

**Strengthening
the Capacity
to Counter
Disinformation**

Belarusian information space

November-December 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.

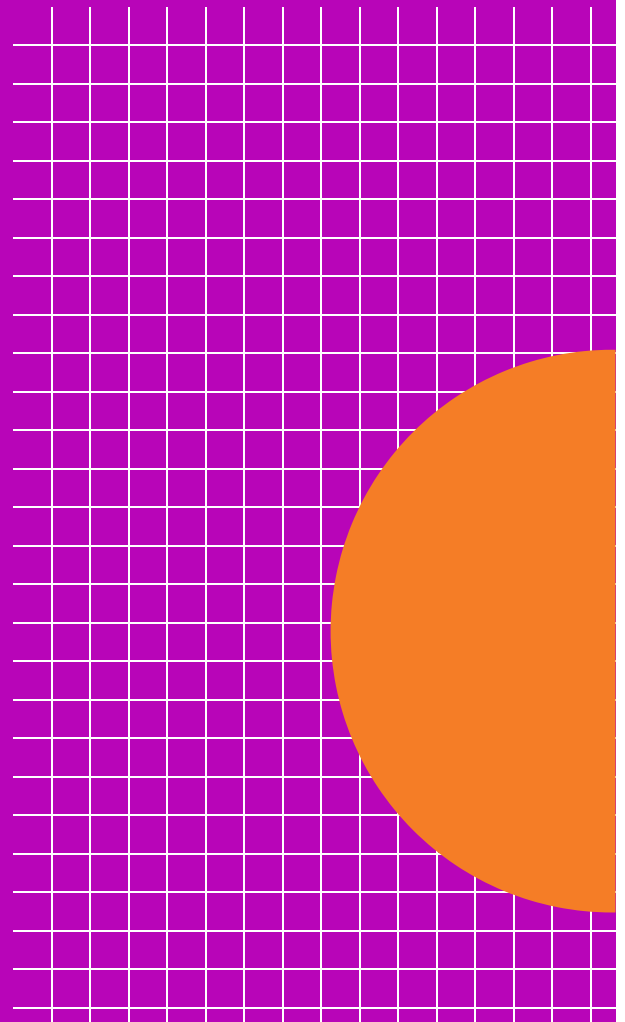
The main activity includes the development of the international Permanent Monitoring and Analyzing Group (PMAG). The main task of the PMAG will be monitoring and analyzing Russian information space in three ways: with the main Russian online media, niche or regional Russian online media as well as Russian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

The monitoring and analysis methodology assume the selection of up to 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 November 2021

Konrad Sztafa



Monitored media:

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

The research results

Overall number of news items: 2259 (27,84% increase compared to October – 1767 news).

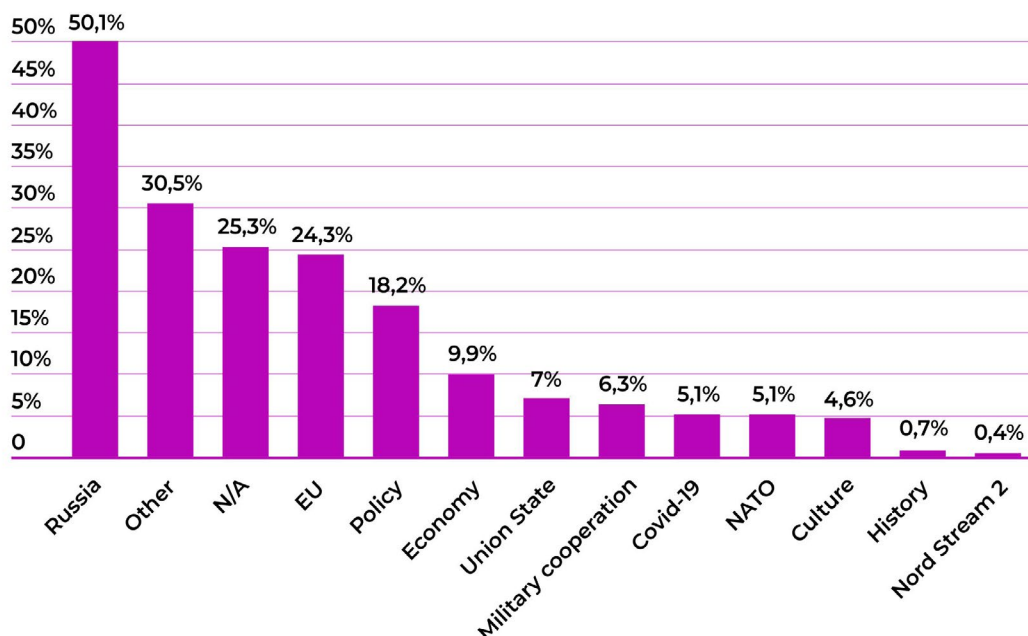
Main trends this month – topics that dominated: Russia (50,1%); Other (30,5%); N/A (25,3%); EU (24,3%); Policy (18,2%); Economy (9,9%); Union State (7%); Military cooperation (6,3%); Covid-19 (5,1%); NATO (5,1%); Culture (4,6%); History (0,7%); Nord Stream 2 (0,4%).

