

FROM “FORTRESS” RHETORIC TO THE RHETORIC OF “WAR”

**Changes in the main pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives in Belarus
before and after the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine**

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From “fortress” rhetoric to the rhetoric of “war”. Changes in the main pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives in Belarus before and after the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine

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Introduction

This study aims to trace the changes that have arisen in pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus due to the preparation, launch, and conducting of Russia's large-scale armed invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022. We set out to determine whether, against the backdrop of preparations for war and during the aggression itself, there had been a change or disappearance of pre-existing story and semantic lines (narratives) of propaganda and whether new narratives have appeared. Through the study, we analyzed statements in Belarusian and Russian propaganda media aimed at Belarusian audiences during the first three quarters of 2022, and these data were compared with the results of the previous period of our observation – after the start of mass protests in Belarus and until the moment of direct preparations for the aggression against Ukraine (August 2020 – December 2021).

As the start of the attack on Ukraine neared, the Kremlin's rhetoric became more and more aggressive. Beginning in 2014 – that is, from the time of the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the armed conflict in Donbass – the main resources of propaganda have been directed towards the task of ideological mobilization of Russian society in the face of “external threats.” This rhetoric of hatred reached its apogee in November-December 2021, when the Kremlin's plans to escalate the military confrontation finally became clear.

The efforts of propaganda media in Russia at that time were aimed at justifying aggression, maintaining a “hysterical” level of public unity, and promoting the Kremlin's ultimatums and clearly impossible demands on Europe and the world.

At the same time, starting from September 2020, after the “landing” of the “RT squad” in Minsk, Belarusian media almost totally became synchronized with Russian propaganda and followed in the wake of the main Kremlin lines. Nevertheless, local, Belarusian stories – foremost, the fight against “internal enemies” – independent opposition, the media, and participants in mass protests – dominated the Belarusian media space. With the preparing for and beginning of the war the situation changed.

According to iSANS research¹, at the end of 2020, after the synchronization of the Belarusian media with Russian propaganda, the global narratives (meta-narratives) of pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus included the following:

- **Narratives about Belarus**, consisting of claims that Belarus is part of the “Russian world” and Belarusians are part of the Russian people; the successful future of Belarus is possible only in alliance with Russia or as part of it; the history of Belarus is connected with Russian history or is alien and disgraceful; Belarusian statehood, language, and culture are inferior;

¹ See Yeliseu A. Pro-Kremlin Propaganda in Belarus: Classification of Narratives. iSANS, November 2020 <https://isans.org/analysis/reports/prokremlevskaya-propaganda-v-belarusi-klassifikacziya-narrativov.html>.

Belarusian historical symbols are pro-Nazi and shameful; and the Belarusian opposition and activists are puppets of the West, nationalists, and terrorists.

- **Narratives about Ukraine** that exploited the primary “anti-Maidan” attitudes that maintain Ukraine is under external control and at the mercy of Western puppets; that it is run by a “Nazi junta” that came to power as a result of a coup; Ukraine does not have legitimacy and that it is an artificially created or “fake state”; without an alliance with Russia, Ukraine is doomed to collapse and has no prospects for statehood; Russia has nothing to do with the conflict in the Donbas; the annexation of Crimea was justified and legitimate; there is a “civil war” in Ukraine; Ukraine is forming aggressive plans against Belarus; Ukraine shot down the Malaysian Boeing, etc.

- **Narratives about Poland and the Baltic countries** promoting messages about imperialism and Poland’s expansionist plans, Russophobia and Poland and the Baltic states’ anti-Russian plans, socio-economic deterioration, totalitarianism, and neo-Nazism in Poland and the Baltic countries, and that these countries are puppets of Brussels, NATO, and the U.S.

- **Anti-Western narratives** based on the myth that in Western countries there is Russophobia and fascist tendencies; the “collective West” seeking to weaken, divide, or destroy Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine; the financing of “color revolution,” opposition and protests in Belarus; the West undermining the Belarusian-Russian alliance and attacking Russia through Belarus; that there is a socio-economic crisis and moral decline in the West; that the EU and EU countries are vassals of the U.S. and NATO; and that the West is split, which will lead to its inevitable collapse.

With the onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine, these meta-narratives generally survived, but underwent a serious transformation: for example, Belarusian stories were pushed out to the periphery of the media agenda by pro-Russian stories. The propaganda emphasis on opposition leaders and mass protests lost its “edge.” From that point moving forward, the locus of hatred has been firmly rooted in Ukraine and the West.

