of the elections in Belarus began to appear on Russian television actively after a resonant news hook - the detention of "Wagnerians."

The general election rhetoric can be divided into the following categories:

- Current information - 55%;
- "Lukashenko won the elections" - 40%;
- Some countries do not recognize Lukashenko as the winner - 25%;
- "Russia considers Lukashenko the winner of the elections" - 9%;
- "The elections were fair" - 9%;
- "Other countries recognize Lukashenko's victory" - 4%.

Before the protests, Russian media did not show any interest in the election process, probably considering Lukashenko's formal victory predictable, and avoided any topics related to the escalation and manifestations of public discontent in Belarus.

On August 10, the day after the elections, Russian television did their best to legitimize their results in order to assure people that Lukashenko had won honestly and democratically (40% of airtime). Russian media produced 30 stories about Lukashenko's victory, 10 stories about the absence of violations and 8 stories about the recognition of the results by Russia and Putin in just one day. Many details of the protests in the streets of Belarusian cities continued to be systematically silenced.

In key political talk shows and newscasts, Lukashenko's victory is presented as exceptionally fair and democratic: "The emotions and frustrations of opposition-minded people are understandable to some extent, but this is the reality: the minority must respect the victory of the majority; the majority voted the way it did. The results of the Belarusian elections are obviously legitimized." For Russian propaganda, Lukashenko's victory is "unquestionable" and "absolutely obvious," as "the majority of the population" is loyal to the self-proclaimed president, and any forceful methods of suppressing protests are an "adequate response to the situation" rather than violence.

To normalize the officially announced election results, Russian television presenters and experts appealed to the official position of such authoritarian states as China, Russia and Kazakhstan, whose leaders congratulated the self-proclaimed president on his victory. At the same time, the mass non-recognition of falsified results by Western states was presented as a hostile step, which only reinforces the thesis of attempts at "external governance": "Two more countries - Ireland and Canada - have stated that they do not recognize the results of the Belarusian elections. The EU has declared Lukashenko a persona non grata and is threatening the country's leadership with sanctions. Western fist... Western fist is clenched, - the press writes, and against this background a number of political analysts note that events unfold according to a very familiar scenario" (NTV # Segodnya, 18.08.2020 16:07).

MAIN TOPICS AND NARRATIVES: DETENTION OF "WAGNERIANS"

Detention in Belarus of 33 members of the private military company Wagner, which is linked to pro-Putin oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhyn (also known for his links to the Patriot media group and the Internet Research Agency, whose bots and trolls took part in Russian meddling in the 2016 US elections) accounted for 6% of all Russian media airtime devoted to Belarus in 2020. The coverage of these events was relatively conflicting, partly because of the initial steps taken by Alexander Lukashenko himself, who said that the "Wagnerians" had arrived in Belarus to

destabilize the situation before the elections³⁴. In this regard, it was the topic of "Wagnerians" that brought discussions of the presidential elections in Belarus to the Russian agenda.

In general, there are three key narratives within this theme:

- "This is an operation of foreign intelligence services" - 63%;
- "This is an attempt to put Russia and Belarus against each other" - 49%;
- "Russia releases its citizens" - 43%.

It is worth noting that the detention of the "Wagnerians" was probably a special operation in which Ukraine took an active part. However, as of July 2021, there is not enough information to clearly identify all its participants, the purpose and tools for its implementation. Earlier, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Security Service of Ukraine denied the existence of such an operation and their participation in it³⁵. However, later Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky confirmed in an interview that the operation had taken place, but "it was the idea of other countries, definitely not Ukraine, and it is true that Ukraine got dragged into this operation to the uttermost"³⁶.