Thematic areas that dominated: Russia, Other (migrant crisis), N/A, European Union (migrant crisis).

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

- Topics gained: EU, Other, Union State, NATO.
- Constant: Russia, military cooperation.
- Decrease: Policy, Covid, Economy.

Main thematic areas:



Source: Own elaboration, Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis



The main narrative says that

Belarus and Russia are opposing the Western provocation during the migrants' crisis. Military cooperation with Russia is essential to stand against NATO's direct threat. **Belarus is truly providing humanitarian help to migrants, while the West does not care about their lives and treats them as a political weapon against Belarus and, ultimately, Russia. The crisis was planned in the United States and implemented by its most loyal puppet – Poland – to divide Europe.** The authorities of European Union's institutions have to contact Lukashenko to solve the migrant's crisis.



What goals do those who spread it want to achieve?

To convince that the migrants' crisis was actually triggered by the "collective West" that is doing everything to deprive Belarus of its independence and that this crisis is their foreign policy's most important part.



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

Most of the articles follow the simple rule of blaming those who blame us and blame with the same accusations you are blamed with.



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

Urges from Russia that UE must collaborate with Lukashenko to resolve the migrants' crisis.



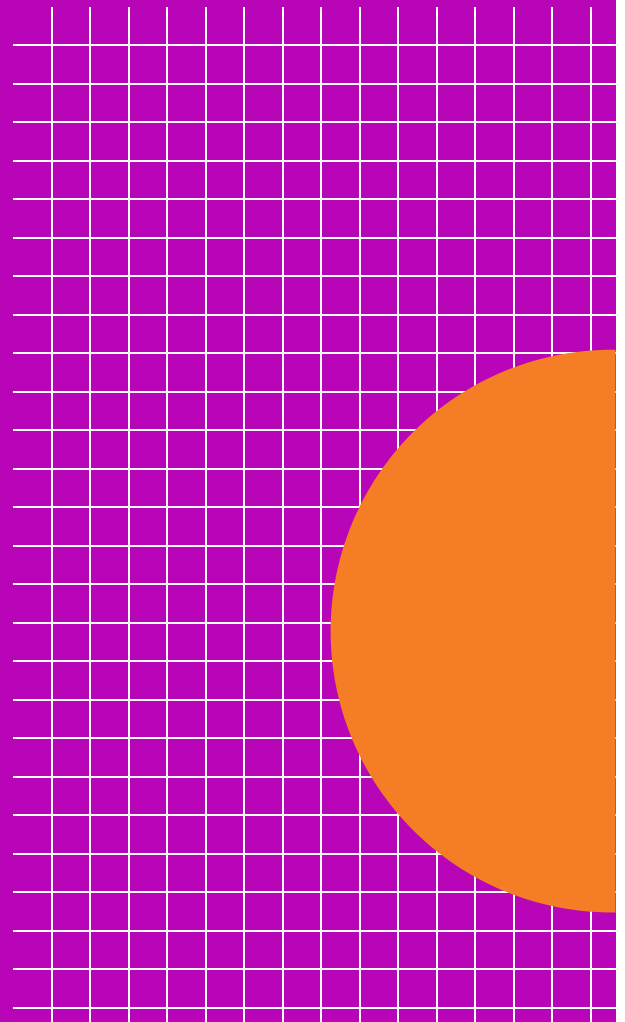
Other comments and / or, if possible, a forecast of the listed points

In case of lack of prospects of the migrants' crisis putting political pressure on the UE, the media would shortly switch to another topic.

