



Anti-Belarusian propaganda and hate speech:

Results of monitoring VKontakte toxic public pages

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SUMMARY

This research is based on systematic monitoring (January-June 2020) of the largest VKontakte public pages aimed at Belarusian audiences and regularly publishing propaganda content. They are aimed at discrediting Belarusian statehood, history, language, and culture. Such pages also regularly publish anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western messages. Many pages use various forms of hate speech and sometimes even call outright for violence against certain individuals and groups of the population on professional, ethnic, and political grounds.

CONTENTS

1. CLASSIFICATION AND FREQUENCY OF PROPAGANDA CONTENT	4
2. THE CONCEPT OF “ZMAGAR-NESS” AND HATE SPEECH	8
3. ANTI-BELARUSIAN PROPAGANDA: TYPES AND METHODS	13
3.1 Promotion of the concept of a “triune people” and the Russian world	13
3.2 Discrediting Belarusian language and literature	15
3.3 Discrediting Belarusian statehood and history	16
3.4 Historical revisionism and the advancement of Stalinism	18
4. ANTI-UKRAINIAN PROPAGANDA: BASIC MESSAGES	20
5. ANTI-WESTERN PROPAGANDA: NAZISM AND MORAL DECLINE	23
CONCLUSION	26

1. CLASSIFICATION AND FREQUENCY OF PROPAGANDA CONTENT

Anti-Belarusian propaganda and pro-Kremlin propaganda statements on the internet are not limited to websites and to a large extent are disseminated through social media. The impetus for the creation of many propaganda public pages on VKontakte aimed at Belarusian audiences was, apparently, the Ukrainian events of 2013-2014. Up until then, there were only a few large public pages operating at the time that contained anti-Belarusian propaganda.

Within the framework of this study, the content of several public pages in VKontakte that regularly publish propaganda and/or hate speech aimed mainly at Belarusian internet audiences was studied. The objects of study were open public pages in VKontakte with more than 1,000 subscribers that were chosen during earlier iSANS¹ research and subsequent monitoring of the VKontakte network.

During the monitoring, all posts published by these pages during January-June 2020 were considered. At the same time, the posts of those publics that posted exclusive content were subjected to additional analysis and classification. We are talking about the following twelve public pages: “Our Country – Belarus,”² “Chesnok News and Politics of Belarus,”³ “History of Belarus,”⁴ “Zmagar,”⁵ “WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS!,”⁶ “Reasonable Vitebsk,”⁷ “Vitebsk PRO,”⁸ “Our Gomel – city and regional news,”⁹ “#STOP.ZMAGAR.BREST!!!,”¹⁰ “NLM-Belarus,”¹¹ “Stable Mogilev,”¹² and “Gomel AGAINST.”¹³

The content of those pages that were inactive or not very active during January-June 2020 (“Tough Guy for Belarus!,” “Community movement ‘Our,’” “Anti-maidan Belarus”) or that posted exclusively in order to lead readers to the websites associated with VKontakte pages (“Politraining,” “Telescop,” “IMHOclub Belarus,”¹⁴ “Mogilev News || Podneprovie-info,” “Vitbich | News of Vitebsk and the Vitebsk region,” “Anti-maidan Belarus,” “Western Rus,” “Berestje News – Brest city and region news,” “Friends (Rus/Bel) | Russian and Belarusian Journalists,” and “Grodno Daily | Grodno News”) were not subject to categorization.

¹ See the updated map “Toxic Public Pages of Belarus”: <https://isans.org/toxic/>

At the start of monitoring in January 2020, the map included several pages that became inactive by the end of 2020 and did not contain some pages that became active later.

² <https://vk.com/club24982282>

³ https://vk.com/4esnok_by

⁴ https://vk.com/belarus_history

⁵ <https://vk.com/carbatushka>

⁶ <https://vk.com/belruspatriot>

⁷ <https://vk.com/adequatenews>

⁸ <https://vk.com/vitebskprotiv>

⁹ https://vk.com/novosti_gomelya

¹⁰ <https://vk.com/stopzmagarbrest>

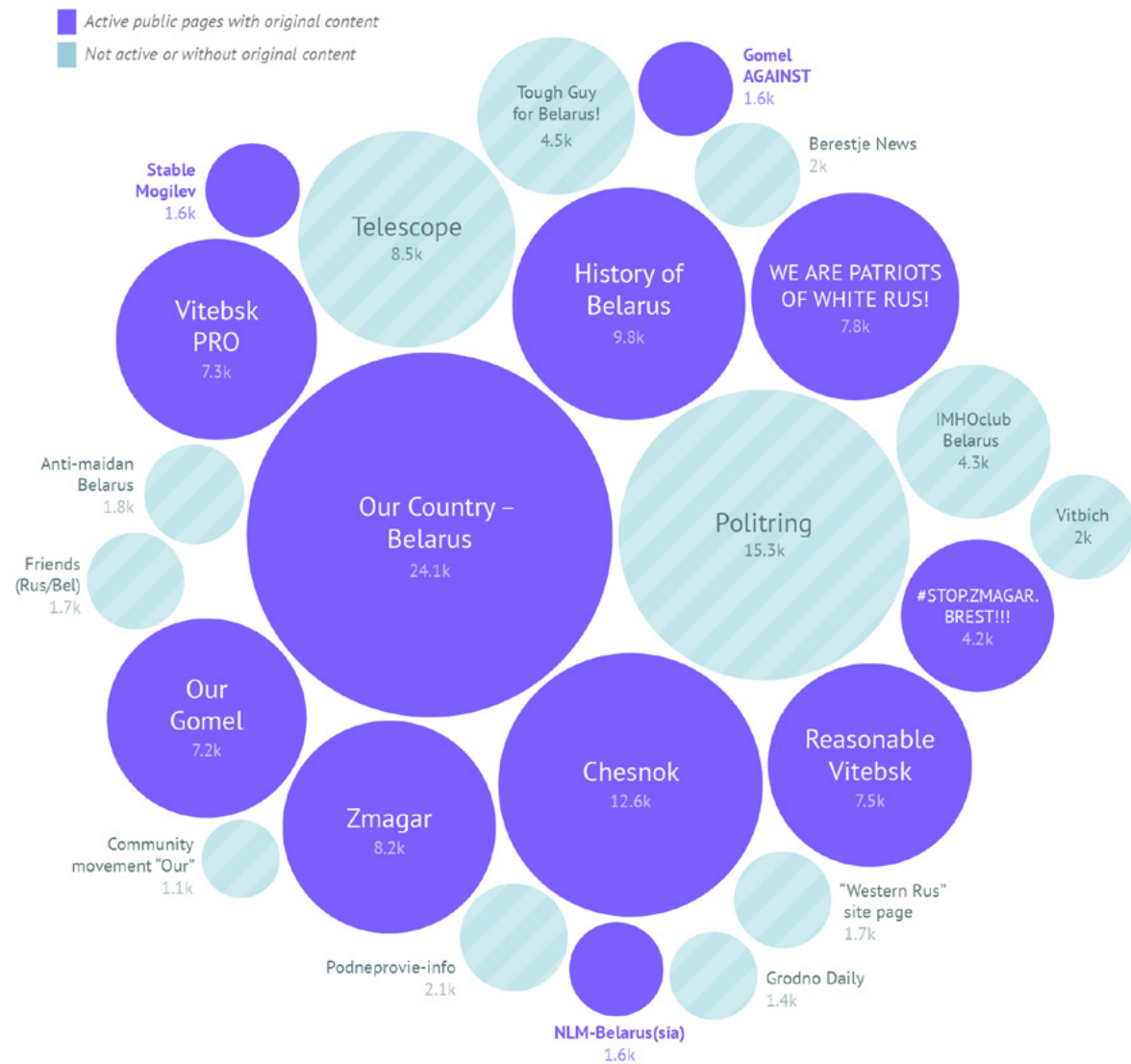
¹¹ <https://vk.com/nodbelarus1>

¹² <https://vk.com/club185651782>

¹³ https://vk.com/gomel_protiv

¹⁴ In addition to references to Imhoclub.by, this page contained only rare reposts of videos from a personal VKontakte page of Imhoclub.by's editor.

