

Coercion to “Integration”: Russia's Creeping Assault on the Sovereignty of Belarus

Likely Scenario of a Takeover, Channels of Influence and the Main Actors

BRIEF VERSION of the Preliminary analytical report*

* Full 104-page text of the preliminary analytical report, including the list of the main websites used in the Russian information operation to affect Belarus and the dossier of selected actors, referred to in the report, can be provided at request.

Hybrid scenario of coercion to “integration”

Russia is applying active, serious and growing pressure on Belarusian social and media space through various instruments of influence, de-facto turning into a hybrid war over the last months. State-controlled, quasi-private and non-governmental initiatives form a wide system of interference, aimed at a “deep integration” of Belarus with Russia — effectively at coercing Belarus to give up its political, cultural and linguistic sovereignty.

The interference is well-coordinated, implemented through Russian and Belarusian actors, united into several networks. The overall strategy is coordinated from the Presidential Administration of Russia. Large resources are allocated to media and propaganda in the Internet through websites and social network groups with a total audience of several million people and a strong potential for increase.

First activities in creation of pro-Russian groups in Belarus can be dated back to approximately 2010. Efforts on their shaping and consolidation, according to the data accumulated, began approximately in late 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, start of the Donbass war and Kremlin's turn to confrontation with the West. Starting with the second half of 2018, the wave of propaganda and development of influence networks has drastically increased.

With the year 2024 approaching in the calendar of Russian politics, when a legal way of keeping Vladimir Putin at the helm without direct violation of the Constitution, or substitution of Lukashenko with an obedient governor, will have to be implemented, Russia's pressure on Belarus will rise substantially and will culminate around that moment. In our opinion, the years 2023-2024 is a deadline by which the absorption must be completed, according to the movers and shakers in the Kremlin.

Russia does not need to use its military force or send “little green men” to “integrate” Belarus. Such actions would cause negative reaction from both Russian and Belarusian society as well as deepen international isolation of Russia and increase sanctions pressure. Instruments of hybrid war aimed at splitting and brainwashing Belarusian society through propaganda, combined with powerful economic pressure on Belarusian government, will provide a takeover of Belarus at a more affordable price than military aggression. The plan has is that the majority of Belarusians including key actors in administration and economy will be persuaded into supporting a de-facto absorption into Russia.

The takeover of Belarus by Russia might significantly change the military balance in the region. New Russian military bases will be deployed on the borders of the EU and NATO member states. Besides, Russia will achieve a new strategic advantage over Ukraine surrounding it by Russian territories from the north in addition to the east (Russian regions), south (annexed Crimea) and southwest (Russian troops in Transnistria), providing additional staging ground for possible new hostilities — or a constant threat of them.

General supervision and official instruments of Russia's influence

The initiatives and activities of state-controlled propaganda media and patriotic groups of pro-Russian influence abroad are directed from the Presidential Administration by two advisors to the President — Vladislav Surkov and Sergey Glazyev¹.

The former is known as the demiurge of Russian state ideology and policies since early 2000s. Belarus was part of his portfolio during the two terms of his work in the Administration. The latter is known as a right-wing nationalist politician and a prominent orchestrator of the events in Crimea and Donbass². He is also a former Under-Secretary-General of the EurAsEC.

Surkov's supervision of Belarus-related affairs is fortified in the so-called Buzila Leaks — hacked emails belonging to one of Surkov's assistants where some of emails are related to Belarus³. An example of the Presidential Administration's work in “urgent” situations can be found in Surkov Leaks⁴ and Frolov Leaks⁵, where one can track the whole process of creation of networks for interference and provocation of unrest using both traditional and Internet-based media, groups of activists, paramilitary groups, Russian Orthodox communities and “patriotic” businesses.

It is precisely in the frame of the Union State that numerous programmes of involvement of Belarusian youth in Eurasian and integration-centric educational events are implemented. Classes are conducted by Russian political experts — such as Vladimir Lepekhin of Rossiya Segodnya, a theorist known for his imperial stance and involvement in foreign operations⁶, and Igor Ashmanov, a grey cardinal of Russian Internet who promoted internet projects of the “patriotic circle” in Russia by the use of search engine optimisation. They share with their Belarusian audience their conservative vision of informational sovereignty and information wars involving manipulations and “brain viruses”⁷, arrange tours to RosAtom and RT, conduct foresight sessions, designed by Kremlin-associated methodologists, et cetera⁸.

In the year 2018, a Russian-Belarusian youth contest called the “Union League of Debates”, was started by the Centre for the Study of Integration Prospects with support from Presidential Grants Foundation and Federal Agency for Youth Affairs. The contestants are young people — undergraduates, postgraduates, PhD students. The finals took place in Moscow on the grounds of the Standing Committee of the Union State with the participation of its State Secretary Grigory Rapota.