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Monitored media:

belsat.eu, money.onliner.by, tech.onliner.by, people.onliner.by,
nn.by, www.kp.by, kp.by, www.belarus.kp.ru, nashaniva.com

The research results

Overall number of news items: 300 (476,92% increase compared to October – 52 news).

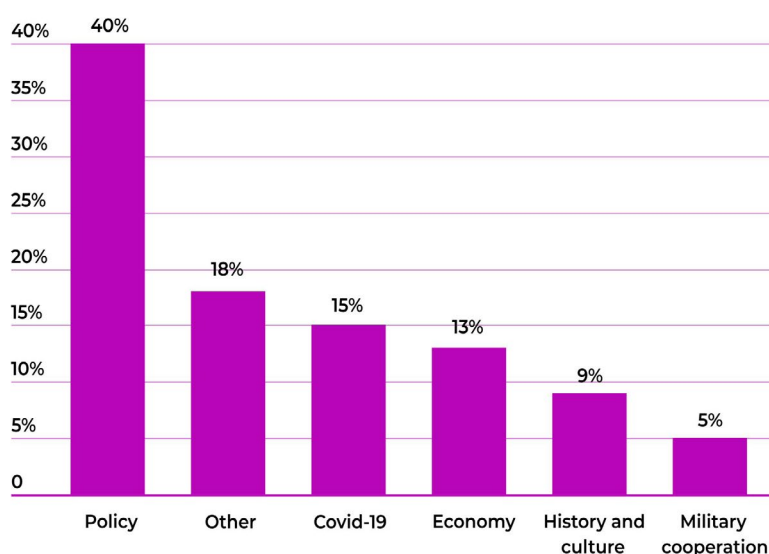
Main thematic areas: Policy (40%); Economy (13%); Covid-19 (15%); History and culture (9%), Military cooperation (5%), Other (18%).

Countries / Entities: Russia – 262 mentions; EU – 87; NATO – 26; Union State – 9.

Main trends: The total number of news items in the niche media in November returned to its normal values preceding the technical problem on the Pulsar platform. However, it should be noted that the news on belsat.eu remained excluded from the monitoring. **News about politics and policy significantly prevailed among other thematic areas.** Other frequently addressed topics were the news about the economy, Covid-19, as well as the newly introduced category – “military cooperation”. The amount of mentions of the European Union and NATO was considerably higher compared to the previous monitoring period.

It is worth noting that this month the amount of news in category “other” has significantly increased in comparison with other months. This is explained by the high amount of news about society or social system/governance in Russia that did not fall into defined categories but appeared to be important to the author’s analysis.

Main thematic areas:



Source: Own elaboration, Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis



The main news subjects and their context

Belarus – European Union/United States relations: migrant crisis at the Belarusian border with EU; increased military tension in the Polish-Belarusian border zone; economic sanctions against Belarus and their impact on the country's economy.

Russian – Belarusian relations: military cooperation between two countries, including joint military exercises and stationing of Russian arms on the territory of Belarus; increased Belarusian support for Russia in the Russian-Ukrainian crisis; **Russian-Belarusian integration process and the possibility of introducing a single currency.**

Russian – EU/U.S. relations: high-level discussions around possibility of Russian invasion into Ukraine and the role of Russia in the EU-Belarus migrant crisis.

Other topics: coronavirus crisis; economy; local governance-related issues in Russia, including the accident in Lisvyazhnaya mine; history.