Figure 1. VKontakte pages monitored



Note: Subscriber counts are as of October 1, 2020.

As part of an additional study of the content of the 12 pages mentioned above, an analysis was made of posts on the content of propaganda of the Russian World and/or propaganda narratives regarding Belarus, Ukraine, and Western countries. The presence of various forms of discrediting Belarusian activists, journalists, human rights defenders, etc. was also considered. The total number of such posts established during the monitoring was about 3,800.

Posts were categorized based on the topics of propaganda narratives. They could be either neutral or contain propaganda from the "Russian world" and/or propaganda narratives regarding Belarus, Ukraine, and Western countries. While most posts containing propaganda corresponded to only one message, some promoted two or more at the same time. In other words, one post could contain both anti-Ukrainian propaganda and discrediting of Belarusian history, as well as hate speech against a Belarusian activist. In this case, it corresponded to three propaganda messages at once.

1. Propaganda of the “Russian world”

Posts promoting views on the Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples as part of the Russian people and on Belarus and/or Ukraine as part of the Russian world or Russian civilization. This also includes posts with the message that a successful future for Belarus is possible only in close alliance with Russia or in becoming a part of it.

2. Anti-Belarusian propaganda

First, those posts that discredit Belarusian statehood, language, and culture, as well as those about the supposedly violent Belarusianization and Russophobia in Belarus. In Figure 2, the frequency of such posts is indicated by the hashtag #antibel.

Second, posts on historical topics discrediting Belarusian national heroes, Belarusian proto-statehood, and denying Belarusian heritage as part of the Rzeczpospolita and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This also includes posts containing historical revisionism, for example, denial of Stalinist repressions in Belarus and the massacres at Kurapaty. In Figure 2, the frequency of such posts is indicated by the hashtag #history.

Third, posts aimed at discrediting Belarusian activists, journalists, human rights defenders, initiatives, and citizens for whom Belarusian statehood and culture are self-sufficient values. They often contain hidden or explicit insults, obscene language, and sometimes calls for violence. In Figure 2, the frequency of such posts is indicated by the hashtag #zmagar.

By classifying the objects of discrediting as collective images (“zmagary,” “svyadomye,” etc.)¹⁵ with arbitrarily attributed negative connotations, broader segments of the population are discredited at the same time.

3. Anti-Ukrainian propaganda

Posts with anti-Ukrainian content within the framework of traditional pro-Kremlin messages justifying and supporting the separatists of the DPR / LPR,¹⁶ narratives about Ukraine as a Western puppet, a failed oligarchic state, the dominance of Nazi Banderites in the country, and about the Malaysian Boeing supposedly being shot down by Kyiv, among others.

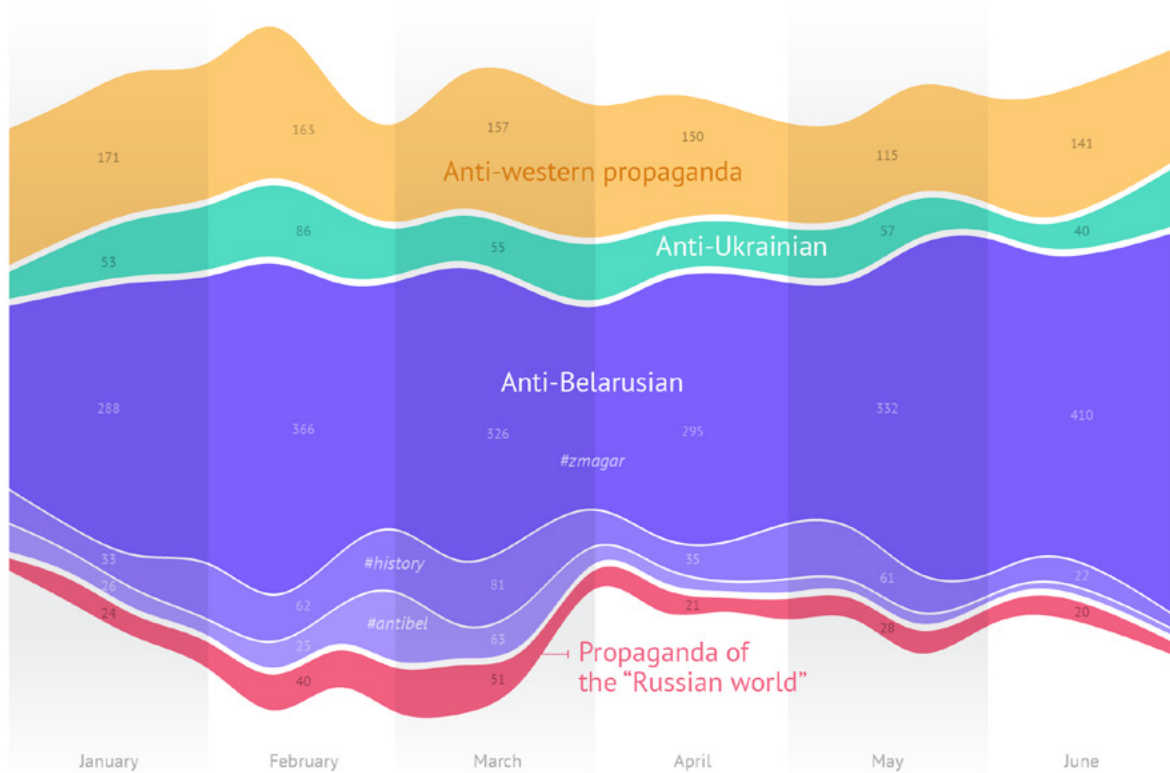
4. Anti-western propaganda

Posts promoting pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives about Western countries’ hostile plans against Belarus and/or Russia, often using absurd parallels between modern Western countries and Nazi Germany. This also includes posts about the moral decay of the West, authoritarian practices in Western countries and their socio-economic decline, vassal status, lack of sovereignty, and so on.

¹⁵ In a broad sense, toxic pages use the label “zmagar” relative to a very large category of the population that has a positive attitude towards Belarusian historical symbols, the Belarusian language, or otherwise shows its “pro-Belarusianness.”

¹⁶ Unrecognized Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics.

Figure 2. Frequency of propaganda messages in January-June 2020



Note: One post may correspond to two or more types of propaganda.

As you can see, over the entire monitoring period these VKontakte pages, in addition to anti-Belarusian content, systematically posted anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian messages. At the same time, most of the toxic content in Belarus does not concern discrediting Belarusian statehood, history or culture directly, but is done through consistent denigration (often using hate speech) of individuals or groups of citizens with pro-Belarusian views, public activists, human rights defenders, and other categories of people.

2. The concept of “zmagar-ness” and hate speech

Toxic public pages on VKontakte quite often use direct insults and obscene language (many examples of such posts are not provided here for ethical reasons), and also broadly use labels to designate people and population groups they hate, attaching a variety of negative connotations to them.

The most common label is the word “zmagar,” [trans. note – Belarusian for “combatant”] which is even present in the names of two toxic pages (“Zmagar” and “#STOP.ZMAGAR.BREST!!!”). In addition to these two, the term is regularly used in posts on the pages “WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS,” “Our country is Belarus,” “Gomel AGAINST,” “Vitebsk PRO,” “Stable Mogilev,” and occasionally a number of other toxic public pages.