Through participation in events held by the Federal Agency for CIS Affairs, state-backed Russkiy Mir Foundation and Gorchakov Foundation, members of Belarusian society also become involved in creation of Russian influence networks in foreign states beyond Belarus, including Kazakhstan, Slovakia and Serbia, at minimum⁹. These structures — the Federal Agency for CIS Affairs, state-backed Russkiy Mir Foundation and Gorchakov Foundation — also carry out programmes inside Belarus.

Funding

The key player in the field of advancement of Russian influence by use of “soft power” is the Federal Agency for CIS Affairs, or Rossotrudnichestvo, which will receive 9,5 billion rubles (around 130 million euros) annually by 2020¹⁰. Rossotrudnichestvo has offices in Minsk, Brest and Gomel, called Russian centres for science and culture. Their activity is covered on their websites¹¹.

Other major state actors for advancing Russian influence abroad include the Russkiy Mir Foundation, the Gorchakov Foundation and the Foundation for Support of Compatriots. Their activities are well documented in numerous articles and reports¹². Russkiy Mir has centres in Minsk and Brest. The foundation's website contains a list of partners (participants) in Belarus¹³.

The Foundation for Support of Compatriots ceased to publish its financial reports after a series of investigations of its activities in Baltic states¹⁴, but these figures are accessible through Russian Statistics Committee (Rosstat) and online services associated with it. According to them, the Foundation spent 2 464 583 Euro in 2016¹⁵, and 1 711 565 Euro in 2017¹⁶.

Rossotrudnichestvo, the Gorchakov Foundation and the Russkiy Mir Foundation don't publish their expenses by country, but total budgets are made public by Rosstat – without geographic location, though.

The Gorchakov Foundation¹⁷

2017 Revenues

Total — 122 376 000 rubles (1 617 285 Euro)

Expenses 86 647 000 rubles (1 203 330 Euro)

For events 37 240 000 rubles (517 220 Euro)

The Russkiy Mir Foundation¹⁸

2017¹⁹ Revenues

Total — 474 199 000 rubles (6 586 100 Euro)

Expenses 532 900 000 rubles (7 042 647 Euro)

For events 362 647 000 rubles (5 036 760 Euro)

Relatively modest finances for work with Belarus, in comparison with the aforementioned foundations, are provided by the Presidential Grants Foundation²⁰. However, thanks to availability of funded projects at the foundation's website, their analysis, in connection with other sources, gives a picture of a complex network of influence in certain regions — Gomel, Mogilev, Vitebsk and Brest — forming a particular border area in the western direction.

The availability of projects description gives a clue to the nature of these projects and their ideological basis. One of the trans-border projects worth 3 217 587 rubles, implemented by the Russian Orthodox Church, addresses the following problem: “Facilitating the formation of unity of Russian and Belarusian cultures as two branches of one historical, spiritual and cultural origin in public opinion of young residents of near-border regions of Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus”.²¹

Ideological support of “integration”: Key players

Ideological and quasi-public support of Russian influence on Belarus is effectively implemented by a single circle of people. This group uses several Russian organisations as coordination centres: well-known GONGO, **International Election Monitoring Organisation CIS-EMO**²² (created in 2003 to work on election observation as a counterweight to OSCE/ODIHR); **Foundation for Development of Civil Initiatives “Public Diplomacy”**²³, “anti-Russophobic” website named **Bditelnost** (Vigilance)²⁴ and most recently, **Soyuz Civic Initiative**.

Acting as key public figures and creators of ideological documents in Belarusian direction, representatives of these structures work closely together with an array of higher-level Russian organisations like the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies under the Administration of the President of Russia, the Institute of CIS Countries headed by the State Duma deputy Konstantin Zatulin, and others — and control the activities of several pro-Russian organizations in Belarus.

Key Russia figures in this circle of organisations are **Alexey Kochetkov** and **Stanislav Byshok**, both banned from the Schengen area at Lithuania’s demand for their anti-Ukrainian activity. Kochetkov does not shy away from referring to his regular contacts with the Presidential Administration²⁵, although it is quite obvious that his activities are approved the Kremlin. Kochetkov, former director general of CIS-EMO in 2004-2013 and now director of the Public Diplomacy Foundation, takes active part in the implementation of the transborder scheme of Russian influence in Belarus²⁶.

Participants on the Belarusian side involve several people, including the infamous right-wing activist and author **Kirill Averyanov-Minsky** (regularly published by the recently closed Russian nationalist media Sputnik i Pogrom, as well as by Regnum and Rex, key author of devastating propaganda books on Belarusian nationalism published by the Public Diplomacy Foundation), **Lev Krishtapovich** (former deputy director of the Information and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration of Belarus and the ideologist of “Western Russism”), **Alexey Dzermant** and **Alexander Shpakovsky** (coordinators of IMHOclub) and, of course, the aforementioned Rumol leader **Sergey Lushch**²⁷.

