



Artyom Shraibman is a political editor in Belarusian news portal TUT.BY. He previously worked as political analysts in BelarusDigest and BelaPan.

Pavel Usov is a director of Center for Political Analysis and Prognosis. He is the author of more than 500 scientific publications on the problems of modern politics and geopolitics of Eastern European countries.

IS RUSSIA USING AN INFORMATION WAR AGAINST BELARUS?

Russia's actions in Eastern Ukraine proved that an information war has become a significant tool in what is called 'hybrid war'. The main goal of the information attacks is to spread uncertainty and create tensions in the society. Usually directed at the 'enemy', such policy may also be used against the allies.

Visible shifts in the policies of Lukashenka's regime towards the national identity and culture, which was a response to the unrests in Ukraine, stimulated a reaction from the so-called 'imperialist' Russian media. The message is clear – Russia is sending a warning that Lukashenka is kept on a short leash, that Presidential elections in Belarus are approaching, and that he faces various internal and external challenges.

authors focus on the question what the goal of Russia's information attacks in Belarus is. In the first article Artyom Shraibman argues that intensified information attacks from Russia against Belarus and Lukashenka's regime are a kind of warning to Lukashenka in view of the upcoming Presidential elections. The author provides two scenarios for the 2015 Belarusian politics.

In the second article Pavel Usov continues the analysis and shows that the ongoing informational outburst contains two elements: accusations of nationalism and Lukashenka's possible refusal to run for re-election. The author summarises that regardless of the game Lukashenka plays, Russia will continue to support the regime.

Therefore, in this issue of Bell two reputable

Vytautas Keršanskas, Editor

CONTENTS

1
IS RUSSIA USING AN INFORMATION WAR AGAINST BELARUS?

1
RUSSIAN MEDIA ATTACKS AGAINST BELARUS: REASONS, MECHANISMS AND RISKS IN RUN-UP TO THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

3
INFORMATION ATTACKS IN BELARUS: A FORM OF THREAT FROM RUSSIA OR A WAY FOR LUKASHENKA TO CONSOLIDATE

6
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN BELARUS: POLITICS, ECONOMY, INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

RUSSIAN MEDIA ATTACKS AGAINST BELARUS: REASONS, MECHANISMS AND RISKS IN RUN-UP TO THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Artyom Shraibman

Annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in the East of Ukraine have caused an unprecedented outburst of nationalist and imperialist rhetoric in the Russian media space. Voices arise increasingly in favor of the "Russian World", a kind of an historical and cultural Russian-speaking area under the rule of Moscow to oppose the "hostile West". The doctrine sees independent Belarus as a misunderstanding and a primary target for the Russian expansionism, since the people of Belarus is supposed to be a branch of the single Russian nation.

This mounting trend could not but generated two interrelated processes: the activation of pro-Russian actors in Belarus and attempts of the Belarusian government to oppose these dangerous trends. The latter is visible, in particular, in measures announced by Aliaksandr Lukashenka

and other supreme officials to promote the Belarusian language and the national culture, and to support civil initiatives in this realm. Such actions are rather untypical for the Belarusian authorities, traditionally rooted in the Soviet identity and the idea of the Russian-Belarusian brotherhood, and inclined to marginalize the nationalistic democratic opposition.

Official Minsk also distanced itself from Russia on Ukraine. Belarus opted for a neutral stance vis-à-vis the military conflict and maintained demonstratively warm ties with the new Ukrainian leadership. The developments came on the background of growing economic disagreements with Russia and intensification of the dialogue with the West. It came to a point when the Belarusian MFA organized a meeting for ambassadors of EU member states to discuss

Current informational wave has created the new environment in the Russian media field.

This new inclination of the Russian media to put negative aspects in the spotlight is in itself a new conflictogenic factor of the Belarus-Russia relations, likely to generate new issues.

problems in Belarus-Russia relations in the middle of a yet another trade clash with Moscow. Media covered the meeting defiantly.

Russian media reaction to 'Belarusianization'

Russian and Belarusian pro-Russian media reacted to these gestures and trends rather angrily. Traditionally, two internet websites, Regnum and Imperiya.by, as well as the Russian far-right website Sputnik & Pogrom were the most outspoken. Each initiative by Belarusian officials (or a civil initiative they did not suppress) to promote the Belarusian culture, language, traditional symbols or history provokes a series of publications at these websites. They accuse the Belarusian government of discriminating the Russian-speaking population, enforcing Belarusization and flirting with nationalists. For example, they voiced these accusations after a Belarusian-language sport event "Mova Cup" in Minsk with country's well-known sportsmen participating, erection of a monument to the Great Duke of Lithuania Alhierd in Viciebsk, and minister of education Mikhail Zhuraukou's statement about a need to switch teaching of history and geography in schools to Belarusian. The headlines of websites' stories are self-explanatory: "Lukashenka the Nationalist", "Minsk People's Republic" (an analogy with separatist entities in eastern Ukraine), "Byelorussia consistently contrasts itself to the Russian World", etc. Obviously, these publications seek to escalate contradictions between the two countries with a goal to instigate Moscow to be tough on official Minsk and eventually to incorporate Belarus.