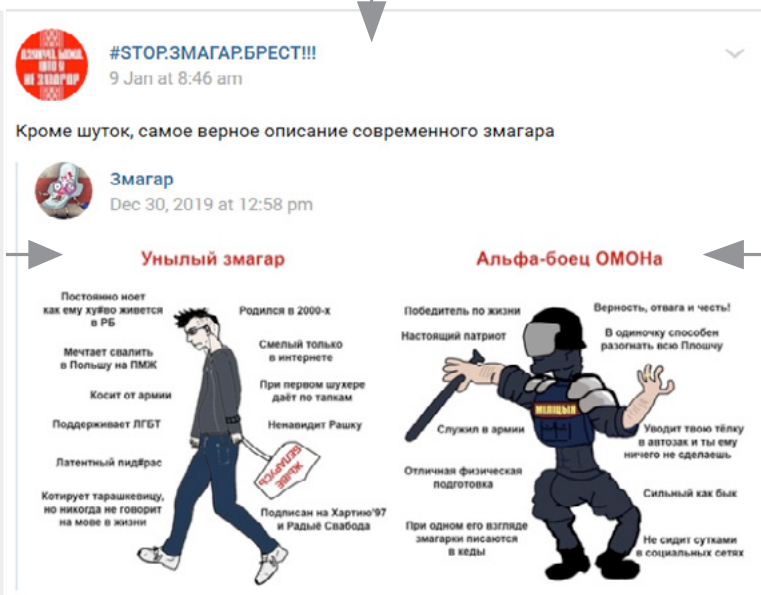
Toxic public pages denigrate the labels “zmagar,” “svyadomye” and their derivatives through their arbitrary attribution of various humiliating characteristics, base feelings, and actions. Among the many methods of manipulation, generalization is widely used, where the real statements or actions of one person supposedly belonging to the category of “zmagars” are taken out of context or even fabricated and automatically attributed to the entire group of “zmagars” in the view of page administrators.

From the analysis of the content of toxic public pages, it follows that the word “zmagar” is used in both narrow and broader meanings. In the narrowest sense, it is used to refer to individual representatives of the democratic opposition, human rights defenders, journalists of independent media and bloggers, cultural activists, and particular Belarusian-speaking citizens.

"Jokes aside, this is the most accurate description of the modern zmagar."

Dismal zmagar

Constantly complains about how it f*cking sucks to live in Belarus
Dreams of running away to Poland with permanent residency status
Skips out of army service
Supports LGBT
Latent f*ggot
Converts to Taraškievica, but never speaks Belarusian in real life
Was born in the 2000s
Brave only over the internet
Runs at the first sign of trouble
Hates Russia
Reads Charter '97 and Radio Svaboda



Alpha-fighter OMON

Life winner
Real patriot
Served in the army
In excellent physical shape
One look from him and a zmagar pees his pants
Loyalty, courage, and honor
Can clear the whole Square by himself
Takes your lady into the police wagon and you can't do anything about it
Strong as an ox
Doesn't spend all day on social media

Source: “#STOP.ZMAGAR.BREST!!!”, January 9, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-166557423_8797

In a meme posted on the page “#STOP.ZMAGAR.BREST!!!” the image of a “zmagar” represents a cowardly homosexual-Russophobe born in the 2000s who dreams of emigrating to Poland, reads “Charter’97” and “Radio Svaboda,” and values Old Belarusian orthography, but does not speak Belarusian. He is juxtaposed with a courageous, strong, and patriotic riot police officer.

In a broad sense, toxic pages use the label “zmagar” to refer to a large segment of the population that holds a positive attitude towards Belarusian historical symbols, the Belarusian language, or otherwise manifests its “pro-Belarusian character” to a somewhat greater extent than the administrators of these pages consider acceptable. At the same time, “zmagars” are juxtaposed with the Belarusian people:

“Today marks 25 years of the victory of the Belarusian people 🇧🇪 over the zmagars. On May 14, 1995, a nationwide referendum was held, in which 83.3% of voters supported granting Russian language the status of a second state language, exactly that number supported economic integration with Russia, and 75.1% voted for replacing svyadomye with Belarusian national symbolism.”¹⁷

Examples of connecting “zmagars” with mental disability and many negative qualities:

- *“That is precisely why we argue that zmagars are always morons, and, accordingly, are always inclined towards a policy of double standards.”¹⁸*
- *“The zmagar Nasha Niva, tells zmagars for money that zmagars are morons.”¹⁹*
- *“We have always said that Gomel zmagars are the worst thugs in the world. While the capital-city zmagars are fighting for the introduction of quarantines and the closure of institutions in connection with the global epidemic, injured living Gomel citizens of the USSR, after the announcement of deaths in Italy, invite everyone to the waterfront. Truly idiots!”²⁰*

Several toxic pages use primitive collages for the same purpose of vilifying independent media and people who respect historical Belarusian symbols.

¹⁷ “WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS!,” May 14, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-46503890_175091

¹⁸ “Our country – Belarus,” May 25, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-24982282_62170

¹⁹ “Zmagar,” March 25, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_706903

²⁰ “Gomel AGAINST,” March 19, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-147551565_37538

"The brain is a surprising organ. It works from birth up until that moment someone says 'Belarusians are Litvins! Long live Belarus!!!'"

"Regarding the 'Independent' press in Belarus, in brief"



Source: "WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS!," March 6, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-46503890_172231



Source: "Vitebsk PRO," January 29, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86305244_262160

One method of discrediting the "zmagars" is to baselessly attribute to them flawed plans and actions against the Belarusian state and society, sometimes in the form of arbitrary parallels with the Nazis:

- "And the zmagar needs only to finish off the country's economy."²¹
- "And this is what the zmagars want to make a matter of pride and value of the Belarusian people... Does anyone else believe that morons running with a white-red-white flag really love Belarus and wish anyone something good? No, they, like their predecessors, think only of their own skins, and only want to live their lives at someone else's expense."²²
- "And this is not a joke at all, regarding the Square and the opposition. In Brest, for example, under the guise of 'feeding pigeons' youngsters are already gathering in the event of cancellation of the celebration to go to the main city square. [...] It is possible that the swastika has already been prepared, the Nazi banners, and even the caps of the traitors of the Motherland."²³
- "How is a zmagar different from a normal person? He creates a mess, calls everyone together to clean it up, and then says he was trying to do the right thing for everyone. Trying to do what? Empty your wallet? But the most amusing thing is that the donors who lead them to unauthorized rallies most likely gave them money to pay fines... But without a sucker life is bad, so they offer to help the 'sufferers' to live better. That's their whole plan to improve their lives."²⁴


²¹ "Vitebsk PRO," March 19, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86305244_265630

²² "#STOPZMAGAR.BREST!!!" January 5, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-166557423_8765

²³ "#STOPZMAGAR.BREST!!!" April 30, 2020, <https://vk.com/@stopzmagarbrest-fashisty-ne-proidut>

²⁴ "Our country – Belarus," January 17, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-24982282_59414

At times, obscene language and hate speech directed against Belarusian community activists, journalists, and bloggers are combined with anti-Semitic messages.



Змагар
11 May at 7:53 pm 📱


Попал как-то сотрудник радыё свабода в плен к белорусским партизанам:
- Бгатья, не убивайте, я же тожегусский.
А они ему говорят:
- А скажи Островец!
- Кастгавец.
- Расстрелять **нахуй!**

"A Radio Freedom fell in with the group of Belarusian partisans:

- Brothers [spoken with a stereotypical "Jewish" accent], don't kill me. I'm Russian, too.