Recently, this group of people on the Russian part and Sergey Lushch and Lev Krishtapovich on the Belarusian part established a new organization — the international Civic Initiative “Soyuz”. Its inaugural congress took place in July 2018 in Belarus. Two Russians and two Belarusians were elected co-chairs of Soyuz: former Deputy Chairman of the State Duma, organiser of “Russian March” rallies in Moscow,

leader of Russian All-Peoples Union²⁸ **Sergey Baburin** and expert of Public Diplomacy and CIS-EMO director Stanislav Byshok from Russia, and Sergey Lushch and Lev Krishtapovich from Belarus²⁹. In his speech at the second congress of Soyuz Civic Initiative in September 2018, Stanislav Byshok presented the organisation's objectives — to accomplish the adoption of the Constitutional Act and the holding of the referendum for its approval³⁰. Declared goals of Soyuz are “actualisation of the idea of adoption of the Constitutional Act of the Union State, consistent and full realisation of the tasks enshrined in the documents on the establishment of the Union State and ensuring that the Union State acquires the status of a subject of international relations”³¹.

Another proof of connections among the groups led by Kochetkov and Byshok, besides the coincidence of key authors and experts, is their common connection to the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) — an analytical centre, established by the President of Russia for providing services to the Presidential Administration³². Authors representing RISS appear on the pages of Bditelnost on a regular basis; one of them, **Alexander Bedritsky**³³, was the director of the CIS-EMO in 2013-2015³⁴.

RISS is notorious for causing a scandal in the relations between Russia and Belarus in 2016. Leonid Reshetnikov, then director of RISS, retired Lieutenant General of Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, announced that Belarusian sovereignty and language were artificial constructions³⁵. RISS is currently headed by Mikhail Fradkov, Prime Minister of Russia in 2004-2007, director of Foreign intelligence Service (SVR) in 2007-2016.

Connections between Russian and Belarusian actors: Imperial alliance and the experience of “Russian spring”

Connections of the Russian group of ideologues of “integration” with right-wing actors inside Belarus as well as hacked e-mails of some of these actors suggest that money of Russian sponsors of this group – Kremlin-affiliated “patriotic businessmen” – are invested in pro-Russian activities and sites in Belarus or Russian sites mimicking as Belarusian, along with pro-Russian projects in Poland, Slovakia and other Central European countries³⁶.

Virtually all pro-Russian organisations in Belarus were created by or with direct assistance of Russian actors, and the persons from the two countries work closely together in an array of key organizations and initiatives. This results in joint forces and collaboration of Russian and Belarusian right-wing, conservative and imperial-minded figures, including active facilitators of the “Russian spring” in Ukraine and destabilization efforts in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Balkans. They are the main driving force of the Russian influence on Belarus now.

“Soyuz” Civic Initiative founded in 2017 appears to be the second attempt at the task originally delegated in early 2010s to Eurasian People’s Union in Belarus. Such Eurasian People’s Unions were created in Russia and post-Soviet countries as instruments of influence on neighbour independent

countries' policies through Russian diasporas. The idea belonged to Modest Kolerov, former head of the department on inter-regional and cultural connections with foreign countries of the Presidential Administration of Russia, founder of Information Agency Regnum and other projects.

Modest Kolerov first created the International Russia movement (2011) as a counterpart of a sort to Putin's All-Russia People's Front for activities in neighbouring countries where Russian speakers live, and later in 2012, the Eurasian People's Union, an umbrella organisation with chapters in neighbouring countries³⁷. Kolerov became the chair of the Union's political bureau which also included **Yuri Baranchik** who collaborated with Kolerov in IA Regnum at that time (and maintained his own portal, Imperiya, which he created after leaving Lukashenko's Administration in 2007) and was involved in the Zapadnaya Rus project³⁸.

By 2012, the **Zapadnaya Rus** (Western Rus) project was already quite active in Belarus. This project promotes the idea of Belarus being part of the "Russian World", provides historical and philosophical foundation for the conception of Triune Rus, publishes lengthy pseudo-scientific articles that later become reproduced in their original or rewritten form at other imperial-oriented websites. Zapadnaya Rus evolved from an earlier project named "White Rus — Serbia's sister"³⁹. The old version of Baranchik's Imperiya has a link to an even earlier similar project, "Serbia — Russia's sister"⁴⁰. Zapadnaya Rus is headed by Igor Zelenkovsky, the project's start was made possible by Yuri Baranchik and Lev Krishtapovich. Zelenkovsky represents Zapadnaya Rus in the Eurasian Union of Belarus while Kolerov, in his turn, became one of the authors of the web site of Zapadnaya Rus.⁴¹

Zapadnaya Rus had established relations with the Institute of CIS Countries headed by Konstantin Zatulin, a well-known Russian politician of imperial convictions and a long-term Duma deputy. In 2011, representatives of Zapadnaya Rus were invited to a conference in Moscow dedicated to the 15th anniversary of the Institute. Their materials, including Baranchik's speech at the conference were published in a digest and the Institute's website, Materik.ru. At the conference, Igor Zelenkovsky met a Russian nationalist Orthodox politologist Kirill Frolov.⁴²

Yuri Baranchik and Kirill Frolov already were by that time staff members of Zatulin's Institute of CIS Countries. Baranchik is listed as senior fellow at the Institute's Department on Belarus, a job he is doing along with his responsibilities in Regnum and Imperiya. The Institute's website Materik.ru is also listed as a partner at Imperiya⁴³.