The old storylines were replaced by new ones, the appearance of which became possible after the start of the war. Among them, foremost, has been the justification of Russian aggression and Belarus’s complicity in it and the justification of the need for a “military alliance” with Russia, for which Belarus is a “reliable shield” of its western borders. Also prominent have been the discrediting of Ukraine, threats against it in response to “attempts by Ukraine and Poland” to strike at Belarus and Russia, allegations that the West, not Russia, is to blame for starting the war, the energy crisis in Europe, the suppression of Russian war crimes, the downplaying of successes of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, etc.

Propaganda and its “re-broadcasters” in Belarus

For the purposes of this study, the term “propaganda” refers to a state (political party, business, etc.) information policy aimed not at objective and impartial informing of society, presenting a choice among different points of view, but at shaping the views, ideas, and conclusions of an audience in a way that the authorities (or another organizer or client of propaganda) need at a certain moment. In other words, to create and maintain a false reality in society for the benefit of the political regime (political party, business, etc.).

Externally, propaganda, with a certain effort, can be easily distinguished from the activities of ordinary media with the “naked eye” through its one-sided presentation of information, a selective approach in the use of facts, allegations based on dubious or fictitious “facts” in the absence of clear arguments and evidence, a fixation on the problems of other countries and societies, external threats, enemies, opponents of the authorities and the state, and not on the complex issues of life and problems of their country (economic, social, etc.). Propaganda, as a rule, is characterized by an aggressive and even hysterical style of discussion and expression of opinions, an abundance of insults found in the speeches of propagandists, along with calls for violence, threats, and a penchant for conspiracy theories. Propaganda always calls on disinformation for assistance and employs fake news.

The main sources of pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives in Belarus are Russian and Belarusian officials, primarily the “president” Alexander Lukashenka² himself, as well as a wide range of civil servants and the military, who disseminate narratives in a light that is beneficial to the authorities. Regular “journalists” of propaganda media only relay to the public the primary course set by Lukashenka.

“Re-broadcasters” of pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus are represented by an extensive network of Russian and Belarusian state and pro-state media, consisting of traditional media (television, radio, print and online media) as well as “new” internet media, including YouTube and Telegram channels, and personal channels and accounts of propagandists and officials in social networks.

“Re-broadcasters” of propaganda in Belarus can be divided into two categories:

1. Russian media, propagandists, and media managers

This includes the main Russian national media holdings whose channels and publications are broadcast in Belarus, as well as a complex and extensive network of various online media, including imperialistic conspiracy sites, Telegram channels, Twitter accounts of the main figures of Russian propaganda and officials, and pages on social networks.

² The word “president” is put in quotation marks for a reason. iSANS stands in solidarity with the international community in maintaining that Lukashenka seized power in a rigged election, is holding power illegally, and is a usurper. Lukashenka is not recognized as president by any democratic state.

The first of these includes large state-owned media (for example, Channel One, VGTRK with television channels Rossiya-1, Rossiya-24, etc.) as well as national holdings formally separated from the state and established as NGOs or private companies but funded from the state budget, such as RT (formerly Russia Today), NTV, REN-TV, National Media Group, News Media, Komsomolskaya Pravda holding, etc.

The second group includes the numerous sites and channels of the “troll factory” and “media factory” of the businessman, media manager, and creator and sponsor of the Wagner PMC Yevgeny Prigozhin, who is called “Putin’s cook” – the Patriot media group, Agency for Internet Research, RIA FAN (“Federal News Agency”); other numerous “patriotic” and Z-oriented resources, the pro-imperial agencies Eurasia Daily, Regnum and Rex, Telegram channels of Russian “military correspondents,” etc. The “nuclear” audience of all these channels is the most conservative and reactionary part of society: security forces, veterans, representatives of Cossack associations, as well as millions of military-industrial complex workers and state employees.³

In general, this whole “stew” of semi-official state channels and private pro-government resources of unclear origin and funding is not specifically targeted at Belarusian audience and covers a wide range of topics where news from Belarus is assigned a certain place in the context of stories that affect the interests of Russia. But there are also publications among them that focus on Belarus and the surrounding regions – Poland and the Baltic countries – such as Sputnik Belarus and ruBaltic.ru.⁴

2. Belarusian media and propagandists

The Belarusian propaganda media landscape is represented by state-owned media – STV television channels, ONT, the Television News Agency (ATN), the BelTA news agency, the newspapers Minskaya Pravda and Belarus Segodnya, etc. – and pro-Russian, pro-imperial online resources like IMHO Club, Teleskop, Politnavigator, personal Telegram channels and the YouTube channels of “expert” propagandists, as well as Telegram channels associated with the special services or law enforcement agencies (for example, Yellow Leaks).

³ See also: The Kremlin’s propaganda machine: A directory of the top 100 media managers, public figures, experts, and ideologues. iSANS, August 2022.

