

Strengthening the Capacity to Counter Disinformation

Belarusian information space

May-June 2021



Center for Propaganda
and Disinformation Analysis



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR
DEMOCRACY

SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD

Introduction

Initiatives related to activities identified in the area of information and psychological influences in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are devoid of analytical component of Russian internal actions (in the Russian information space), which distorts the real picture and scale of hostile actions, hinders forecasting and increases security gaps resulting from coordination of simultaneous, multi-vector Russian operations, calculated to achieve specific goals by impacting on various auditoriums. This project's goal is to spread information about those actions.

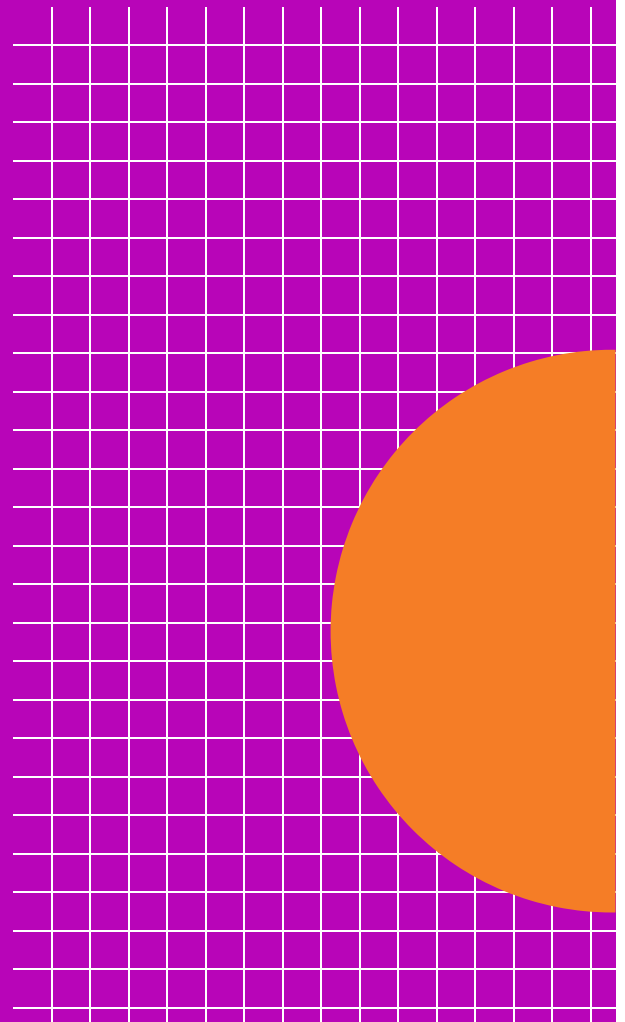
The main activity includes the development of the international Permanent Monitoring and Analyzing Group (PMAG). The main task of the PMAG will be monitoring and analyzing Russian information space in three ways: with the main Russian online media, niche or regional Russian online media as well as Russian social media landscape.

The monitoring and analysis methodology assume the selection of at least 3 main Russian language online media, 3 niche or regional Russian media; the same with regard to Belarusian media online; daily monitoring for information related to Poland, Baltic states, Belarus and Russia; collecting and cataloging of that information by the following categories: Economy, Policy, History, Culture, Other.

Russia in the Belarusian media online

Monitoring and Analysis
of Belarusian information
space in May 2021

Konrad Sztafa



Monitored media:

www.belta.by, ont.by, www.sb.by, interfax.by

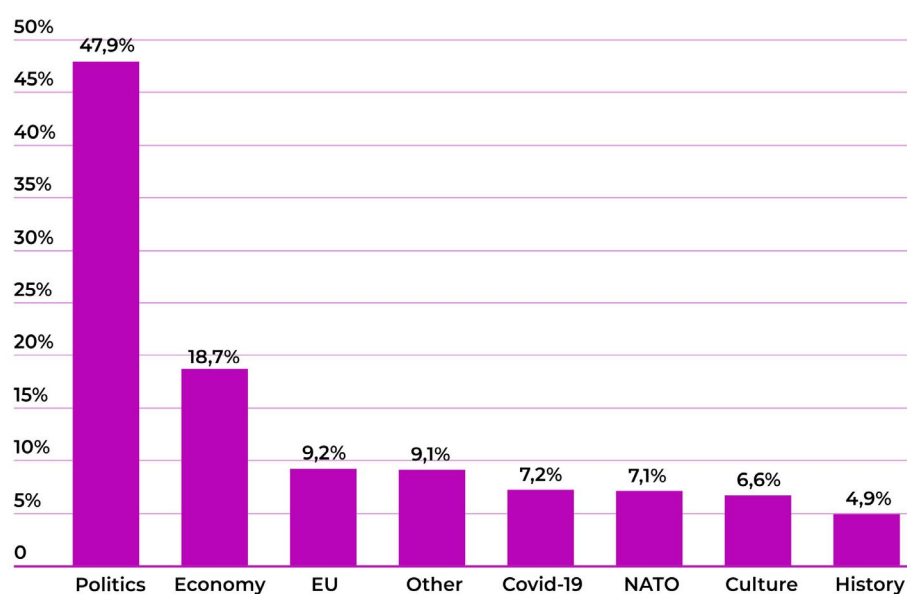
The research results

Overall number of news items: 2126.

Main thematic areas: Politics (47,9%); Economy (18,7%); EU (9,2%); Other (9,1%); Covid-19 (7,2%); NATO (7,1%); Culture (6,6%); History (4,9%).

Thematic areas that dominated: Politics – 1020 mentions; Economy – 399; EU – 197.

Main thematic areas:



Source: Own elaboration, Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis



The main narrative says that

Russia and Belarus are the closest allies and defence of Belarus from the Western threat is a common goal for those two countries. Belarus is in a frontier of hybrid war against the Customs Union countries. Big focus on the Union State development with preserving independency of Belarus from Russia.



What goals do those who spread it want to achieve?

To convince that Belarus and Russia are exclusively in a defensive stance and react to the Western military and hybrid-war threat.



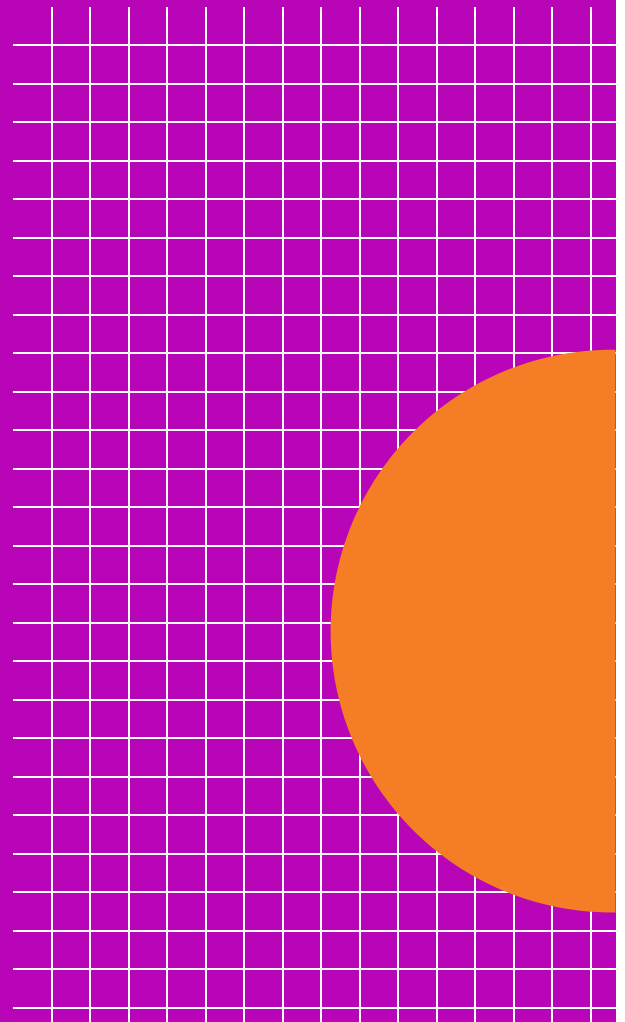
Data / information that is considered the most important in this monitoring period

Russia needs Belarus more than Belarus needs Russia. Lukashenko is a key individual to guarantee Russia-Belarus cooperation.