What was new about such opinions in recent months is that such ideas have reached some more popular Russian media rather than only a narrow segment of the above-mentioned web outlets. Lenta.ru, one of the most visible Russian news resources on Internet, accused Belarusian soccer fans of neo-Nazism and Russophobia, and the REN TV aired a long story in prime time about a Maidan-like revolution prepared in Belarus. The story also reproached the Belarusian government for re-writing history to please nationalists.

So far, the trend has not reached the mainstream federal newspapers or TV channels, something that we saw in 2010 with almost weekly abrasive coverage of Belarus and Aliaksandr Lukashenka personally. However, the current informational wave has created the new environment in the Russian media field. For Russian political scientists, journalists and, subsequently, common citizens, it creates an increasingly rooting image of the Belarusian government gradually distancing itself from Moscow. To put it differently, it is a kind of a new fashion in Russia to produce negative stories about Belarus and its policies, both domestic and external.

Growing pressure

The growing inclination of different media, both opposition-minded and state-run, to focus on likely reasons for a Belarusian-Russian conflict, proves the fact of the new environment in the Russian media. They choose to cover anti-Russian statements from speeches of Belarusian officials, primarily Lukashenka, more than pro-Russian ones. Routine meetings of Belarusian officials with their Western counterparts get more attention. The high noon of this new trend was the stove-piping by many Russian media of an allegedly new provision in the Belarusian martial law to defend the country from unidentified armed groups, something recalling memories about the Russian tactics to annex Crimea in February and March 2014. In reality, the Belarusian martial law had contained this provision for 12 years; it just moved from an old version of the law to the new one.

This new inclination of the Russian media to put negative aspects in the spotlight is in itself a new conflictogenic factor of the Belarus-Russia relations, likely to generate new issues. The negative coverage of Lukashenka's visit to the joint CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union's summit in Moscow on 23 December 2014 resulted in Lukashenka's extraordinarily angry, long and emotional speech against Russian media in front of Vladimir Putin. He used the same occasion to harshly criticize the Eurasian integration and Russia's trade restrictions. Coming as a clear shock for many summit participants, it led to a new surge of criticism against Lukashenka in Russian media and a new spiral of tension in Moscow-Minsk relations as a clear illustration of how the informational war can reproduce itself.

Scenarios for 2015

The fact that federal Russian state media do not broadcast such stories yet is an indication that this information attack was initiated by media themselves or affiliated political actors rather than the Russian leadership. Minsk-Moscow disagreements have not reached the scale that demands the engagement of the federal channels. In a situation of a fierce informational confrontation with Ukraine and the West, an open conflict with Belarus would be a clear message to the domestic audience that Russia is running out of allies. However, we should bear in mind that the Russian foreign policy, including the informational one, is decreasingly predictable by reasonable considerations. This is why it is still possible that Belarus can well become a subject of an informational attack at the highest level, if the middle-level escalation continues. The approaching presidential elections in Belarus increases the probability of such a scenario, because major economic challenges in the pre-electoral year make Lukashenka more dependent

What looks the most realistic is that Russia would maximize its economic and informational pressure on the government in Minsk to coerce it into obedience and de-escalation of the conflict.

on kindness and support of the Russian leadership. It makes the Belarusian government more vulnerable; therefore, Moscow's informational salvo can be a very effective leverage to pressurize Lukashenka and get something in return (e.g., to correct his stance on Ukraine, to stop the "soft Belarusization" or to be more open on privatization of Belarusian companies).

The fragile economic situation is making the Belarusian leadership unlikely to escalate the informational conflict in the pre-election year. "Raising stakes" is a typical tactic for Lukashenka in his bargaining with Russia in regular times, but it might be too risky today, since Russian elites are too nervous and can react to provocations in an unpredictable manner.