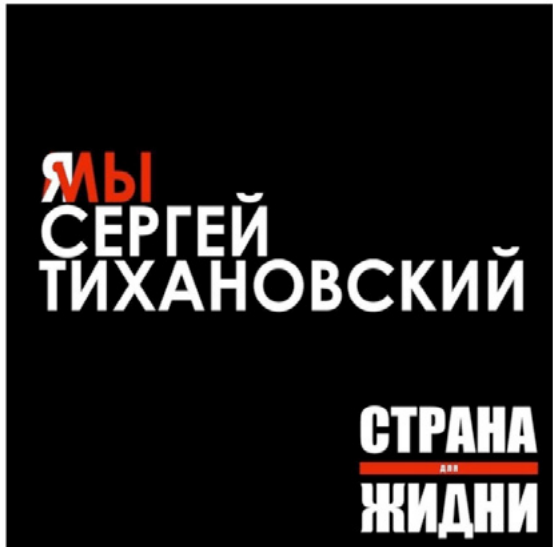
They say to him:
- Say Ostrovets!
- Castravets. [A play on the word castration - a reference to the Jewish ceremony of circumcision, or bris.]
- Fucking shoot him!

Source: "Zmagar," May 5, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_720230



Змагар
2 Jun at 6:15 pm

Поговаривают, что это настоящий логотип "Страны для жизни" Тихановского 🤔



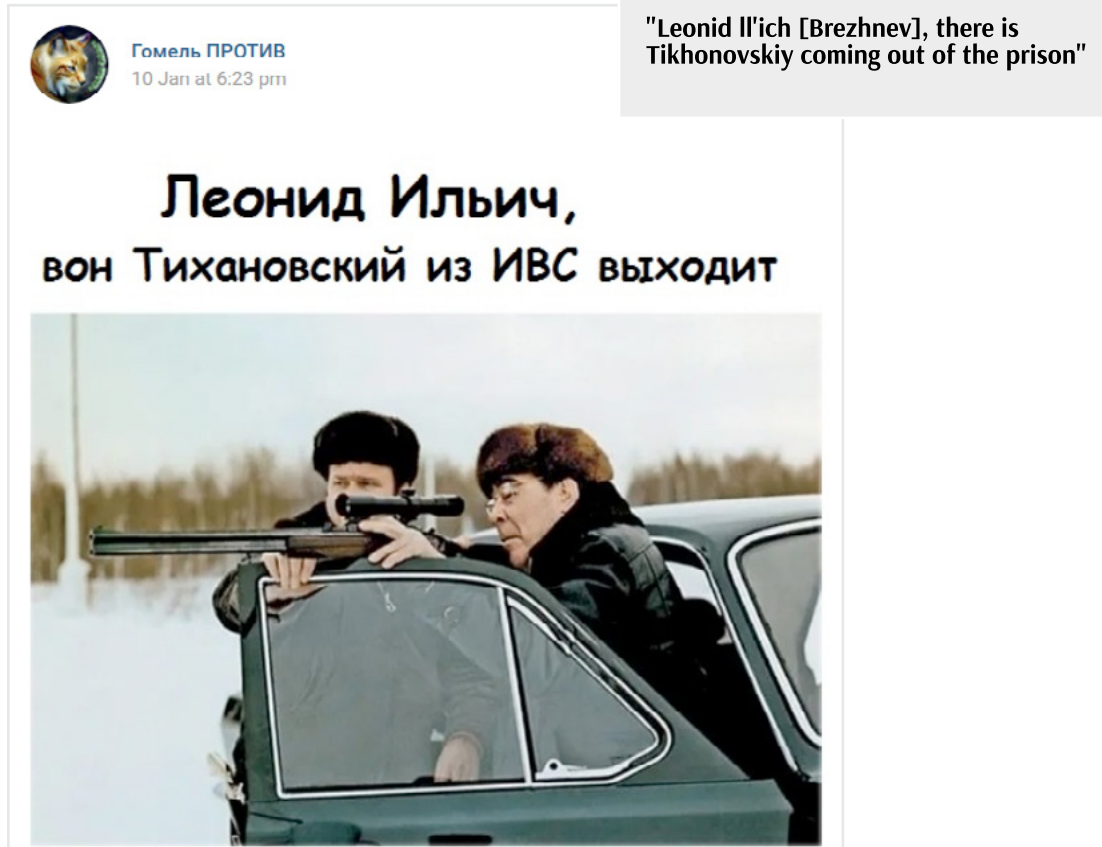
"They say that this is the real logo for Tikhonovsky's 'Country for Living' [movement]"

"Country for Yids" [A play on words in Russian for the "Country for Living" movement]

Source: "Zmagar," June 2, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_726703

In addition, toxic pages sometimes directly call for various repressive actions and violence against individual politicians and activists, as well as the group of "zmagars" as a whole:

- “When we revoke citizenship and deport from Belarus all the white-red-white zmagars, they will not need to fill out any documents. Everything will be done for them – humanely, easily, and economically.”²⁵
- “According to poll results, Belarusians are in favor of stripping zmagars of Belarusian citizenship.”²⁶



Source: “Gomel AGAINST,” January 10, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-147551565_34109

It is telling that by the middle of October 2020, the label “zmagar” began to be regularly used on Belarusian state television to refer to all Belarusians taking part in protests and acts of civil disobedience, and in a broader sense to refer to all residents dissatisfied with the Belarusian authorities. Similar to the methods employed by toxic pages, state television also uses baseless generalization and arbitrarily attributes to members of this category mental disability, extremist and terrorist actions, a host of negative qualities, and without justification compares them with criminal groups, national traitors, and fascists.²⁷

²⁵ “WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS!,” February 8, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-46503890_171282

²⁶ “Zmagar,” February 12, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_697319

²⁷ “Zmagars” as a universal expression of evil: Belarusian propaganda has put a halter on a long-standing pro-Kremlin label, October 21, 2020, <https://isans.org/articles/zmagary-kak-universalnoe-vyrazhenie-zla-belorusskaya-propaganda-osedla-la-davniy-prokremlenskij-yarlyk.html>

3. Anti-Belarusian propaganda: Types and methods

3.1 Promotion of the concept of a “triune people” and the Russian world

Many toxic VKontakte public pages question the existence of the Belarusian people and nation as a full-fledged entity and promote the imperial concept of the “triune Russian people”²⁸ with varying degrees of regularity. They maintain that the Belarusian identity is artificial, that Belarusian culture is local and inferior, and that Belarus is an integral part of the Russian world:

- “Our all-Russian culture is enmeshed in millions of these invisible cultural threads. Wherever you look you will see an outstanding Belarusian or Little Russian (Ukrainian). Wherever you look at the Belarusian or Little Russian (Ukrainian) culture you will see the huge influence of the Great Russians. And all this taken together is a world-class culture, rightfully taking its place among the ancient Greek, Roman, German, English, Italian, Spanish, French, Chinese and other cultures, and not among the local ‘also cultures !!!11.”²⁹
- “Russophobia has been slowly but surely planted in Belarus in the last years of the decade. [...] Most citizens are forced to have a different, foreign, artificial identity. They are “pushing” a distorted history. If you are Belarusian, then of course you’re not Russian. And if you’re Russian, grab your suitcase, head to the station, and so on...”³⁰
- “When you say that Belarus is an integral part of the Russian world, that our country as a sovereign state can exist and avoid Ukraine’s mistakes only as a Russian republic, fluff and feathers fly in response. You hear grumbling about the Kremlin, Putin, the Black Hundreds, ‘Anschluss,’ and ‘six regions.’ It is said that the Belarusian Constitution will be amended soon. I think that if the Basic Law of the Republic of Belarus included a provision that Belarus is an integral part of the Russian world and the Belarusian people recognize themselves as part of a great Russian nation, it would be the strongest domestic political and diplomatic move.”³¹


²⁸ The triune Russian nation, also known as the All-Russian nation, is an Imperial Russian and Russian irredentist ideology which sees the Russian nation as comprising the three sub-nations Great Russians, Little Russians and White Russians. Read more at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All-Russian_nation

²⁹ “WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS!,” May 29, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-46503890_176142

³⁰ “Reasonable Vitebsk,” January 18, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-119045058_86625

³¹ “WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS!,” March 15, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-46503890_172772

One of the pages cites anti-Semitism as “proof of the triune of the Russian people.”