Kirill Frolov, a notorious Russian Orthodox activist, took active part in initiation of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2013-2014 while working for the Institute of CIS Countries led by Zatulin. Frolov's responsibilities with the Institute concerned Ukraine.

Thanks to Ukrainian hacktivists and Frolov-leaks website, one can trace Russia's mobilisation of existing contacts with pro-Russian actors in Ukraine (including the Eurasian People's Union of Ukraine) during

preparations for the events in Donbass, learn about instructions coming directly from Surkov and Glazyev and a meeting of Malofeev and Glazyev arranged by Frolov.

During that period Frolov also expresses interest in Russian Orthodox Church's affairs in Belarus, uses a slogan during his mobilisation efforts in Donbass, "Russia, Ukraine, Belarus — unite as Holy Rus". Leaked emails show that Frolov reports to Surkov and Glazyev⁴⁴ since 2013⁴⁵.

Russian politician **Konstantin Zatulin** is known as one of the masterminds behind the "Russian spring", holds such titles as First Deputy Chairman of State Duma Committee for the CIS Affairs, Eurasian Integration and Compatriot Relations, Head of the Institute of the CIS Countries, member of the Scientific Council under the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Chair of the Commission on International Policy of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy, member of the Presidential Council for Cossack Affairs, member of the Interdepartmental Commission for the Implementation of the Strategy of State Policy of Russian Federation Regarding the Cossacks through until 2020.

Alexey Kochetkov is one of the key ideologues of the unification of Belarus with Russia. Kochetkov took part in the constitutional crisis of 1993 in the ranks of the largest radical neo-Nazi organisation, the Russian National Unity (RNU) led by Hitler apologist Alexander Barkashov⁴⁶. RNU functioned as a paramilitary organisation and identified itself as "fascist" and "Nazi". Kochetkov was an active figure there as a member of the RNU Central Council since 1991 and an editor of the RNU main newspaper "The Russian Order" since 1992.⁴⁷ Kochetkov was listed in its registration documents as its founder⁴⁸.

Like many other former and acting members of radical nationalist organisations, in the second half of the 1990s Kochetkov became a political and PR consultant in electoral campaigns in Russia. After establishing his first GONGO, International Election Monitoring Organisation CIS-EMO, and becoming its director general in 2004, Kochetkov organised dozens of election and referenda observation missions in many countries and unrecognised territories and presented the observation results at international conferences with support and assistance of the Russian authorities. IA Regnum covered CIS-EMO activities extensively⁴⁹. In 2009, Kochetkov was posing on a photo with Vladislav Surkov⁵⁰.

Kochetkov promotes the idea of a union state consisting of Russia, Belarus and Serbia⁵¹. *"As Alexey Kochetkov, head of the Public Diplomacy Foundation, told "Ridus", this interstate structure will first be joined by Belarus and Serbia. With time, Kochetkov added, this "Russian bloc" will inevitably include new members, like Macedonia, Montenegro or "sobered-up" Ukraine.*"⁵²

Stanislav Byshok is a comrade in arms of Alexey Kochetkov for many years, at first as an expert of the International Election Monitoring Organisation CIS-EMO, and later as an expert of the Public Diplomacy Foundation and Bditelnost (Vigilance) project. Like Kochetkov, Byshok comes from the far right background. In the mid-2000s, Byshok was an activist of now prohibited radical nationalist organisation

“Russky Obraz” (Russian Image)ⁱ – a political wing of the underground Militant Russian Nationalists Organisation (BORN). Byshok befriended and regularly met with its leader and editor of the journal of the same name Ilya Goryachev. Creation of the Russian Image in early 2000s was inspired by the activities of a renowned Serbian radical nationalist organisation Obraz (the Image)⁵³. The Russian Image had working contacts with the Administration of the President, the State Duma and the Ministry of Internal Affairs⁵⁴. In 2014, it became an important part of the Donbass separatismⁱⁱ.

According to his official biography at the CIS-EMO website, since 2016 Byshok is actively involved in the “integration” of Russia and Belarus. He became one of the founders and co-chairs of the international Civil Initiative “Soyz” (Union) established in July 2018 in Belarus. In his speech at the second conference of Soyuz in September 2018, Byshok spelled out the goal of the Initiative: to ensure adoption of the Constitutional Act of the Union State and its approval at a referendum⁵⁵.

Sergey Lushch was active in the Coordinating Council of Organizations of Russian Compatriots in Belarus from the mid-2000s and at the same time maintained his membership in a Slavic pagan anti-Semitic organisation of a neo-Nazi kind “Skhoron Ezh Slaven”.⁵⁶

In 2004 Lushch creates and in 2011 registers in Belarus Rus Molodaya (Rumol), a pro-Russian youth organization; an event covered by the Institute of CIS countries' website Materik.ru. The report mentions that “*Rus Molodaya takes active part in international projects. Lately Rumol became involved in "Kosovo is Serbia" actions*”.⁵⁷

In 2013, Lushch becomes a member of the Board of the Coordinating Council of Organizations of Russian Compatriots and is supported by the Russian Embassy in Belarus, Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the Gorchakov Foundation⁵⁸. A report at the Gorchakov Foundation website calls Sergey Lushch a member of the Gorchakov Foundation Friends Club⁵⁹.