Main narrative

The main focus of the November news in the niche media was the escalation of the migration crisis between Belarus and the EU. The rhetoric of Belarusian officials appealed to the blame of the “collective West” for the crisis and provoking the conflict between the EU/NATO and Belarus/Russia. **The overall tone in relation to EU countries and the USA remained mainly negative, with Poland and Lithuania getting especially dismissive remarks.**

Additionally, much of the media attention was given to fears of an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Belarusian official narrative was characterized by unquestioning support for Russia, both political and military, which differed from the rather neutral approach that Belarus had taken in previous years. **There have been repeated talks about the recognition of Crimea by Belarus.** The overall narrative toward Ukraine has become even more hostile.

News about military cooperation between Belarus and Russia has been particularly frequent this month, with much less attention paid to the discussion of the Union State of Belarus and Russia compared to August and September 2021.

Finally, the unprecedentedly high amount of news about Russian celebrities and criminal reports from Russia in Belarusian niche media should also be noted. Although they are not relevant for present analysis, they indicate a general decrease in the quality of news in the country, as well as an increase in the dominance of Russian news content.



Goal / Purpose

The main goal pursued by the Belarusian state propaganda is to create an appearance of the external threat coming from the EU and the U.S and to shift the attention from the deep internal political and economic crises that Belarus is currently facing, while strengthening pro-Russian sentiment in Belarusian society.



Impact / Consequences

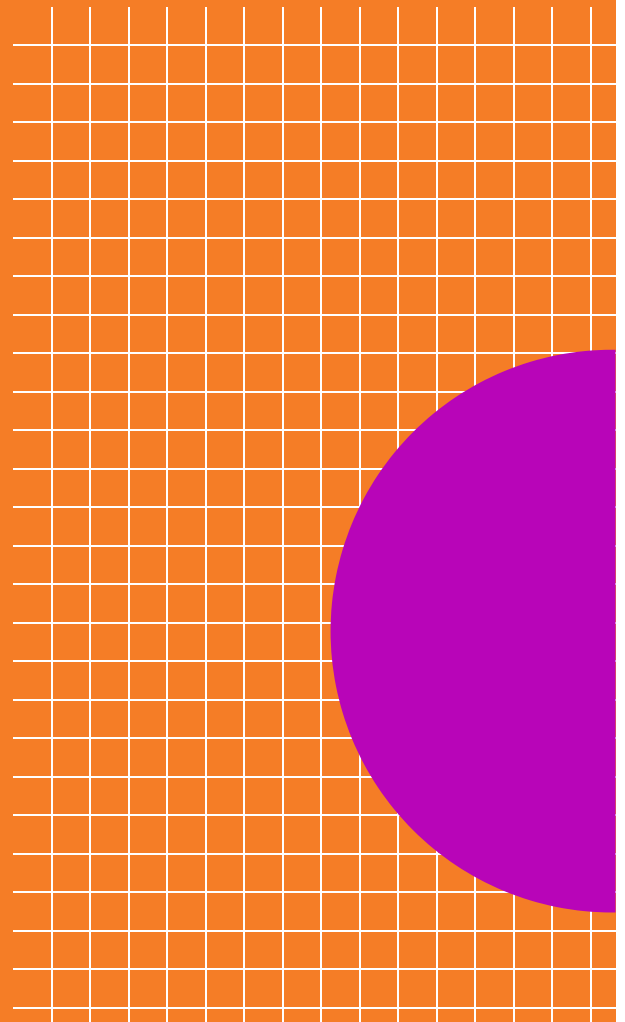
News about the external threat to Belarus from the EU/NATO increasingly superseded the news about the internal political situation. Therefore, the news about political prisoners and repressions, situations with the human rights protection and economy have become much less frequent.

It can be assumed that the level of hostility towards the “collective West” among part of the Belarusian population would continue growing.

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Monitored media:

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The research results

Overall number of news items: 21,91% decrease compared to November (2259 results).