МЫ ПАТРИОТЫ БЕЛОЙ РУСИ!
12 Feb at 7:30 pm

[Headline] "Yet more evidence of a triune Russian people 'trough antisemitism.'"

Ещё одно доказательство триединства русского народа "через антисемитизм".

Нелюбовь к евреям в первой половине XX века - явление общеевропейское. Оно было широко распространено и в Венгрии, и в Польше, и в Германии, и во Франции, и в Литве. Белорусская ССР, конечно же, не была исключением из общего ряда, даже несмотря на то, что являлась частью социалистического интернационалистского государства.

Но КАК именно среди белорусов проявлялся антисемитизм? А проявлялся он через антагонизм "мы, русские vs они, евреи". Можно ли представить себе, чтобы поляк ненавидел еврея и писал на заборе "Бей жидов, спасай Россию!?" Можно ли представить себе венгра, не любящего евреев и рассуждающего о том, что "жиды наших русских людей обманывают"? Вряд ли. Поляки и венгры - не русские, это два отдельных народа. А вот великороссы, малороссы (украинцы) и белорусы - это единый русский народ. Потому и антисемитизм у трёх русских племён крайне схожий.

Source: "WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS!," February 12, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-46503890_171477

Claims that a successful future for Belarus is possible only in close alliance with Russia, or even as part of it, are often accompanied by the false dilemmas of “Russia or Poland” and descriptions of the negative consequences of a possible political rapprochement with the West:

*“The union of Belarus(sia) with Poland has always been reactionary, anti-national, since it set as its goal the denationalization of the Belarusian people; that is, its liquidation. The union of Belarus(sia) and Russia has always been progressive and national, contributing to the preservation of the mental characteristics of the Belarusian people and preserving the conditions for national revival and state building. That is why any concepts of “Belarus’s entry into Europe” or “the European Union” will lead to Belarus’s loss of state independence and to the denationalization of the Belarusian people; that is, to its disappearance.”*³²

As part of the contrast of relations with Russia and Poland, the latter is often depicted as an immoral state through historical references to the cooperation of interwar Poland with Nazi Germany. Another frequent message of the posts on these propaganda pages is the objection to the oppressed life of Belarusians in interwar Poland and the supposedly free and prosperous life of the inhabitants of the BSSR in the 1930s (in reality, the period of famine and mass repressions).³³

³² “Our country – Belarus,” April 17, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-24982282_61436

³³ Read more about the Soviet famine of 1932–33 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_famine_of_1932%E2%80%9333 and about Soviet repressions in Belarus at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_repressions_in_Belarus

The propaganda narrative about any somewhat pro-Western political and social forces as traitors, vassals, and puppets of the West (see section 5 of the study for more details) naturally stems from mythologems about the “triune Russian people” and Belarus as part of the so-called Russian world.

3.2 Discrediting Belarusian language and literature

Toxic pages on VKontakte discredit the Belarusian language through posts about its uselessness, denial of its existence as such, presenting it as a “simplified” version of the Russian language, direct insults, and other absurd statements:

- *“The question that has tormented all Belarusians for 100 years is why do they need this foreign, m@ranic language???”*³⁴
- *“You yourself probably noticed from school that the Belarusian language is a simplified version of a language, even ‘lazy.’ You do not need to be bothered about how it’s written – with a -t’sya or -tsya [ending] – or if it’s spelled with an O or A; just pick A because it will work 99 percent of the time, etc. So it is with the word ‘to overcome,’ which in the local latitudes has been simplified to ‘zmagatstva’ [behave like a zmagar].”*³⁵
- *“Feeling useless? Remember that there are subtitles in Belarusian.”*³⁶
- *“Based on the results of the petition, the Ministry of Education of Belarus decided to exclude Belarusian language from the compulsory school curriculum due to gay propaganda.”*³⁷
- *“But it is not profitable for small and medium business and the speculative class to use the Belarusian dialect.”*³⁸
- *“In general, the phrase ‘native language’ in relation to our people is absurd. It is not ‘native’ even for the small percent of citizens who speak it.”*³⁹

At the same time, propaganda narratives about the alleged forced Belarusianization and de-Russification in Belarus are promoted, as well as about Belarusian language as an indicator of Russophobia:

- *“De-russification in Belarus(sia) continues”*⁴⁰
- *“Since 2015, a large-scale ‘soft Belarusization’ has been systematically deployed in the country, in the implementation of which the country’s top officials and moderate nationalists are closely cooperating.”*⁴¹
- *“Native Russian language confirms that we, Belarusians and Russians, are one ethnic group and that we are united in our history, culture, and civilization. Unfortunately, we see that today the Belarusian language is often used as an instrument of Russophobic*

³⁴ “Zmagar,” March 23, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_706551

³⁵ “Zmagar,” June 9, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_728244

³⁶ “Zmagar,” May 25, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_723337

³⁷ “Zmagar,” March 29, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_708120

³⁸ “#STOP.ZMAGAR.BREST!!!,” February 28, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-166557423_9987

³⁹ “WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS!,” June 28, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-46503890_178509

⁴⁰ “Reasonable Vitebsk,” March 5, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-119045058_87626

⁴¹ “Politring,” January 29, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-111669793_33584

and anti-national policy. The language used by today's local pro-Polish nationalists, which is, in fact, pseudo-Belarusian, has nothing to do with the living melodious language of the Belarusian hinterland, the national Belarusian language.”⁴²

3.3. Discrediting Belarusian statehood and history

Toxic pages ridicule modern Belarusian statehood and call into question the advisability of maintaining sovereignty:

- “On September 19, 1991, at an extraordinary session of the Supreme Soviet, it was decided voluntarily to call the BSSR ‘the Republic of Belarus.’ On the same day, the laws ‘On the State Flag of the Republic of Belarus’ and ‘On the State Seal of the Republic of Belarus’ were adopted. Seeing the new symbols, many veterans of the Great Patriotic War, not without reason, thought that the Belarusian lands were once again occupied.”⁴³
- “The collapse of the USSR was organized and carried out with gross violations, which makes it legally worthless. Any elementary legal expertise would confirm this.”⁴⁴
- “During the days at the National ball for graduates, the Belarusian president said that sovereignty is not an abstract concept, but something that allows us to remain Belarusians. What does this statement mean? Why can we not remain Belarusians as a part of Russia, for example, like the Chechens or Tatars?”⁴⁵
- “What questions can there be now that Belarus(sia) is Russia? The capital of our Motherland is Moscow! Luka(shenko) himself said it!”⁴⁶

One of the posts plays up the Belarusian origin of the Russian senator Franz Klintsevich, calling him a worthy candidate for the post of “governor of the North-Western region.”

Source: “Zmagar,” February 13, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_698160

⁴² “Reasonable Vitebsk,” February 21, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-119045058_87351

⁴³ “Vitebsk PRO,” June 27, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86305244_273245

⁴⁴ “WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS!,” February 16, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-46503890_171674

⁴⁵ “Politring,” June 29, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-111669793_37173

⁴⁶ “Zmagar,” June 26, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_732080

Moreover, toxic pages consistently discredit the historical forms of the Belarusian (proto) statehood the form of the BNR, and also deny the presence of Belarusian heritage in the Rzeczpospolita and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania:

- “And we remind you that the BSSR became part of the USSR in the form of 6 powiats of the Minsk province.”⁴⁷
- “You can call the not-quite-Founding Fathers of the fake BNR just about anything: thieves, separatists, political prostitutes or German ass-kissers. But you cannot call them illiterate mankurts [trans. note – a reference to unthinking Central Asian slaves]. Here you will come up empty handed. After all, the people were educated, in contrast to the present-day descendants of the tail-twirling pigs.”⁴⁸
- “In more detail, how the BNR terrorists together with the White Poles conducted mass murders on the territory of the SSRB [Socialist Soviet Republic of Belarus].”⁴⁹
- “He speaks the truth! Sergei Lapikov: ‘The propaganda of Belarusianism has spawned idiots. What kind of nonsense is this about statehood since the time of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This alone is enough to draw some conclusions. The first mention of the statehood of our people is the BSSR. That’s it. There is no other mention of the Belarusian national state in history.’”⁵⁰

Discrediting the BNR is accompanied by defamation of Belarusian historical symbols, in particular the white-red-white flag which is usually presented as pro-Nazi and shameful.