In 2017, with support from Rossotrudnichestvo Lushch organizes an International Forum for NGO Leaders of the Union State; applications for participation must be sent to the address of Rumol⁶⁰. In 2018, Lushch becomes a co-chair of Soyuz Civic Initiative⁶¹.

ⁱ “Russian Image” was headed by a well-known radical nationalist Ilya Goryachev, convicted and sentenced for life in 2015 for the establishment and leadership of an extremist group, organisation of murders based on ethnic and political grounds, banditry, and illegal arms trafficking.

ⁱⁱ As investigative journalist Alexander Litoy wrote, “for “Russian Image”, nationalism was always more important than racism. In their worldview, Ukrainians and even Poles are parts of the Russian nation gone astray. In 2010, a chapter of “Russian Image” was established in Donetsk region; its members partially overlapped with the “Donetsk Republic” — a movement which was a cradle of Donbass separatism. When the war in Donbass broke out, the local chapter of “Russian Image” restructured into a regimen of the DPR militia.” Alexander Litoy. The case of Ilya Goryachev: from BORN to Anti-Maidan. The Insider, 03.06.2015. <https://www.rospress.com/specserv/16091/>, [accessed on 25.02.2019].

It is evident that all Russian actors working on “integration” of Belarus and Russia have now joined their forces. Their vision of the future fate of Belarus is quite clear. Taking into account the involvement of persons directly associated with the Presidential Administration of Russia and endorsed by Surkov and Glazyev — such as Zatulin, Baburin, Frolov (implementers of the “Russian Spring”), Kochetkov (whose activities in the Balkans and other parts of Europe at the very least invoke suspicion that he may be involved in destabilization efforts), the threat to Belarus should be considered direct and explicit.

Far-right groups of pro-Russian influence network inside Belarus

This problem has been addressed by authors in pro-independence Belarusian media including Igor Lyalkov who has written several articles on this subject⁶². Lyalkov points to members of the following groups as possible core of paramilitary groups:

“- local chapters of Russian nationalist organizations — NLM, RNU, ANB, NBP and others (some of them banned in Russia but supported by the FSB of Russia in the neighbouring countries);

- legal pro-Russian youth organizations targeted at “patriotic education” of youth and sending young people to training camps in Russia disguised as “cultural and educational exchanges”; the most significant of them is Youth Social and Cultural Civic Union “Rus Molodaya”; these organizations are coordinated by the International Association of Youth Organizations of Russian Compatriots in Belarus;

- cossack organizations (formally ethno-cultural and educational, but having paramilitary structure and discipline) — the most prominent in Belarus are Belorusskoye Kazachestvo (Belorussian Cossacks), Vsebelorusskoye Ob'yedinennoye Kazachestvo (United All-Belorussian Cossacks), Cossacks' Equestrian Club “Ermak”, Military Patriotic Club “Kazachy Spas”.

- members of sport clubs (primarily those specialized in martial arts), organizations of veterans of the war in Afghanistan and other local conflicts (Internationalist Warriors), provided they have strong ties with similar Russian organizations, can form an active part of Russian World's fifth column.”⁶³

Controlled mainstream media and Telegram channels: Propaganda, fake news, information games

While in 2014-2016 the situation in Belarus was commonly viewed in the Russian public sphere in the context of the Ukrainian agenda, in the last two years Belarus became a separate target for Russian political, financial and media actors. Numerous research institutes under control of the Presidential Administration, controlled media and online resources of the “patriotic circle”, Russian foundations with their grant programmes, and quasi-civic organizations (GONGOs) are engaged for this purpose.

Many media involved in the information attack on Belarus, are sponsored and promoted by “patriotic businessmen”, close to Vladimir Putin or connected with Presidential Administration, such as Yuri Kovalchuk, Alexander Mamut, Konstantin Malofeev, Evgeny Prigozhin, and Igor Ashmanov.

Let us explore a few examples. Media belonging to the oligarch Alexander Mamut (Rambler & Co media group directly connected to the Presidential Administration), such as Lenta.ru, readily replicate fake news reports like that of people wearing tee-shirts with emblems of the so called DPR that allegedly got beaten in the streets of Minsk⁶⁴. Another story describes a coin allegedly issued in Belarus with a call to kill Russians⁶⁵. It was widely reproduced and made its way to Russian television⁶⁶. Rambler News disseminated to its huge audience a damaging biography of Lukashenko⁶⁷, that originated from Dni.ru⁶⁸ a newspaper associated with the present Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin⁶⁹.