It is not a promising prospect for Lukashenka to confront Russia for winning popular support at home, either. First, polls testify that the Belarusian public still tends to support Russia in its conflict with Ukraine (IISEPS findings). Relying on an anti-Russian minority is risky for Lukashenka's electoral support. Second, if Belarus escalated the conflict, it would mobilize the previously mentioned pro-imperial actors and boost their anti-Belarusian campaign in Russia's media. Today they have no other choice but to inflate minor news opportunities such as Belarus' attempts to promote its own ethnic culture; however, should the Belarusian government opt to confront Russia actively, it would play into the hands of champions of the Russian World, something that can lead to an inadequately rough Kremlin's retaliation. As Minsk is highly unlikely to foment the conflict on purpose, two basic scenarios remain.

In Scenario I, the Belarusian leadership realizes the

mounting risks and the growing Russian media's hostility as well as a bad need for Kremlin's help before the elections, so it makes no action that could be seen as an escalation of tensions. In such a case, many Belarusization initiatives are likely to stop, no more pro-Ukrainian or pro-Western steps or statements are realistic, to avoid giving any reason for Russian media to tarnish Belarus. Minsk-Moscow relations will probably improve, media attacks will fade away, and Lukashenka will get the financial and political support he needs relatively painlessly.

In Scenario II, official Minsk will keep sticking to the current line of behavior with the emphatic neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, new initiatives to strengthen the Belarusian self-identity and further development of the dialogue with the West. Slow as it is, it is an escalation. This path is possible if the Belarusian leadership miscounts the risks or deliberately tries to count on its conventional geopolitical bargaining and to threaten Russia with "going West". In this scenario, the anti-Belarusian rhetoric is likely to "break the ceiling" and leak to the Russian mainstream media. It will cause Lukashenka to react emotionally, because he hates personal attacks against him on Russian TV stations. He will purge the Belarusian political arena of any pro-Russian actors in an attempt to destroy any alternative forces that Kremlin could support at elections and get rid of Lukashenka. Potential outcome of this scenario depends on Moscow's reaction, something very difficult to foresee for understandable reasons. What looks the most realistic is that Russia would maximize its economic and informational pressure on the government in Minsk to coerce it into obedience and de-escalation of the conflict.

INFORMATION ATTACKS IN BELARUS: A FORM OF THREAT FROM RUSSIA OR A WAY FOR LUKASHENKA TO CONSOLIDATE THE SUPPORT?

Pavel Usov, Center for Political Analysis and Prognosis

Political campaigns in Belarus, especially presidential elections, always bring about more tensions and sensitivities. Like any dictator, Lukashenka is afraid of conspiracies and external interference. The system seeks maximum self-isolation and expansion of internal control; it reacts toughly to any unplanned or unpredicted actions. Moscow uses this lack of confidence of the Belarusian authorities by blackmailing Minsk and imposing its interests. This is what we saw during the previous presidential campaign in 2010.

To replace or not to replace?

Replacing Lukashenka is not a task for Russia in the nearest future. Though sometimes Lukashenka annoys Kremlin, he still satisfies its interests. First, there are no pre-requisites for removing Lukashenka, even by a soft elite coup in Belarus; second, even such a soft scenario of a shift in power would be a threat of unexpected and unmanageable processes in Belarus, primarily the political system deconsolidation. Replacing Lukashenka by power methods is

The ongoing informational outburst contains two elements: (1) accusations of nationalism and (2) Lukashenka's possible refusal to run.

only possible in a case of social, economic and political destabilization of Belarus. If Lukashenka had to go, it would solve one problem for Russia, but would create many new, costly and more important problems Russia cannot cope with. Given a fact that Russia has to pay a lot to its new territories (South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, and Crimea) and its own subsidized regions, one can be sure that Moscow will not take radical actions against Lukashenka. Russia needs stability in Belarus, because it is much cheaper. Therefore, no matter how annoying Lukashenka is, he helps fulfilling two key tasks for Moscow by (1) staying loyal and (2) maintaining political and economic stability in Belarus.

However, Kremlin will not stop pressurizing Minsk in political and informational fields, because they want Lukashenka:

- to deepen its integration with the Eurasian Union,
- to privatize Belarusian assets,
- to deploy new military bases in Belarus,
- and to engage in reckless external undertakings, such as the conflict with Ukraine.

Structure and direction of informational attacks

Criticism of Lukashenka by many Russian media and flows of compromising information gave analysts a reason to speak about Moscow's pressure on Lukashenka.

The ongoing informational outburst contains two elements: (1) accusations of nationalism and (2) Lukashenka's possible refusal to run.

Years of Lukashenka's reign, his anti-national policies and integration with Russia created quite a large group of people, including young ones, who identify themselves with the Russian World and fully support Russia's behavior. Russian propaganda dominates the Belarusian informational field and shape the worldview of many Belarusians who start to believe the world is either Russian or fascist. Russian media's audiences see any manifestations of the Belarusian identity as a threat to the Russian World. Russian chauvinists in Belarus prioritize such media as *imperia.by*, *regnum.ru*, or "The Western Rus" (<http://zapadrus.su>).