Змагар
10 May at 2:09 pm

[Headline] “Today we celebrate the Day of the Government Seal and Flag in Belarus.”

Сегодня в Беларуси отмечается день Государственного герба и флага.

<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">БРО</p> 	<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold;">НЕ БРО</p> 
<p>Государственный флаг Республики Беларусь. Именно под этим флагом окончательно сформировалась современная белорусская государственность. Под этим флагом были добыты многочисленные победы в различных видах спорта, благодаря которым Беларусь стала узнаваема в мире. Национальный орнамент, впервые используемый именно на белорусском штандарте, придает ему особый колорит и узнаваемость среди остальных флагов мира. Это однозначно твой БРО!</p>	<p>Унылое говно, в простонародье именуемое «использованной прокладкой» или «сало-мясо-сало». Был придуман социалистом Дуж-Душевским лишь в 1917 году, однако преподносится сегодня некоторыми поциентами как якобы “исконный” и “национальный” флаг белорусов. Именно под этим флагом, будучи под немецкой залуной оккупацией, коллаборационисты дважды неудачно пытались построить свою государственность. С этим флагом ассоциируются провалы и нищета начала 1990-х. Это флаг лузеров и НЕ твой БРО!</p>

Source: “Zmagar,” May 10, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_719740

⁴⁷ “Zmagar,” June 21, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_730468

⁴⁸ “Zmagar,” April 19, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_713527

⁴⁹ “History of Belarus,” February 3, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86951725_13429

⁵⁰ “Vitebsk PRO,” February 9, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86305244_262982

Toxic pages distort the history of Belarus, discredit Belarusian national heroes, and offer absurd interpretations of historical events to please Russian historical myths:

- *“The Russian government, army, society, and the Orthodox population of Lithuania and Belarus perceived the uprising as an attempt on the life of Polish separatists on the indigenous ‘ancient Russian’ lands and ‘the ancient heritage of Russia.’ Therefore, for the Russian side, the goals of the outbreak of the armed struggle were seen not in the return of a foreign, Polish land, but in the morally justified defense of Russian land and the co-faith and consanguineous Western Russian people who lived there.”*⁵¹
- *“Thanks to Lenin, Belarus emerged. But opponents and nationalists are trying in every possible way to get rid of the monuments to Lenin, glorifying the PRO-Polish hero Wincenty Kalinowski.”*⁵²

In general, toxic public pages declare the history of Belarus either all-Russian / connected with Russia or present it as foreign and shameful.

3.4 Historical revisionism and the advancement of Stalinism

Many of the monitored toxic pages are engaged in historical revisionism, refuting the fact of Stalinist repressions and mass shootings at Kurapaty. Several pages, especially “Vitebsk PRO,” “History of Belarus,” and “Our country – Belarus,” are promoting Stalinism.

- *“Come on, syadomye, tell me about how Joseph the Bloody [Stalin] wiped out the Belarusian elite at Kurapaty to destroy everything Belarusian”*⁵³
- *“And now look at the German aerial photography of 1941 of those same impenetrable dense forests. So isolated that the local villagers tramped around the paths and hit the roads. This is probably from fear when they heard bursts of German machine guns from which the NKVD shot 250,000 people day and night.”*⁵⁴
- *“Kurapaty: Koshman finishes it. Everything born dies over time, as it should. However, contrary to all laws of thought, for more than 30 years the fog of the chimera has been hanging, woven from deception, substituting one truth for another on the hill near the pre-war brigade of the Zeleny Lug state farm. [...] This is how Pozniak laid out his terrible lie in June 1988 in the Belarusian “language,” distorted through Tarashkevich [trans. note – Belarusian classical orthography], in the newspaper ‘Literatura I Mastatstva.’”*⁵⁵

⁵¹ “Western Rus” site page, February 26, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-28484527_5053

⁵² “Vitebsk PRO,” January 4, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86305244_259966

⁵³ “WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS!,” June 20, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-46503890_177727

⁵⁴ “Zmagar,” April 27, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_715208

⁵⁵ “IMHOclub Belarus,” April 24, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-104416296_1851

"If Stalin was a bloody dictator and didn't think of the people, then explain to me his motives? [...]"



Витебск PRO
1 Mar at 10:00 am

Если Сталин был кровавый диктатор и не думал о народе, то объясните мне его мотивы?
Все современники, в том числе враги, подтверждают, что человек он был гениальный. Счетов нет, дворцов не построил, детей отправил воевать и власть по наследству не передал.
Какая-то нестыковочка!



Source: "Vitebsk PRO," March 1, 2020,
https://vk.com/wall-86305244_264260

"They consciously pull us off track, saying that in supporting Stalin you support repression. No, guys, in supporting Stalin we are talking about those serving punishment by logging forests, while peasant children became scientists and marshals. And giving all this to the people kept for themselves a pair of worn-out boots."



Витебск PRO
7 Jan at 10:00 am

Нас сознательно уведят в сторону, говоря, что поддерживая Сталина, вы поддерживаете репрессии. Нет, ребята, поддерживая Сталина, мы говорим о том, что ворье валило лес, а крестьянские дети становились учеными и маршалами. И дав все это народу, оставил себе пару стоптанных сапог!



Source: "Vitebsk PRO," January 7, 2020,
https://vk.com/wall-86305244_260096

4. Anti-Ukrainian propaganda: Basic messages

The main messages of anti-Ukrainian propaganda in the VKontakte public pages reviewed are as follows:

- Ukrainians are part of the Russian people. Without an alliance with Russia, the country has no prospects for statehood and successful socio-economic development is impossible.
- Ukraine is at the mercy of Western puppets and the fascist junta that unleashed a civil war after the 2014 coup.
- The Crimean referendum on accession to Russia is legal and legitimate.
- The Ukrainian authorities, at the behest of the West or on their own, show unjustified aggression towards the residents of Donbass, the Russian-speaking population, Belarus, and Russia.

Statements about Ukrainians belonging to the Russian people sometimes take radical forms:

"When a Ukrainian ceases to be Russian, he becomes spare parts for the Chinese." ⁵⁶