⁴ The broadcasting of several Russian and Belarusian television channels along with their websites, YouTube channels, and pages on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are blocked in the EU, UK, U.S., and other countries. In addition, the social networks themselves and YouTube video hosting remove or block the personal channels of some of the most well-known propagandists (e.g., Grigory Azarenok). This complicates somewhat the work of researchers in looking for and identifying propaganda narratives.

Narratives about Belarus

As mentioned above, the main storylines from pro-Kremlin propaganda regarding the internal issues in Belarus have not disappeared, however the subject of the opposition which was relevant in 2020-2021 and in the first half of 2022 moved to the periphery.

Union with Russia

In recent months, the motif of the “union state” of Russia and Belarus has clearly been emerging. Propaganda sources are increasingly promoting an idea stating that **Belarus’s successful future depends on its alliance with Russia or as part of it**. This is obviously due to Belarus’s growing international isolation, the introduction of new sanctions, the severing of the last economic ties with Europe and, as a result, a growing political and economic dependence on Russia since the start of the war. Propaganda media maintain that only an alliance with Russia will ensure the state and political independence of the Belarusian people, thereby protecting them from “Polishization”⁵ and assimilation by the West.

The idea of “integration” has become a universal response to any challenge: “I hear all the time about being absorbed tomorrow, incorporation tomorrow... 30 years have passed. Not incorporated, not absorbed, and they haven’t taken anything away. And frankly, **we get from Russia everything that a sovereign independent state needs.**”⁶

“Slavic brotherhood”

Another widespread and earlier concept that received a powerful push after the start of the war is of **Belarus is part of the “Russian world” and that Belarusians are one with the Russian people.**⁷ Statements by propagandists emphasize the unbreakable connection between the three Slavic peoples – Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians – with Belarus even declared the center of Slavic culture.⁸ The image of “Slavic brotherhood,” split and destroyed by the West, is popular in war propaganda. It was used more than once by

⁵ A term used by the Belarusian “political scientist” Alexander Shpakovsky (September 8, 2022) https://imhoclub.by/ru/material/batkini_uroki_politgramota_ot_lukashenko_glazami_eksperta

⁶ Alexander Lukashenka (30.06.2022) <https://soyuz.by/politika/lukashenko-provel-vstrechu-s-glavoy-mid-xf>

⁷ “The whole history of Belarusians is the path of struggle for their Russianness. The future for Belarus holds two options – to become a bathroom in the Western cordon sanitaire on the borders with Russia or to remain a free independent country based on allied relations with Russia... Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians, whose ancestors were Eastern Slavs, are part of one large Russian people or, if you prefer, three extremely close peoples of Russian origin and ancient Russian origin.” <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3045294.html> (link does not open in the EU and the Russian news agency Regnum ceased working in October 2022). Indirect link: <https://isans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/propaganda-in-belarus-review.pdf>.

⁸ We are from historical Rus’, from a single East Slavic baptismal font. We are the heart of Slavic Europe. The Old Slavic language, the Slavic base, is from Belarus.” (Igor Marzalyuk, from an open lecture titled “Historical memory – the road to the future!,” January 9, 2022 <https://soyuz.by/obshchestvo/otkrytyy-urok-istoricheskaya-pamyat-doroga-v-budushchee>).

Lukashenka in his speeches, lamenting that “we allowed the West to push us against each other.”⁹ But the foundation for this myth was laid even earlier, apparently in Vladimir Putin’s article “On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” published on the Kremlin’s website and widely discussed by analysts in the summer of 2021 as an ideological basis for preparing for the start of large-scale aggression.¹⁰

The image of the “Slavic brotherhood” of the three peoples “works” for another important propaganda narrative wherein **the West, not Russia, is to blame for the war**. It was they who pushed the “fraternal peoples” against each other, and it was they who were preparing an attack and sabotage runs against Russia and is now making plans to seize the western lands of Belarus. Putin is “returning” a “Ukraine deceived by the West” to the historical bosom of Slavic unity. In this way, the myth of “Slavic brotherhood” that fell victim to an insidious conspiracy is harmoniously integrated into the justification of the so-called “preemptive strike” launched by Putin in Ukraine on the hostile West and its “Nazi puppets.”

The logical extension of this myth is that **sooner or later the West will inevitably abandon the “deceived” and “used” Ukraine**, whom, according to propagandists, “the West does not need either as a member of NATO or as a member of the European Union” (Vladimir Makei).¹¹ “The West... has delivered the final verdict on Ukraine and Ukrainians, who to them are nothing more than biomass.”¹² There is only one way out, with the family of fraternal peoples picking up and accepting Ukraine with open arms.