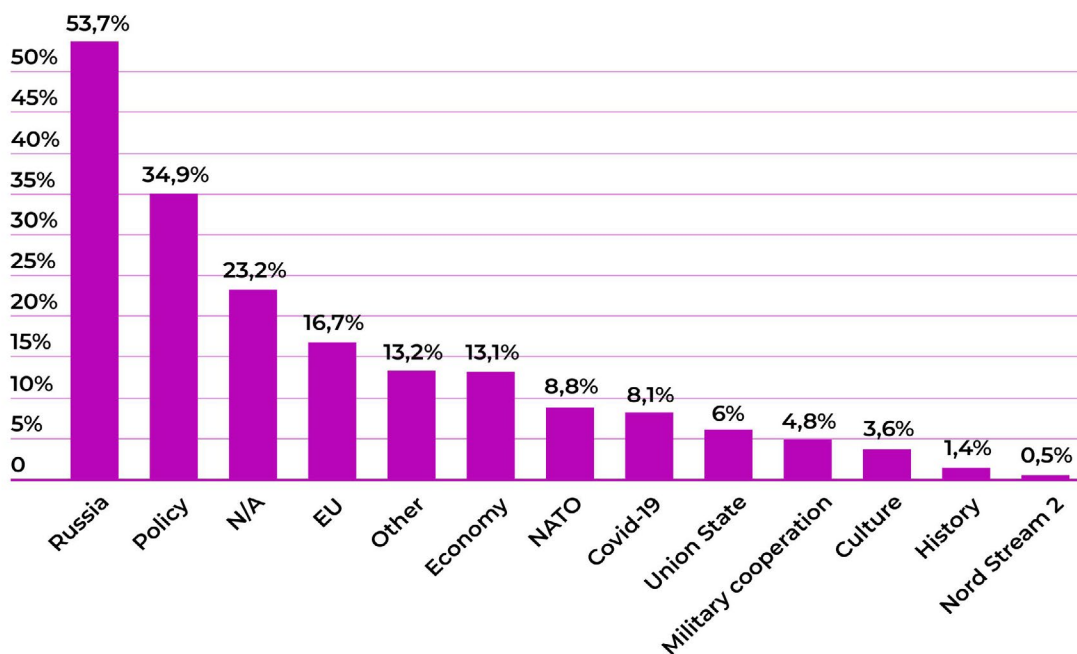
Main thematic areas: Russia (53,7%); Policy (34,9%); N/A (23,2%); EU (16,7%); Other (13,2%); Economy (13,1%); NATO (8,8%); Covid-19 (8,1%); Union State (6%); Military cooperation (4,8%); Culture (3,6%); History (1,4%); Nord Stream 2 (0,5%).

Thematic areas that dominated: Russia, Policy, European Union.

The number of messages with the indication of increases and decreases in relation to the previous month:

- increase: Policy (increase by 16,7%), NATO (3,7%), Russia (3,6%), Economy (3,2%), Covid-19 (3%);
- decrease: Other (decrease by 17,3%), EU (7,6%);
- constant: Union State, Military cooperation.

Main thematic areas:



Source: Own elaboration, Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis



The main narrative says that

1. **Belarus and Russia are struggling to maintain peace in Europe which the United States, through NATO and its puppet states (Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine), is trying to disrupt.**
2. Western sanctions will not affect Belarusian economy, because Russia provides full scale support to the country.
3. The support is guaranteed by special personal ties between Alexander Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin.



What goals do those who spread it want to achieve?

1. To create a moral justification in case of a military conflict that Belarus and Russia are peaceful countries which are constantly under pressure of expansionist NATO.
2. To create a public opinion that to preserve regional, and even global peace, Lukashenko and Putin tandem is crucial.



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

Belarus and Russia are determined to defend their area of influence focused on Ukraine and ready for all possible scenarios in case the West increases its presence there.



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

Suggesting that there is a threat of war provoked by foreign powers in order to follow the principle of attack as a best defensive method.