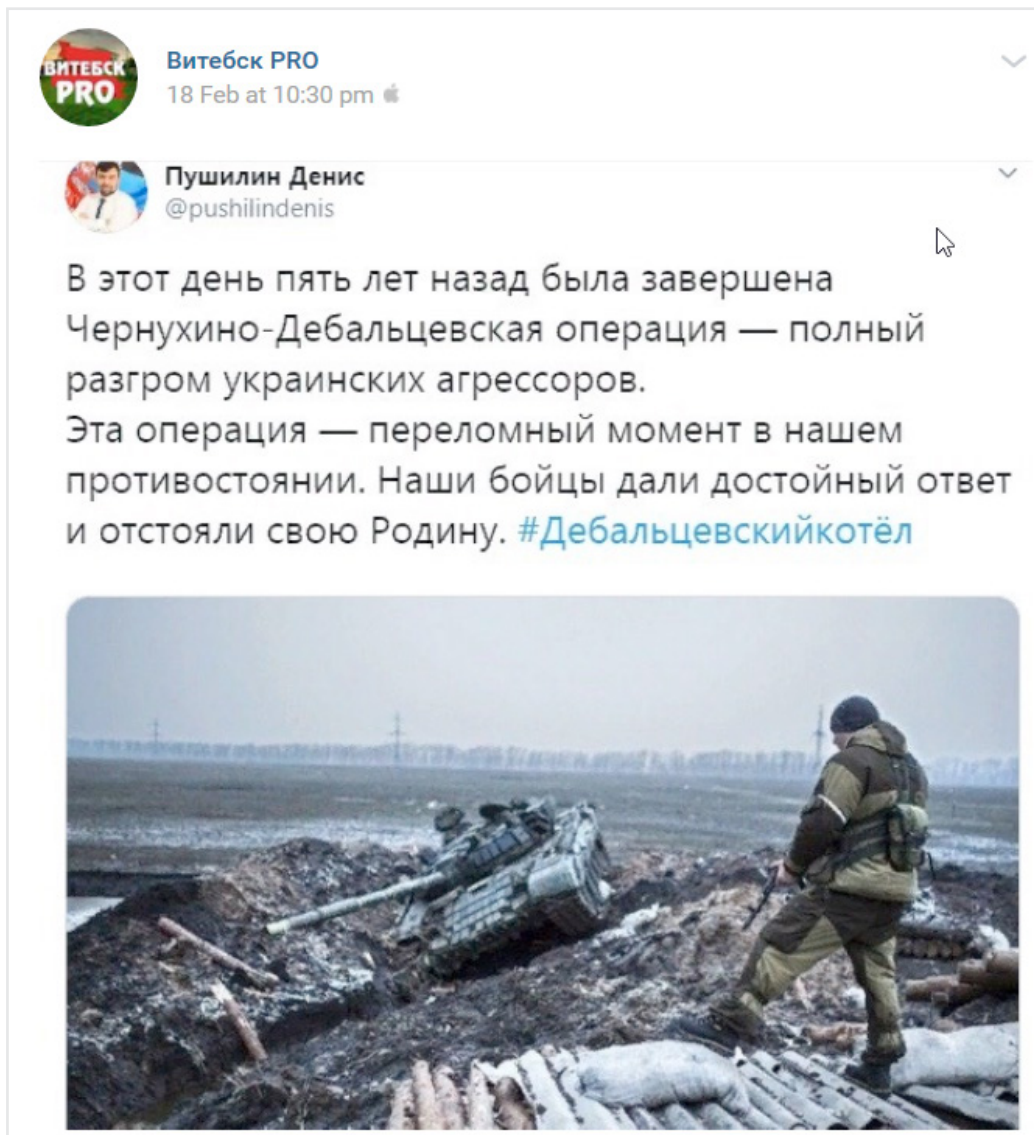


Source: "Zmagar," March 13, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_704688

⁵⁶ "Zmagar," April 26, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-57476755_714958

One of the posts on the public page “History of Belarus” puts forth arguments as to “why there is a civil war in Donbass, and not a war between Ukraine and Russia,” including the assertion that there is “no evidence at all of the Russian regular army’s full-scale participation. If this were even remotely true, then inevitably there would have been many captured Russian soldiers, but this was not observed.” ⁵⁷

Another public page denies Russian aggression against Ukraine on account of the existence of trade turnover between the two countries, arguing that “countries at war do not trade with each other.” Another toxic public page glorifies the “complete defeat of the Ukrainian aggressors” through a repost by the head of the unrecognized DPR, Denis Pushilin.



Source: “Vitebsk PRO,” February 18, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86305244_263521

The same public page credits Ukraine with the Malaysian Boeing being shot down over Donbass.

⁵⁷ “History of Belarus,” June 28, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86951725_13931



Source: “Vitebsk PRO,” January 8, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86305244_260220

Most of the posts about the fate of Crimea were related to the anniversary of the referendum on Crimea, but sometimes the topic was raised without reference to this event:

- “And in voting in the referendum on joining Russia, the Crimeans understood perfectly what fate was in store for them if they remained in ‘free’ Ukraine, no matter how tragic nor how much blood it would cost them to resist the current Kyiv Bandera regime.” ⁵⁸
- “I am sure the time will come when there will be an official recognition of Crimea’s status without unnecessary antics. In any case, Belarusian business has made its choice.” ⁵⁹
- “In accordance with international law, a referendum on the status of Crimea was held six years ago.” ⁶⁰

The number of anti-Ukrainian propaganda statements in the VKontakte pages studied ranged from 40 to 86 per month (see Figure 2); that is, it was relatively stable throughout the monitoring period.

⁵⁸ “Reasonable Vitebsk,” February 20, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-119045058_87327

⁵⁹ “WE ARE PATRIOTS OF WHITE RUS!,” March 15, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-46503890_172677

⁶⁰ “Reasonable Vitebsk,” March 16, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-119045058_87927

5. Anti-Western propaganda: Nazism and moral decline

The main messages of the anti-Western propaganda of the VKontakte public pages studied are as follows:

- Aggressive Western plans and actions against Belarus and Russia, including through the controlled political opposition and non-governmental organizations
- Fascist and authoritarian tendencies in Western countries, parallels with Nazi Germany
- Socio-economic and moral decline of Western states and their inevitable collapse

The hostile actions of the West are presented to Belarus and Russia in the messages of toxic public pages separately, to both countries at the same time, or in provoking conflict between Minsk and Moscow:

- *One of the public pages through a repost of a message from Russia Today staff member Konstantin Pridybailo says: “The ‘Velvet Revolution’ in Belarus is proceeding according to the manual. Gene Sharpe – by the book. It would take you half an hour to understand what is happening in Belarus now.”*⁶¹
- *“American experts from the RAND corporation and other ‘thought factories’ are programming the conflict between Russia and Belarus.”*⁶²
- *“The ‘anaconda’ is crawling to the borders of Belarus and Russia.”*⁶³
- *“An unprecedentedly warm winter became the subject of discussion in the Russian parliament. They could not find an explanation for this anomaly. Then they remembered the climate weapons that the United States has had since the Vietnam War of 1964-1975.”*⁶⁴

As part of discrediting the West, toxic public pages often use the theme of collaboration and the events of World War II, report on supposedly fascist / Nazi trends in modern Western countries, and promote absurd parallels between them and the Third Reich:

- *“Twice as many Poles fought for Hitler than against him.”*⁶⁵
- *“The tradition of glorification of Nazi war criminals is strengthening every year in Estonia. Despite the condemnation of Nazism in Europe and by Estonian authorities at the official level, Tallinn’s actions in practice differ significantly from their political declarations.”*⁶⁶
- *“The head of the Latvian Ministry of Justice, Janis Bordans, recalled the battle at the Stompaku Bog and the valiant ‘national partisans.’ The Russian Embassy in Latvia explained why these ‘heroes’ preferred to sit in the woods.”*⁶⁷

⁶¹ “Honest News and Politics of Belarus,” June 20, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-80794238_29501

⁶² “IMHOclub Belarus,” May 25, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-104416296_1949

⁶³ “Our Gomel – city and regional news,” June 30, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-76435616_25375

⁶⁴ “Our Gomel – city and regional news,” January 15, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-76435616_22615