Anti-Belarusian and anti-Lukashenka stories by Belarusian intellectuals such as "The Belarusian Language Community a Sediment

of Marginals"¹ is a mere reflection of the split in the Belarusian identity and a failure of the Belarusian government to win its domestic battle over the informational space in Belarus.

Rather than an ideological attachment to Moscow, the growth of "pro-Russian" moods among Belarusian publicists and some opposition activists (such as Dziyanau) can also show their willingness to receive funds from Kremlin. To justify it, they demonize Lukashenka as a traitor.

Search for Alternative

The Belarusian democratic community is not alone in its discussions of who could replace Lukashenka. Surely, Kremlin is also concerned about it. Curious stories emerged in Belarus in the beginning of this year about Lukashenka not running in elections and passing his powers to Uladzimir Makei, the foreign minister². Unrealistic as it looks like, this scenario can be a Kremlin-initiated insinuation. I do not rule out that Moscow is thinking about replacing the Lukashenka painlessly in the future. On one hand, his role of the Great Integrator has expired, and Belarus has joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Moscow-inspired project with poorly hidden imperialist ambitions. On the other hand, Lukashenka can be a problem for EAEU political integration and the reestablishment of the empire. Russia relies on expansion for survival, and Belarus is a perfect platform for its further growth, while Lukashenka sees integration and friendship with Russia as a threat to his personal safety and power. He is unlikely to share his powers voluntarily; therefore, it is logical for Russia to press him in run-up to the presidential elections, something clearly illustrated by the rumors about his resignation. Kremlin sends a message that he wants a calm and smooth transfer of power in Belarus without breaking the political system, the nomenklatura transformation or "the palace reshuffle" being the best scenario.

Given his former background of a security officer and a member of the Belarusian "power corporation", Uladzimir Makei is a perfect option for Kremlin. Endorsing him effectively is challenging, as Lukashenka holds all the keys; still, Moscow can undertake attempts. Such insinuations can help to check moods in Belarus and the readiness of the establishment

¹ Доцент БГУ: Белорусскоязычное пространство - это "отстойник маргиналов", -<http://www.belaruspartisan.org/m/politic/293320/>

² Переполох в российской прессе - Лукашенко уходит, - <http://www.belaruspartisan.org/politic/292144/>

I am sure the Belarusian ruling elite understands this threat, but it has no resources available to oppose Russia's growing influence.

We do not face a threat of "green gunmen", because our citizens are already now "green" and shapeless. The government is also "green".

to support or accept Russia-initiated transformations. However, we cannot rule out that the Belarusian security services stand behind such informational tests, either.

Lukashenka's Game, or the Political Schizophrenia

Ukraine has radically changed the core essence of geopolitical processes around the post-Soviet area. Russia clearly shows that it does not treat Belarus as a player but as a mere subject of its ambitions. With the Eurasian integration becoming deeper and wider, overthrow of Lukashenka is a matter of time. I am sure the Belarusian ruling elite understands this threat, but it has no resources available to oppose Russia's growing influence. Lukashenka tries to imitate a balance between Russia and the West, and to exploit the Ukraine-Russia conflict for a political (sic!) rapprochement with the EU.

The Belarusian government might use two elements for implementing this strategy:

1. Imitation of the national identity revival, strengthening the Belarusian language and culture;
2. Reconstruction of the old myth of Lukashenka the Fighter for the Independence of Belarus who is willing to cooperate with the West amid the threat of Russia.

As far as the first element is concerned, state officials have obviously increased their focus on the Belarusian language and culture during the previous half a year. Lukashenka made his first ever public speech in Belarusian during the celebration of the 70-year anniversary of country's liberation from Nazi.³ The minister of education announced a switch to Belarusian in

teaching the history and geography in schools in January 2015.⁴

However, these single events cannot change the overall identity policies. The Belarusian government represses those who defend the Belarusian sovereignty, language and culture. It shows that the Russian World is quite deeply rooted in our country's political and public system. We do not face a threat of "green gunmen", because our citizens are already now "green" and shapeless. The government is also "green". There is no real independence, because Belarus is almost completely integrated into the Russian World in geopolitical, informational and cultural terms.⁵

The same applies to the reanimation of the myth about Lukashenka confronting the Russian threat, quite successfully utilized by Minsk in its game with the West in 2008-2010. Such insinuations can point to Russia's growing pressure as a reason for EU and US to withdraw their sanctions and re-launch relations with Minsk. Certainly, independence is above democracy, therefore, in doing so, the West should not expect Minsk to make any democratization steps.