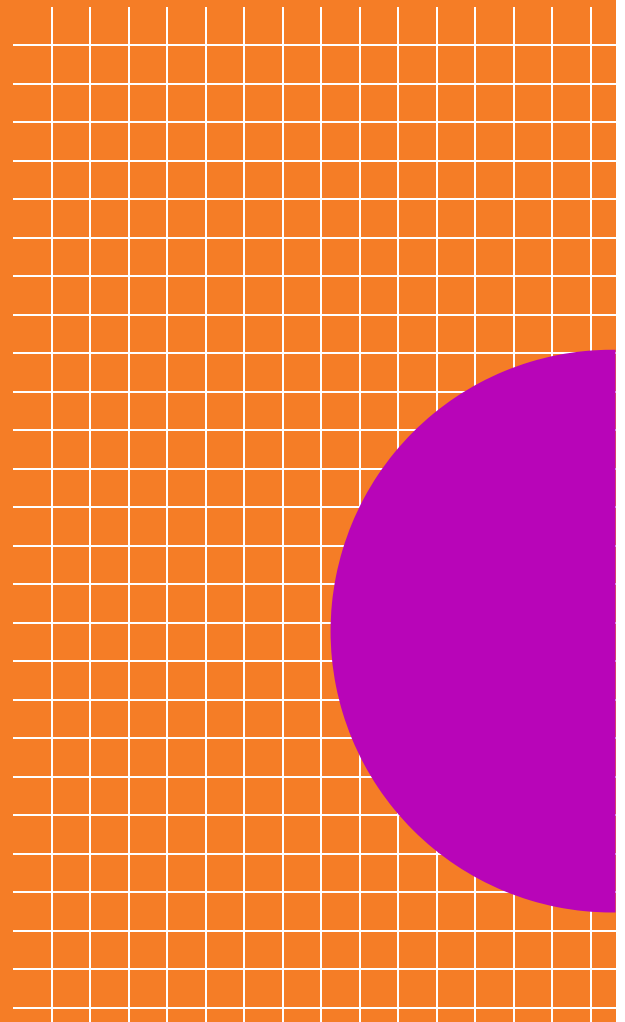
Other comments and / or, if possible, a forecast

Until any further political incident happens, mainstream media will focus on standard topics which are: anti-Western rhetoric, sanctions, the Union State of Russia and Belarus, cooperation with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CIS) countries, the role of Russia in international politics.

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Monitored media:

belsat.eu, money.onliner.by, tech.onliner.by, people.onliner.by,
nn.by, www.kp.by, kp.by, www.belarus.kp.ru, nashaniva.com

The research results

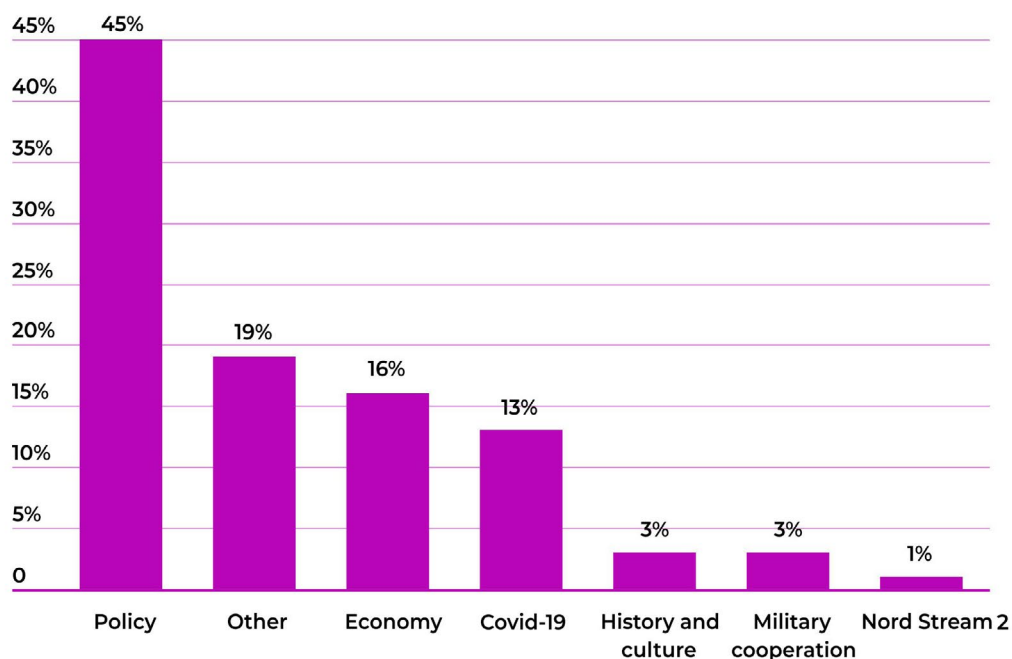
Overall number of news items: 131,66% decrease compared to November (300 results).