Russia in the Belarusian media online

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Palina Shcherbava



Monitored media:

belsat.eu, money.onliner.by, tech.onliner.by,
people.onliner.by, nn.by, www.kp.by, kp.by

The research results

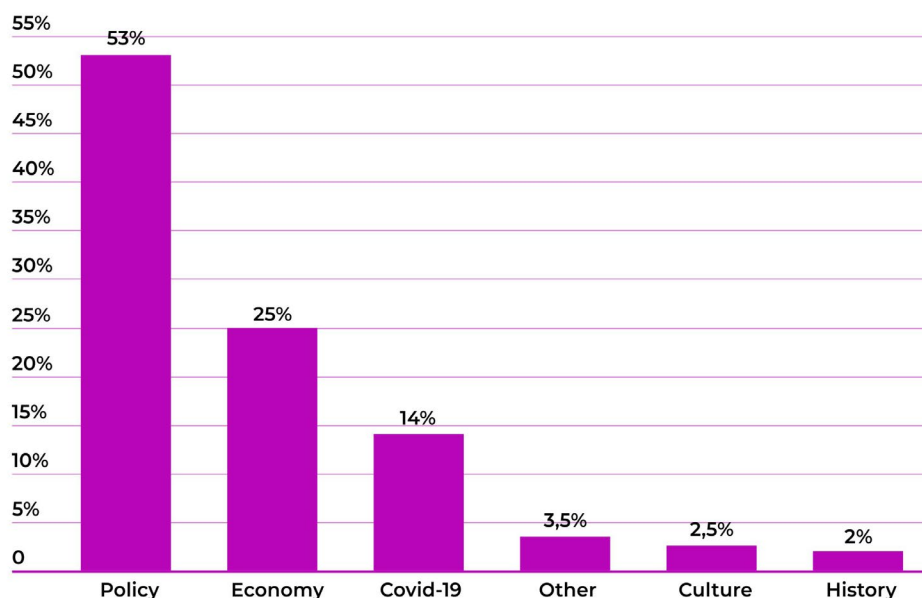
Overall number of news items: 484.

Main thematic areas: Policy (53%); Economy (25%); Covid-19 (14%); Culture (2,5%); History (2%); and other areas (3,5%).

Countries / Entities: Russia – 322 mentions; EU – 153; NATO – 48.

Main trends: In the first two weeks of May, news about politics and economics had an approximately equal ratio (34% and 30%), while during the second half of the month, following a political scandal caused by forced landing of Ryanair plane, news about politics has had an absolute quantitative advantage (62% and 23% accordingly). Mentions of the EU and NATO have also more than doubled in the second half of the month. News about the Coronavirus crisis were continuously high on the agenda, however they received almost twice less coverage during the second half of May.

Main thematic areas:



Source: Own elaboration, Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis



The main news subjects and their context

New economic agreements and the deepening integration between Belarus and Russia; Customs Union; Lukashenko-Putin meetings; External threats for Russia and Belarus; Vostok-2021 Russian-Belarusian joint military exercise; the U.S. and the EU sanctions and their impact on Belarusian and Russian economies; the accusation of the U.S. and the EU countries of an attempted coup d'état in Belarus in August 2020 and of plotting a future military operation against Belarus and Russia; Nord Stream 2.

Other subjects: The fight against Covid-19 and vaccination campaign; Victory Day celebration, Eurovision Song Context.



Main narrative

In May 2021, the main narrative of Belarusian propaganda transmitted through the niche media was centred around the confrontation between the EU, the U.S. (as well as Ukraine) on one side and Belarus with Russia on the other. **No matter the subject (be it Coronavirus crisis, economy, politics, history or culture), the so-called West has been constantly opposed to Belarus and Russia; has been exclusively portrayed in a negative and sometimes even dangerous light.** The EU and the U.S. were being accused of bias, desire to undermine stability and aggravate the economic situation in Belarus. Russia, on the other hand, has been portrayed as a close friend and a staunch ally, that is always ready to provide various support to Belarus during times of crises.



Goal / Purpose

The main goal of such propaganda was to find an external enemy and to shift the blame onto it for the deep internal crisis that Belarus is currently facing. It is also to make up an immediate threat that ideally would distract the population from domestic problems. Last but not least, it aims to lead to the conclusion that further deep integration between Belarus and Russia is inevitable and Belarus will only benefit from it.



Impact / Consequences

The growing level of hostility towards the EU, the U.S. and Ukraine among part of Belarusian population. Increased political and economic dependency of Belarus from Russia.