Given Lukashenko's initial rhetoric and even the declared possibility of extradition of detainees to Ukraine, the Kremlin viewed the detention of members of the private military company as a hostile move. However, as the protests intensified, Minsk's position softened and the "Wagnerians" returned to Russia, the Kremlin-controlled media began to avoid criticism of the Belarusian government again. Instead, they took the position that the Western intelligence operation was intended to worsen bilateral relations between the two countries: "What forces are behind the provocation in Minsk? The main goal of the dirty political game is to strike a blow to Russia - Belarus relations. Trap, hoaxes and gray cardinals pulling those strings. The scenario is like a political thriller. Except that everything that happens is far from a movie" (Channel 1 # Vremya, 09.08.2020 21:13). Thus, Russian media once again took the opportunity to promote anti-Western rhetoric, which later allowed them to allege that "Western-led protests" were organized by special services.

CONCLUSIONS

³⁴ "Lukashenko - to Russians: Stop lying, "Wagnerians" told us everything", Ukrayinska Pravda, August 4, 2020.

Available at: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/08/4/7261764/>

³⁵ "The Russian side prepared in advance a fake version of the alleged involvement of the SBU in the detention of "Wagnerians," Ukrinform, August 18, 2020. Available at:

<https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/3083531-kirilo-budanov-kerivnik-golovnogo-upravlinna-rozvidki-mou.html>

³⁶ "President Volodymyr Zelensky in "VIP with Natalia Moseychuk", TSN, June 24, 2021. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAPSWg5jw3o&t=2012s>

The quantitative content analysis of news programs of the three most popular Russian TV channels allowed us to identify 6 key topics in the rhetoric about the Republic of Belarus for 2020. The most popular among them during the year was the issue of bilateral relations between Belarus and Russia. It should be noted that, although the topic of protests ranked third in absolute numbers, given that they began in August 2020, the coverage of relevant events was of great importance for Russian TV channels.

In general, all the selected topics and narratives are logically interconnected and mostly fit the framework of Russian disinformation, for which the priority is to create a hostile image of the West, discredit any pro-democracy movements, reinforce the "legitimacy" of authoritarian regimes and address historical issues, especially those related to World War II and the role of the USSR in it.

In general, the leitmotif of Russian propaganda in the coverage of the elections in Belarus and the reaction of civil society to them was the same as in the coverage of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity: any disagreement with the government is regarded as foreign interference and external governance. Thus, the Kremlin once again resorts to constructing an image of a weak, inferior protest movement, incapable of existing without the "coordinated support from Western powers": both in terms of finance and human resources. It is noteworthy that in covering the relevant topics, Russian TV channels used the label "external governance" previously tested by the Kremlin and its agents of influence in Ukraine.

In addition, Russian propaganda repeatedly compares the Belarusian protests to "color revolutions," appealing primarily to the Ukrainian context of the Revolution of Dignity. The description of the mechanics of the revolutionary processes is also typical, not much different from the description of events in Ukraine in 2014: according to presenters and invited experts of the 60 Minutes program, "intellectuals are bought out, given grants, they go abroad," and at the same time, "militants are being trained, including abroad." Thus, the coverage of any civil disagreement with the official position is interpreted by the pro-government Russian media, on the one hand, as descending into chaos and anarchy, and on the other - as a repetition of the "Ukrainian" scenario ("All this is very technological from the point of view of the Maidan and the Revolution", "... technologies have not changed since the days of the Ukrainian Maidan.")

Television presenters and experts do not try to hide that the Russian government's position is a position of force, so any steps not agreed with the Kremlin can be fatal for Lukashenko: "From an economic point of view, if he [Lukashenko] pursues a policy of exacerbating the relations with Russia, the economic situation in Belarus will deteriorate very quickly."

At the same time, accusing neighboring countries (especially Poland and Lithuania) of destabilizing the situation in Belarus, the Russian media also denied any Russian interference: "There is no "Russian trail" here, and behind this mess are definitely Western countries, including the nearest and distant neighbors."