Hacked emails show that Lenta.ru was directly connected with authors inside Belarus and discussed with them the way they should “aggravate” the problem of the increasing use of Belarusian language in schools.⁷⁰

The infamous imperial media agency Regnum and its subsidiary IA Rex are well known to Belarusian audiences. Founded and headed by Modest Kolerov, the agency publishes huge numbers of anti-Belarusian materials. Three of its reporters have been found guilty of incitement of hatred and released on their own recognisance⁷¹.

IA Rex editor-in-chief Yuri Baranchik had to leave Belarus. He has a site of his own called “The Empire”. He is known as one of the founders of the “Western Rus” project and a key ideologist of this concept⁷². He is also a senior research associate at the Institute of the CIS Countries.

Regnum and Rex should not be taken lightly, given the history of Kolerov's collaboration with Vladislav Surkov, their ideological kinship⁷³, and Kolerov's experience in launching successful internet-related projects⁷⁴. Regnum is considered one of Russia's biggest and most influential information agencies.

By comparing publication times, analysing styles and link policies we can make an educated guess that a new pro-Russian (allegedly Belarusian) Telegram channel “Bulba Prestolov” is also a child of Regnum-Rex family. Experts conceive that it is run by Yuri Baranchik with possible contributions from Tsargrad TV observer Yegor Kholmogorov, the author of the term “Russian spring”.

Anonymous Telegram channels, a relatively new means of mass communication, providing new opportunities for manipulation, disinformation and stove-piping, is in active use by Kremlin's agents of influence for pressure on Belarusian media sphere and directly on Lukashenko. A channel called Nezygar which became controlled by Kovalchuk's group a year and a half ago, is notorious for the disinformation attack it began prior the arrival to Minsk of Mikhail Babich, a new Russian ambassador.

The most recent example is a Russian media hype around a “nationalist aggression”. It was initially based on an incident involving a cossack in a Minsk metro but was soon completed with false details in Russian media and supported by fake social media messages describing similar accidents, insisting that the attacks were driven by conflicts around the use of language⁷⁵. This meal was served with speculations on the proposed ban of Russian media. NTV material dedicated to it also stove-piped a statement about Belarusian foreign minister Vladimir Makei's alleged Austrian citizenship⁷⁶ which added to the picture of “Western-oriented nationalist conspiracy”.

These pro-Kremlin media and Telegram-channels openly work from Russia and their content is reproduced in Belarus, not only intimidating Lukashenko and his inner circle and brainwashing Belarusian public in favour of unification with Russia but also influencing public opinion inside Russia, targeting various groups from elites to ordinary people.

Websites promoting “integration” initiatives

Advancement of the “integration project” is supported by websites of varying calibre and popularity. Their total (partially overlapping) monthly audience, though, can be as large as millions of individual readers. Let us take a look at the most prominent ones.

SONAR2050 — Union narratives factory, <https://www.sonar2050.org/>. Created in June 2017, hosted in Moscow. It develops an ideological base for the Union State. Editor-in-chief — Semyon Uralov. In 2012, he was Igor Markov's campaign advisor during the parliamentary election in Ukraine.

Teleskop <http://teleskop-by.org>. Registered in the USA. Pseudo-Belarusian site led by Kirill Averyanov-Minsky⁷⁷ and Lev Krishtapovich. Publishes fake news of attacks against Russian speakers, positive materials on the Union State, articles on Belarusians being historically part of the Russian civilization.

IMHOclub Portal <https://imhoclub.by> Created in 2015 by Alexey Dzermant and Alexander Shpakovsky — authors of numerous integration-related materials and regular guests at events on the theme — from official integrational congresses to Russian TV shows of imperial nature. Originally, the website was in content management system of a similar IMHOclub site created in Latvia in 2011 (<https://imhoclub.lv>), but when it was closed by Latvian security services, the Belarusian counterpart, after an offline period, became standalone. The website focuses on the Union State, the Eurasian Union, the USSR. IMHOclub's materials are spread further by an array of smaller sites.

Military Political Review (Voенно-Politicheskoe Obozrenie, VPO) exists since 2011 and presents itself as a resource representing a sound unofficial viewpoint of Belarusian military officers. Hosted in Moscow where 48% of its visitors also reside. The website's primary content consists of anti-NATO, pro-Russian articles. A significant share consists of anti-Ukrainian articles including “investigations”. Partners listed include IA Rex and the Centre for Military Political Studies at Moscow State University

of Foreign Affairs (MGIMO). Ukrainian hackers conducted their own research to find out that the website was registered using a fake identity and the real moderator was probably related to IA Regnum⁷⁸.

Together with Russia (Vместе s Rossiyei) <http://ross-bel.ru> — the website of the Organization of Russian Compatriots in Belarus is dominated by a distinct anti-Western, anti-Belarus, anti-Ukrainian and pro-Imperial rhetoric. The materials are written by Andrey Gerashchenko, chairman of Russian embassy' Coordination Board of leaders of Belarusian organisations of Russian compatriots. Of course, there are articles by Lushch and articles about Lushch, as he is deputy chairman at the Executive Board of the Coordinating Council of Organisations of Russian Compatriots in Belarus.