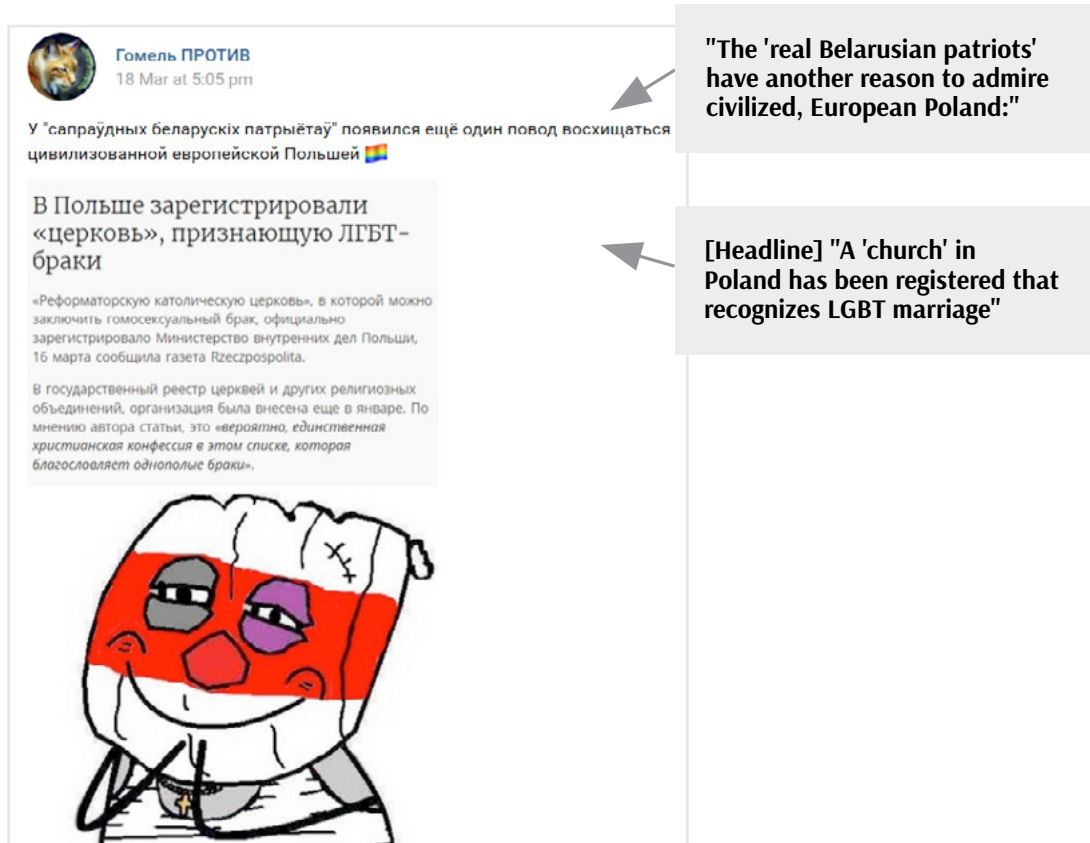
⁶⁵ “Vitebsk PRO,” June 29, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86305244_273313

⁶⁶ “Vitebsk PRO,” February 7, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86305244_262806

⁶⁷ “Vitebsk PRO,” May 23, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-86305244_269509

Another frequently used propaganda narrative is about the moral decline of the West and the crisis of values. It is often accompanied by an absurd interpretation of news regarding the LGBT movement:

*"The West is moving to a new level in the development of 'tolerance' and issues of 'gender.' They say that normal heterosexual relationships (this is when a girl and a boy are paired) is NOT the norm and 'it's time to think about a ban on them.' We look forward to an accompanying petition from our svyadomye."*⁶⁸



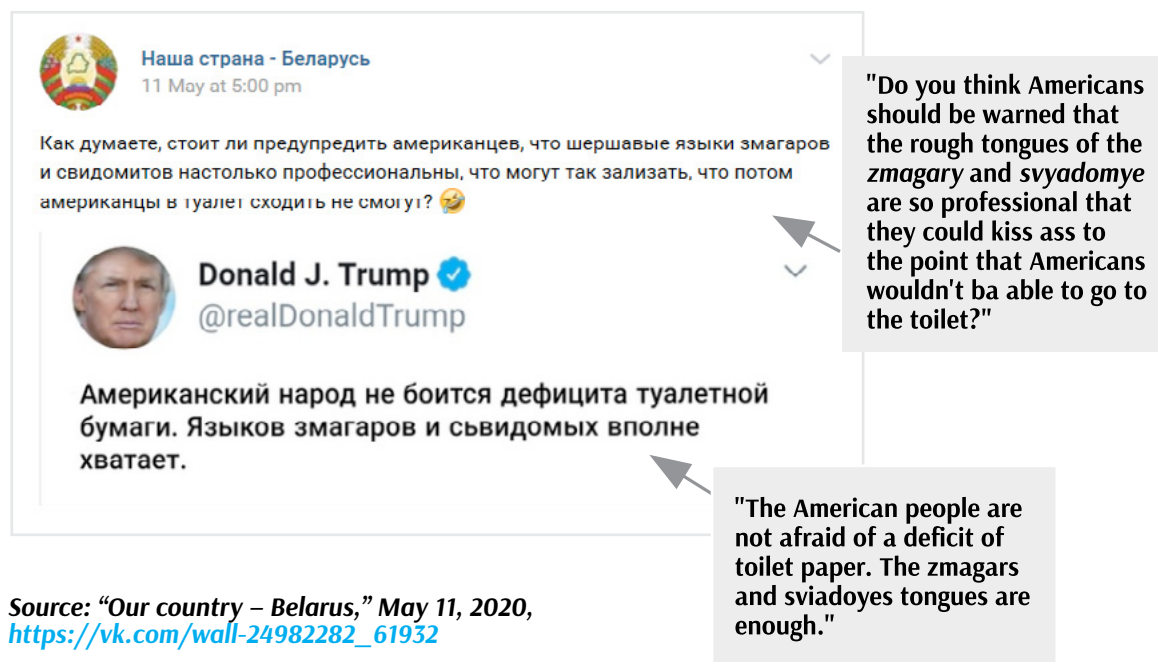
Source: "Gomel is AGAINST," March 18, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-147551565_37496

The propaganda narrative about the socio-economic and moral decline of Western states found on toxic public pages on VKontakte are often accompanied by a message about the puppet status of the Belarusian opposition, activists, and the entire group of "zmagars" (see section 2 of the study for more details) in relation to Western countries:

*"And the answer is very simple – "slavish thinking," which for 25 years has been cultivated by the Belarusian opposition, groveling in front of Poles, Lithuanians, Europeans, and Americans. And if the opposition considers the people to be cattle, then the opposition itself can safely be called "slaves."*⁶⁹

⁶⁸ "#STOPZMAGAR.BREST!!!", March 1, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-166557423_10687

⁶⁹ "#STOPZMAGAR.BREST!!!", February 24, 2020, <https://vk.com/@stopzmagarbrest-nacionalnaya-rozn>



The number of anti-Western propaganda statements in the VKontakte pages studied was quite stable, varying from 115 to 171 per month (see Figure 2).

CONCLUSION

Systematic monitoring of the largest toxic public pages on VKontakte made it possible to better study the specifics of their propaganda activities. The content of twelve active public pages with exclusive content has been treated to a deeper study and classification based on the topics of posts published in the first half of 2020.

It turned out that during this period these pages published about 3,800 thousand posts that promoted the Russian World, contained propaganda regarding Belarus, Ukraine, and Western countries and/or were posts containing criticism, sometimes using hate speech, against individuals and groups of citizens. Anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western messages are regularly present in the content of the pages studied to a significant degree, which allows for consistent discrediting of all states neighboring Belarus except Russia.

The anti-Belarusian content of the VKontakte pages studied was expressed in discrediting the Belarusian statehood, history, language, and culture and refuting Stalin's repressions, in particular the mass shootings in Kurapaty. Almost 2,000 posts contained various forms of discrediting various Belarusian activists and initiatives, journalists, human rights defenders, and other citizens.

By attributing to them various negative qualities, plans, and actions and by generalizing them through categorizing them arbitrarily broadly as "zmagars," both democratic values and any manifestations of Belarusianness are discredited. Many posts contain hate speech against individuals and groups of the population based on professional, ethnic, and political grounds. Hate speech is expressed, inter alia, in the form of insults, obscene language, and calls to violence.

The anti-Ukrainian content of the pages studied is expressed in support of the D(L)NR separatists, through statements about Ukraine as a Western puppet, a failed oligarchic state, the dominance of fascists in the country, etc. Anti-Western statements most often relate to allegedly aggressive plans and actions against Belarus and Russia, fascist tendencies, moral decline, and the inevitable collapse of Western countries.