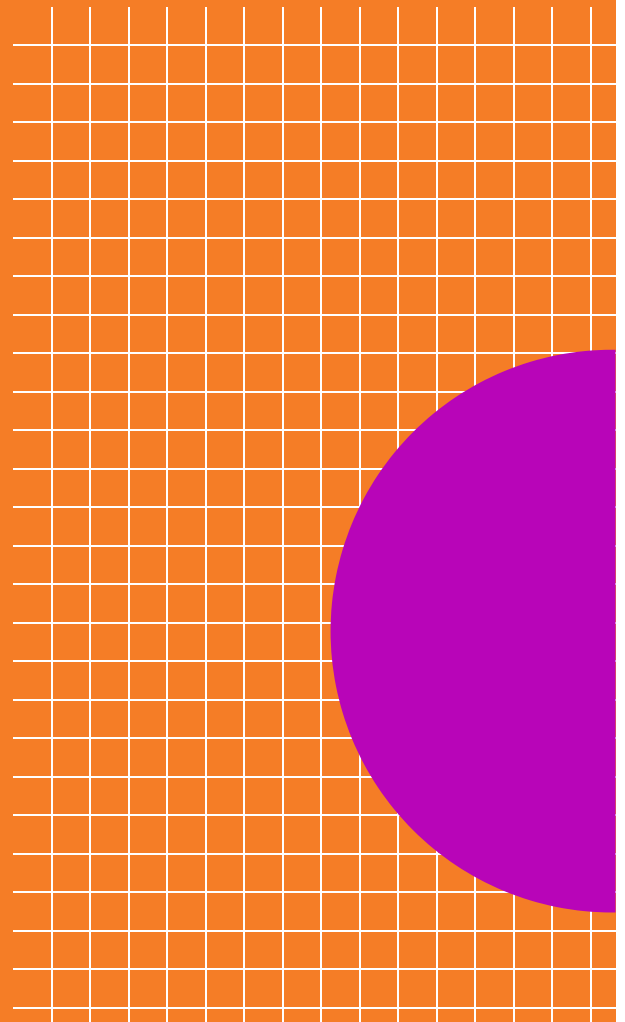
Data / information that is considered the most important in this monitoring period

The most alarming instance of disinformation and propaganda from the following monitoring period concern NATO's alleged practices of airstrikes on Belarus and Russia, demonisation of countries of the EU and NATO coalition and proclaiming them as enemy states. Showcasing Russia's military build-up on the territory of Belarus.

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The research results

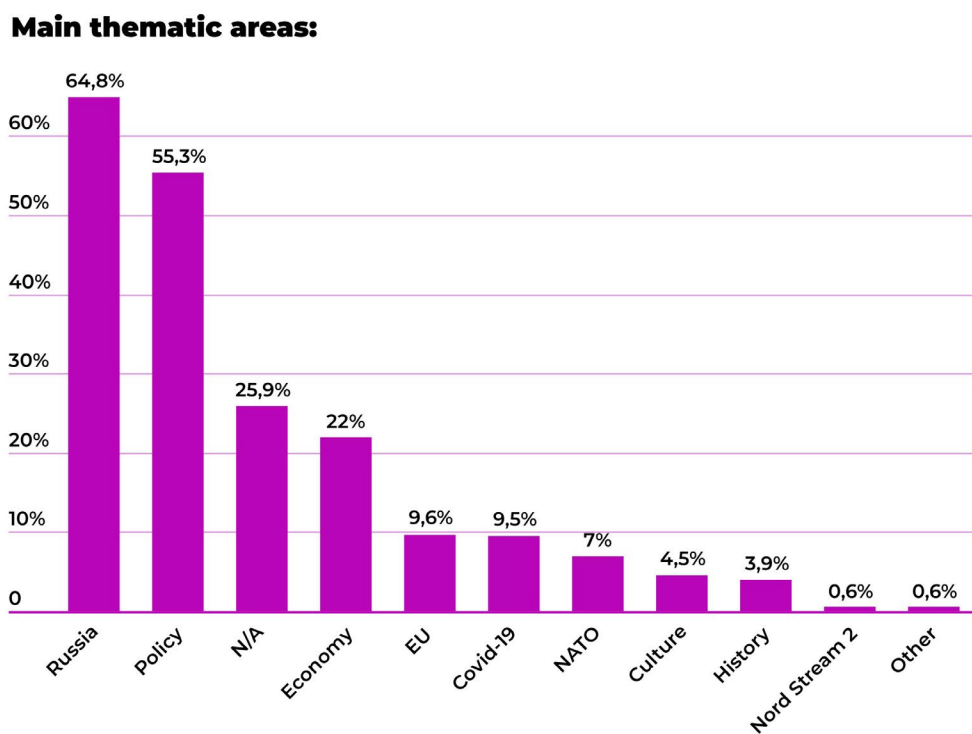
Overall number of news items: 2444.