4esnok <https://4esnok.by> (pronounced chesnok, “garlic” or “plain talk”). Created in October 2014. Hosted in Estonia. About 90% of all visitors are directed from news.yandex.by and zen.yandex.by. The content of the site is characterized by intolerance to anything Belarusian, vilification of Belarusian culture figures, civic activists and persons associated with democratic opposition, promotion of a pro-Russian, anti-Western, and anti-Ukrainian narrative.

Several nearly identical regional Belarusian websites are also involved in informational support of the Union State and Eurasian integration. They were created in 2014-2018. One of them is **Grodno Daily** <http://grodnodaily.net>, created in February 2018. It contains news from a variety of sources and publishes mass-produced anti-Belarusian materials under the Blogs section. **Vitbich** <http://vitbich.org/> Created in February 2018, hosted in Moscow. News feed is filled with materials reprinted from Sputnik and a Kremlin-related Telegram channel Pool №3. **Nash Gomel** <http://sozh.info> Created in February 2016. Hosted in Russia. The website was registered by Sergey Lushch. The site is disguised as a regional news resource and boasts of 180 thousand monthly hits. Between local news reports, the easily recognised propaganda materials are posted: pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian, and anti-democratic hysteria, openly black-hundredist messages in re-posts and own publications. Publishes articles by Kochetkov, information about the activities of Soyuz, Rumol, Public Diplomacy, “Russian Society” association, promotes the latest book by Lev Krishtapovich. **Mogilew.by** <https://mogilew.by> — a regional news site of Stalinist and communist orientation. The site is hosted in Belarus. The administrator does not reveal his name. 50 thousand unique viewers monthly, 70 thousand in peak moments.

Monitors also register a new phenomenon: the appearance of **news aggregators reproducing propaganda** materials with substantial delays after the original publication — most likely, timed to particular events. **Grodno24** is an example of such resources. The site it is hosted in Germany. Articles reflecting the Russian viewpoint on relations with Belarus and reposted materials from Russian media are squeezed between the usual news reports. After a scandal, some of the materials were deleted. The site boasts of 1 300 000 views per month. Most hyperlink transitions (76,17%) are from zen.yandex.ru.

Recruitment and co-optation of Belarusian journalists and bloggers

Sputnik.by <https://sputnik.by> plays an outstanding role in Belarus, being a very popular and fairly high-grade information and propaganda resource as well as an anchor for recruitment and co-optation of Belarusian bloggers. It has been online since November 2014. It is headed by Andrey Kachura, former spokesman for the KGB of Belarus and also former head of Russian TV channel “Rossiya”'s news bureau in Minsk. Sputnik.by is a subsidiary of Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency.

More than a half of total Sputnik.by's traffic comes from news aggregators such as Yandex and Mail.ru, social media provide a little over 3%, with Vkontakte providing 42% of the share, Facebook — 20% and Odnoklassniki — 18%. In mid-January 2019, Facebook administration reported that it had deleted 364 pages and profiles associated with Russian Sputnik's international network that used fake identities and coordinated their information activity.⁷⁹

Since mid-2018, prominent and most popular Belarusian bloggers and social media public group owners, both state-wide and regional, began receiving offers to write articles expressing given opinions for money, post advertisements or sell their passwords. At least in one case the customer said he represented Sputnik⁸⁰. We only know about this practice from those who rejected the offers, but we cannot tell how many people accepted them.

The Sputnik-related network of user accounts functions independently and separately from the network made up by Rumol and NLM activists, imperial-minded authors, etc., although certain overlaps are possible. It is managed in a more centralised fashion, keeps a much lower profile and only comes into view thanks to signals from Belarusian media activists.

To illustrate the problem, in February 2019, information became available about a purchase in December 2018 of a very popular public group in VKontakte called “This is Minsk, baby” with the audience of 40 thousand people for 5 thousand US dollars. Reportedly, the buyer is associated with the “Young Rus”. Immediately after the purchase, insulting pictures started to appear in the group, depicting the historical symbol of independent Belarus, “Pagonya” coat of arms, on toilet paper. It is possible that Rumol received funding and orders to buy public groups independently of Sputnik. The scale of purchase of public groups and accounts demands further research.

Politring <http://politring.com/> is a pseudo-liberal discussion platform. The mysterious customers were ready to buy not just materials for Politring but even “contacts of people” in Belarus. Published materials had to be signed with real names. Materials that the authors were able to push to other websites were paid more generously. Among the orders was an interview with the lawyers in the Regnum case. Eduard Palchis, a well-known blogger, believed that the customer was based outside of Belarus⁸¹.

In 2016, hacktivists helped to discover a small part of an influence scheme leading all the way up to the Presidential Administration of Russia and Vladislav Surkov. It is the so-called Buzila-leaks — hacked email belonging to a pro-Russian journalist from Odessa who fulfilled assignments connected with destabilization of the situation in Ukraine, was convicted and released on probation, moved to Moscow and became the editor of InfoCentre, a pro-Russian website. In 2016, he “joined” the Belarus-related activity. The emails dumped show that his responsibility included monitoring of Belarusian media and casting of authors for materials to be written on instructions from Moscow.