However, Lukashenka's jactitation between Europe and Russia or his attempts to get support from both cannot change Belarus' actual geopolitical situation. Only real economic and political reforms can push the country out of its dependence on Russia. However, any reforms would create favorable preconditions for systematic transformations of Belarus and, eventually, removal of Lukashenka.

No matter how the Belarusian President is afraid of Moscow and whatever games he plays, Russia's support is indispensable for the current regime in Belarus.

³ Лукашенко заговорил по-белорусски, но только по бумажке, - <http://www.belaruspartisan.org/politic/271989/>

⁴ Историю Беларуси и географию будут преподавать на белорусском языке, - <http://news.tut.by/society/432381.html>

⁵ Усов Павел: Беларусь полностью интегрирована в "русский мир", - <http://ceapp.info/2015/01/usov-pavel-belarus-polnostyu-integrirovana-v-russkij-mir/>

Recent developments in Belarus: politics, economy, international affairs

29 April 2015, Belarusian economy experiences recession. The economy has gone into recession, which was accompanied by lower real wages and levels of employment and the adjustment of the exchange rate has not secured the restoration of competitiveness.

5 May 2015, Belarus's recent leaning towards pro-Western nations in the Middle East follows fast on the heels of rapprochement with the West. Belarusian government held political consultations with Oman and the UAE, received an Omani parliamentary delegation, sent its representative to a ministerial meeting of the Arab League – dominated by conservative Arab nations, - and sent a delegation to Pakistan, another nation allied with the pro-Western bloc in the Middle East. The Belarusian government is looking for quick money to compensate for Belarus's trade deficits with other countries.

6 May 2015, the Belarusian parliament passes Lukashenka's proposal on paying annual fines for not working. A new measure adopted by Belarus says people who work less than half the year will have to pay the government an annual fine of \$250.

9 May 2015, Belarusian troops participated in the army parade in Moscow. A parade detachment comprised of 75 people of

the 5th independent special operations brigade took part in the army parade on the occasion of Victory Day in Moscow's Red Square.

10 May 2015, Belarus and China sign treaty of friendship and cooperation. The parties agreed to jointly foster the development of the Silk Road Economic Belt and expand cooperation in the trade, economic, financial, investment, sci-tech, energy, space, transport, IT, agricultural, humanitarian and other areas.

11 May 2015, The migration gain in Belarus made up 2,600 people in the first quarter of 2015, up 2.1 times as against the same period of 2014. The National Statistics Committee of Belarus said that the main migration exchange occurs with the CIS countries.

14 May 2015, Belarus joined the Bologna process and the group of 47 countries forming the common European Higher Education Area (EHEA). During the Ninth Bologna Process Ministerial Conference and the Fourth Bologna Policy Forum in Yerevan, Armenia, after submitting its second application in November 2014 Belarus was granted membership in EHEA. However, Belarus still needs to be closely observed to see whether Belarusian authorities respect academic freedoms, ensure student mobility and uphold human rights in general as required for its accession to the EHEA.

20 May 2015, The Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of Belarus ratified

two intergovernmental agreements with Bulgaria and Armenia on the mutual protection of classified information. The document was developed in order to ensure the protection of state secrets and (or) state and official secrets used in the course of foreign political, military, economic, scientific and technical and others bilateral cooperation.

27 May 2015, Nearly all of the primary economic indicators in Belarus are in a downward spiral. According to the press release published by International Monetary Fund the possible losses for the Belarusian economy in 2015 will amount 2.3 per cent of the GDP and \$2bn of its foreign exchange reserves.

28 May, 2015, Yury Rubtsou 'Tattoo' sentenced for two years in jail. A Belarusian rights activist who during his trial for violating the terms of an 18-month mandatory labor sentence revealed the tattoo across his chest saying "Lukashenka, Get Out!" has been jailed for two years.

29 May 2015, The Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) intends to make the decision on Belarus' application at the next session of the EurAsEC Anticrisis Fund Council. Progress has been secured in negotiating the general directions of structural reforms with the Belarusian government, however, the speed, depth, and sequence of the reforms are still under consideration.

Sources: *BelarusDigest*, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, *Belarus.by*, *Belta.by*, *Belapan*.

This publication has been produced with the financial support from:



TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE NEXT ISSUE OF "BELL", PLEASE CONTACT:

Vytautas Keršanskas

Phone: +370 5 2705993

Fax: +370 5 2736953

Email: vytautas.kersanskas@eesc.lt

EASTERN EUROPE STUDIES CENTRE

The content of the articles is the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the supporters and coordinators.