Main thematic areas: Policy (45%); Economy (16%); Covid-19 (13%); History and culture (3%), Military cooperation (3%), Nord Stream-2 (1%); Other (19%).

Countries/Entities: Russia – 500 mentions; EU – 122; NATO – 98; Union State – 24.

Main trends: The overall number of news items in the niche media in December was one of the highest during the whole period of monitoring, with news from belsat.eu being reintroduced into the analysis this month. News about politics and policy significantly prevailed over other thematic areas. Among other frequently addressed topics, the news were related to economy, Covid-19, as well as the “Union State” and “military cooperation”. The amount of news about society, social system/governance in Russia, which makes up a larger part of the “other” category, remained high this month. Mentions of the EU and NATO were also quite frequent.

Main thematic areas:



Source: Own elaboration, Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis



The main news subjects and their context

Belarus – European Union/United States relations: migrant crisis at the Belarusian border with the EU; adoption of the 5th package of sanctions against Belarus; imposing an embargo on goods from the EU and the U.S. in response to sanctions against Belarus; threats to stop Russian gas transit to Europe by Belarus.

Russian – Belarusian relations: increased Belarusian support for Russia in the Russian-Ukrainian crisis; military cooperation between both countries, including joint military exercises and potential deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus; meetings between Putin and Lukashenko; a new loan from Russia and agreement on gas price for 2022; Russian-Belarusian integration process.

Russian – EU/U.S. relations: high-level discussions between Russia, US, NATO and the EU on the Russian-Ukrainian crisis; gas price hikes in Europe and Nord Stream 2.

Other topics: draft of the new Belarusian constitution; situation regarding the Omicron coronavirus variant; economy; local governance issues in Russia.



Main narrative

One of the main topics in December was the Russian-Ukrainian military crisis. The Belarusian niche media covered in detail the statements of the senior officials of Russia, Ukraine and the USA concerning the possible Russian invasion of Ukraine. **The Belarusian official narrative was characterised by unquestioning support for Russia, both political and military, which differed from the rather neutral approach that Belarus had taken in previous years.** The talks about the recognition of the Crimea by Belarus continued, with Lukashenko planning an official visit there and discussing the launch of direct flights from Minsk to the peninsula. **The overall narrative toward Ukraine remained very hostile.**

In the light of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, news about military cooperation between Belarus and Russia were quite frequent this month. **There was also particularly worrying rhetoric regarding Belarus' readiness to station Russian nuclear weapons on its territory.**

News about the migration crisis at the Belarus-EU border has become much less frequent compared to previous months. The official rhetoric remained unchanged – the blame for the crisis lies with the countries of the “collective West”. **Accusations of Poland's inhumane treatment of migrants were also made.** Particular attention was paid to the fifth package of EU sanctions against Belarus and Belarus' retaliatory measures in the form of an embargo on the import of goods from the EU and the

U.S. on its territory, as well as threats to stop the transit of Russian gas to Europe.

Russian-Belarusian relations have received a lot of attention this month, with meetings between Lukashenko and Putin, discussions around a new Belarusian state loan, gas prices and the Union State agreement.

Finally, there has been much discussion around the draft of Belarus' new constitution.



Goal / Purpose

The main goal pursued by the Belarusian state propaganda was to create an appearance of the external threat coming from the EU and the U.S, and to shift attention from the deep internal political and economic crises that country is currently facing, while strengthening the pro-Russian sentiments in Belarusian society.



Impact / Consequences

News about the external threat to Belarus from the EU/NATO increasingly superseded news about the political situation inside the country, especially in the light of the latest Russian-Ukrainian crisis. News about political prisoners and repressions, situations with human rights protection and the economy have become much less frequent.

An official social survey conducted in December 2021 showed that Belarusians trust the president and the army most of all, describe the relations with Russia as friendly, and blame the EU for the migrant crisis. While it is clear that the official statistics are biased and do not reflect the views of the opposition part of the population, it cannot be denied that such sentiments do exist in the Belarusian society and could be directly linked to state propaganda and disinformation.



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