Recommendations

Belarusian society and state as well as international actors must take very seriously the current threat to the sovereignty of Belarus and its further increase in the years immediately ahead. International community must convince Lukashenko and people influencing his decisions of the crucial importance of a series of steps to be taken in 2019-2020, including cooperation with the West in countering hybrid threats, significant economic reforms, reforms in state-society relations, human rights and rule of law, and active measures in culture and education.

Democratic countries, on their part, must actively support expert and civil society organizations, media activists and independent media involved in countering the influence of Russian propaganda and supporting values of independence and sovereignty, support exchange of best practices among expert and civil organizations, individual activists in democratic countries and Belarus, include Belarus in Russian disinformation monitoring system, promote European values and support people to people exchange, especially in respect of youth.

It must be taken into account that Lukashenko is not a real guarantor of the country's independence. He is a non-rational player clinging to power to guarantee his own safety, unwilling to carry out any real reforms. However, a significant part of Belarusian administrators is ready for economic and political reforms and a turn towards Europe, realising that it is the only guarantee of their country's security and well-being and those of their own.

Leaders of democratic states and international organizations and their representatives involved in international negotiations should convince Lukashenko and persons influencing his decisions of crucial nature of the following principles and **the necessity to take the following steps in 2019-2020:**

In the economic field:

- wide credit and financial support from the West is only possible on the terms of genuine structural economic reforms;
- the opening of European Union's markets for Belarus is only possible after Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Belarus and the European Union is executed (Belarus and

Turkmenistan are the two post-Soviet states lacking such agreements due to severe human rights situation). The agreement must necessitate tangible and measurable progress in the field of human rights and the electoral system;

- the perspective of broad western investments is conditioned by implementation of the law rule principles, steps to ensure independent judiciary and minimal guarantees for business.

In the field of security, it is necessary to:

- cooperate with the “EU versus Disinformation” campaign, run by the European External Action Service East Stratcom Task Force;
- study and use the Baltic states' expertise in countering hybrid threats and agents of influence, fighting against disinformation, and cooperating with members of the society;
- cooperate with the *EU-NATO Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats*.

In the field of civic life, human rights and rule of law, it is necessary to:

- lift the restrictions and end pressure on independent media and journalists including those cooperating with foreign media, stop blocking and censorship in internet;
- lift the restrictions on the activity of non-governmental organisations including obstacles to register NGOs and receive funds from international donors, and abolish administrative liability for acting on behalf of unregistered NGOs;
- extend effective cooperation with inter-governmental organisations in the field of human rights and democracy, including the UN treaty bodies, recognise the UN Human Rights Committee's competence to review individual complaints, and cooperate with UN Human Rights Council's special procedures;
- resume OSCE mission activity in the country with broad mandate;
- open the country for international observers — intergovernmental and parliamentary as well as NGO observers, especially in the election periods; end the practice of banning foreign NGO representatives from entering the country;
- take concrete steps for entering the Council of Europe, including, in particular, adoption of a moratorium on capital punishment. Membership in the Council of Europe can be the first step to Partnership Agreement with the European Union.

In the field of culture and education, it is necessary to:

- support the development of Belarusian and international educational initiatives, intensify exchange programmes with educational institutions in democratic countries;

- provide efficient and diversified support to civic initiatives for the renaissance of Belarusian culture and language;
- provide support to projects and programmes for preservation and dissemination of knowledge of Belarusian history and culture;
- provide support to initiatives promoting the values of independence and sovereignty of Belarus.

To counter Russia’s hybrid absorption of Belarus, the international democratic community should:

- provide active support to expert organisations, civil society groups, media activists and independent media involved in countering Russian propaganda influence, promoting the values of independence and sovereignty;
- support projects for preservation and dissemination of the knowledge of history and culture of Belarus in Belarusian society and neighbouring countries;
- hold regular consultations and information exchange among the European, American and Belarusian organisations and civic activists involved in countering Russian influence, aimed at working out a plan for coordinated actions;
- democratic states neighbouring Belarus and monitoring Russian disinformation activity in their countries, can include Belarus in their monitoring system;
- research shows that Russian influence networks go beyond Belarusian borders; the same actors are often involved in disruptive activity in the Baltic states, Central Europe and the Balkans. Spotting and neutralisation of such actors in these countries will be beneficial to the situation in Belarus;
- information on the results of investigations into the activity of Russian influence networks, their detected connections and funding sources must be made public and widespread, including coordinated efforts with independent media and media activists in Belarus;
- support development, promotion and popularisation of projects building European scenarios and reforms for Belarus;
- facilitate issuance of multi-entry multi-annual Schengen visas to Belarusian citizens for short travels with minimal visa fee or without it – as an important factor of exposing anti-Western propaganda narratives;
- support scholarship programmes for educating young Belarusians in European universities.

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