Main thematic areas: Russia (64,8%); Policy (55,3%); N/A (25,9%); Economy (22%); EU (9,6%); Covid-19 (9,5%); NATO (7%); Culture (4,5%); History (3,9%); Nord Stream 2 (0,6%); Other (0,6%).

Thematic areas that dominated: Russia – 1584 mentions; Policy – 1353; N/A – 634; Economy – 538.

What topics gained, what were constant, and what topics decreased:

- increase: Policy (increase by 7,4%), Economy (3,6%), Covid-19 (2,3%);
- decrease: Other (decrease by 8,6%), Culture (2,1%), History (1%);
- constant: EU, NATO.



Source: Own elaboration, Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis



The main narrative says that

NATO is afraid of the cooperation between Belarus and Russia and tries to disrupt the process of forming a State Union. **NATO plans to invade Belarus and take over Russia, that is why the unified defensive system is needed for both countries.** State Union development is in advanced stage and it will provide great assets for Belarus and Russia politically and economically.



What goals do those who spread it want to achieve?

To convince that sanctions do not have any influence on national economy and Russia will always support Belarus in the common struggle with the collective West/NATO.



What is the impact / how is it to be understood?

Belarus chose a political and economic isolation from the West by a re-orientation to the Eastern markets (Russia, China).



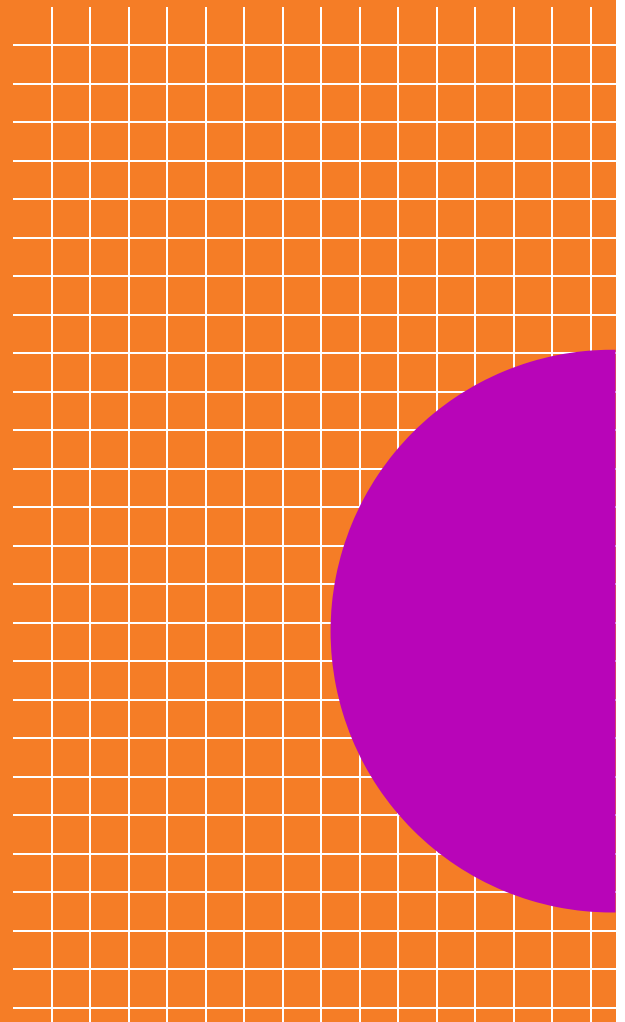
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Belarus is strategically important for Russia's direct security. Very aggressive narrative in regard to NATO under the Great Patriotic War starts' anniversary. Undermining of sanctions' impact on the national economy.