As was the case with covering the events in Ukraine in 2014, the Russian media actively used such narratives as "coup d'etat," "violent change of power." The antithesis "power (law and order) - opposition (chaos, decline)" became pervasive. It is constantly emphasized that the "uncoordinated with the authorities" protests (just like in Ukraine) are nothing but the inaptitude of a certain stratum of the Belarussian population to understand the reality the state lives in (and therefore the reality in which Lukashenko wins a fair victory).

As in the mentions of Ukraine, the Russian media actively promoted the narrative of external governance (for example, from Poland, Lithuania) of protesters sponsored by foreign donors. Protesters "form a picture for Western agencies," and instructions on how to behave are given to them by "inconspicuous people" - allegedly Western agents.

Thus, a narrative dichotomy of "Lukashenko's" Belarus (as a space of peace) and "post-Maidan" Ukraine (as a space of decline) can be found in the media landscape of the Russian Federation. The "Ukrainian" scenario is depicted exclusively as an counterexample, or as an option that must be avoided at all costs. Lukashenko is positioned as a symbolic fighter against chaos, who will "brutally but within the law" suppress civil resistance in order to allegedly preserve statehood.

In key political talk shows and newscasts, Lukashenko's victory is presented as exceptionally fair and democratic: "The emotions and frustrations of opposition-minded people are understandable to some extent, but this is the reality: the minority must respect the victory of the majority; the majority voted the way it did. The results of the Belarussian elections are obviously legitimized." For Russian propaganda, Lukashenko's victory is "unquestionable" and "absolutely obvious," as "the majority of the population" is loyal to the self-proclaimed president, and any forceful methods of suppressing protests are an "adequate response to the situation" rather than violence.

Thus, the key national TV channels of the Russian Federation have created a picture of the events in Belarus, the main participants of which are Russia and the demonized image of the West. Belarus was removed from this context, allegedly being only a tool in the hands of neighboring countries, especially Poland and Lithuania. The only goal of the West was allegedly to "harm" Russia, and the situation in Belarus was allegedly used only as a tool in the political struggle against Russia. According to the rhetoric of Russian media, for its western neighbors, Belarus is exclusively

an object without its own political will, and its citizens are a space for manipulation of public consciousness. At the same time, the Russian media tried to consolidate the image of Russia as a bearer of law and order, which is always ready to help the "younger brother": Russia is always ready to come to the aid of the "friendly people." This is confirmed by numerous quotes from political talk shows on leading national TV channels, such as "60 Minutes": "There can be no options for [the Belarusian government's] agreement with the West": the only "true friend" of Belarus is Russia. Such a tactic is designed to consolidate the already well-established demonization of the West as the Other, which will "by any means" seek to change the government in Belarus from the supposedly legitimate to the opposition one.

The study findings once again highlight the systemic nature of Russian disinformation and the use of Kremlin-controlled TV channels to create an agenda favorable to the regime. This agenda is characterized by pervasive anti-Western rhetoric, discredit of pro-democracy movements, creation of a dichotomy of the aggressive West and Russia as a reliable partner, "fraternal" relations with which are historical and allow Moscow to claim the leadership in them.

In such circumstances, it is obvious that neither Russian nor Belarusian state-owned media can serve as a source of honest information about the events in Belarus. This highlights the need for support to any independent civic and journalistic initiatives in Belarus, with a special focus on the security of activists and media workers. Online media can play an important part. Many of them have editorial offices abroad. It is also necessary to pay attention to the growing Belarusian diaspora communities, the number of which is increasing due to the mass emigration of Belarusians. Developing and maintaining the necessary skills for Belarusian citizens to create media and civic initiatives abroad is an important task, which will help increase the number of balanced, relevant journalistic materials about Belarus as opposed to disinformation organized by Moscow and Minsk. Such materials, as well as other steps aimed at supporting freedom of speech and protecting Belarusian democratic initiatives, will hinder the normalization of the strengthening of authoritarianism in Belarus and the discrediting of protests, and will increase pressure on the authoritarian regime.