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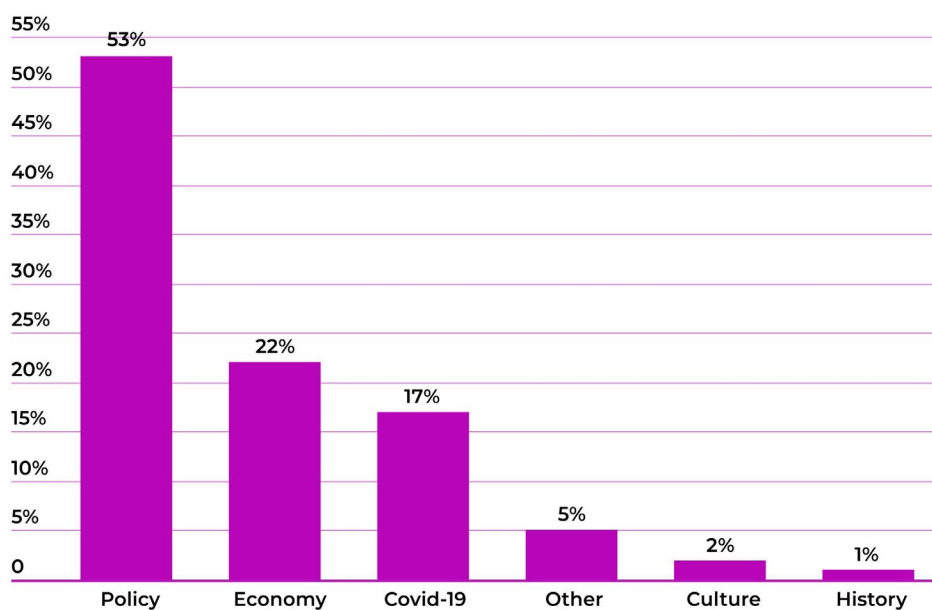
Overall number of news items: 653, increase for 30%.

Main thematic areas: Policy (53%); Economy (22%); Covid-19 (17%); Culture (2%); History (1%); and other areas (5%).

Countries / Entities: Russia – 454 mentions; EU – 180; NATO – 106.

Main trends: Compared to the previous month, the overall number of news items in June increased by almost 1,5 times. News about politics and economy have been predominating among other thematic areas. News about Coronavirus crisis remained high on the agenda with the slight increase in the second half of June.

Main thematic areas:



Source: Own elaboration, Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis



The main news subjects and their context

- **Belarus-EU/U.S. relations:** adoption of new economic sanctions against Belarus and banning of overflight of its airspace for Belarusian air company following the Ryanair scandal.
- **Russian-Belarus relations: finalization of key agreements within Custom Union; Russian financial aid to Belarus; collective security issues, including conducting Russian-Belarusian joint military exercises.**
- **Russia-U.S. relations:** Biden-Putin summit in Geneva; building-up Russia's military potential on the territory of Belarus; Nordstream-2.

Other subjects: Coronavirus crisis: Russia's assistance in vaccination campaign in Belarus and a discovery of a new coronavirus variant Delta; Belarus-EU border crisis.



Main narrative

Compared to May 2021, the general tone of Belarusian state propaganda remained unchanged. In June, following the Ryanair flight diversion scandal and subsequent adoptions of new economic sanctions against Belarus, **the main narrative in regard to EU countries and the U.S. has become even more hostile and confrontational.** As such, the “western countries” have been accused of waging economic war against Belarus aimed at destabilizing political situation in the country, as well as undermining overall stability of the region. Russia, on the other hand, continued to be portrayed almost exclusively in a positive light and be presented as close and reliable ally.

Independent news outlets, in their turn, have kept raising numerous concerns that the Kremlin is deliberately pushing Belarus towards new escalations with the EU and in order to further increase Belarusian dependency from Russia.



Goal / Purpose

The main goal pursued by Belarusian state propaganda is to create an appearance of the external threat coming from the EU and the U.S. To shift the responsibility and blame from Belarusian government for the deep internal crisis that country is currently facing. It also aims to show **that current imposed, accelerated integration process with Russia is in fact a free and informed choice and will only be beneficial to Belarusian interests.**



Impact / Consequences

The growing level of hostility towards the EU, the U.S. and the other countries of NATO coalition among part of Belarusian population. Further improvement of Russia's image.



Examples of disinformation and propaganda

23.06.2021

Minister of Defence of the Republic of Belarus Viktor Khrenin: "In the course of a joint operation by the Belarusian and Russian special services, the organization of a riot aimed at the physical destruction of the head of the Belarusian state and members of his family was stopped. The investigation has so far uncovered irrefutable evidence of the involvement of US state agencies."

23.06.2021

Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu: "The North Atlantic bloc is increasing the number of high-readiness groups, working out routes for the rapid transfer of troops to the borders of Belarus and Russia."



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