Paradoxically, the story about the “brotherhood” of the Slavic peoples is developed in parallel with the **campaign to discredit, dehumanize, and ridicule Ukraine and Ukrainians**. Ukrainians are excluded from the recently glorified “Slavic brotherhood” by other propagandists, for example, because they “cancel” Russian culture: “We, the citizens of Belarus and Russia, as bearers of the Slavic code of the nation, must not allow the demolition of monuments [in Ukraine – ed.]... We will never allow anyone to mock the Belarusian and Russian people...”¹³ (More on this in the section “Narratives on Ukraine.”)

⁹ “As it has been more than once in our history, so-called Western partners have pitted three fraternal peoples against one another: Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians. What are we? Why did we let them push us?” A. Lukashenka. Open lecture titled “Historical memory – the road to the future!”, September 1, 2022 https://t.me/pul_1/6577).

¹⁰ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

¹¹ <https://ont.by/news/makej-ukraina-ne-nuzhna-zapadu-ni-kak-chlen-nato-ni-kak-chlen-evrosoyuza> (25.09.2022).

¹² “The West has already said that it is ready to ‘fight to the last Ukrainian.’ But this was an initial message. And now the West has already made it clear that it has delivered the final verdict on Ukraine and Ukrainians, who to them are nothing more than biomass.” (“For whom and for what are Ukrainians shedding blood?” Yuri Uvarov May 7, 2022, Minskaya Pravda <https://mlyn.by/07052022/za-kogo-i-za-cho-prolivayut-krov-ukrainczy/>).

¹³ Igor Khlobukin (April 27, 2022) <https://www.belta.by/society/view/tsinizm-i-unizhenie-chuvstv-i-pamjati-slavian-dostigli-predela-deputat-o-snose-pamjatnikov-497851-2022/>.

“Alternative history”

Among Belarusian propaganda narratives, there are, paradoxically, those that are openly “anti-Belarusian.” Essentially, these are aimed at weakening the positions of supporters of Belarus as a national and independent state to again emphasize the need for unification with Russia. One such ongoing narrative is that “the history of independent Belarus is alien and shameful” (and its variant: “only the Soviet period in Belarus’s history is ‘glorious’”). Paradoxical judgments are sometimes expressed, for example, about the holiday of National Unity Day on September 17: “Thanks to the liberation campaign of the Red Army on September 17, 1939¹⁴, Belarus became whole and truly gained statehood. Yes, as part of the USSR, but thanks to this, the whole world now knows us!”¹⁵

From the first lie follows a second one, also not new: **Belarusian historical symbols** (the white-red-white flag, the Pahonia coat of arms, etc.) **are symbols of our enemies and are alien, Nazi, and disgraceful.** Those who use them now (that is, the democratic opposition, participants in mass protests, dissidents, and human rights activists) are **collaborators, terrorists, provocateurs, and Nazis.**

“The blood of every third Belarusian is on these flags... The cries of the people of the Minsk ghetto, the cries and groans of people tortured in concentration camps, and there we have shame, betrayal, and collaborationism on them.” (Alexander Lukashenka, May 8, 2022).¹⁶

On November 10, 2022, when nearing the completion of this study, the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs recognized the traditional patriotic slogan “Long Live Belarus!” as a “Nazi symbol.”¹⁷

The opposition are puppets of the West

This kind of propaganda is carried out by the Lukashenka regime with the sole purpose of undermining support for the democratic opposition in the country. The main propaganda resources have been directed to this task since 2020. At the center of this narrative was and remains Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who won the presidential election, and the democratic forces and activists united around her, declared by propaganda media to be **puppets of the West.**

Propagandists did not pass by our modest organization either: “The rat snout of the white-red-white insanity is more and more clearly protruding from under the veil of ‘democracy,

¹⁴ That is, when the western territories were annexed to the Byelorussian SSR because of the so-called “fourth” partition of Poland between Nazi Germany and the USSR.

¹⁵ Oleg Gaidukevich (September 17, 2022) <https://mlyn.by/17092022/oleg-veshhaet-gajdukevich-o-gordosti-za-proshloe-i-czennosti-dnya-narodnogo-edinstva/>.

¹⁶ <https://ont.by/news/lukashenko-otvetil-na-vopros-pochemu-ne-bchb-flag-i-pogonya>.

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-63587008>.

values, and freedom.” ...iSANS is the most typical subversive spy office working for Western intelligence services.”¹⁸

As preparations for the “big war” began, anti-opposition narratives gradually gave way to much harsher anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and disinformation than before.

Belarus as a reliable shield for Russia

Another “ongoing” narrative that gained strategic importance with the start of the big war is that **Belarus is a reliable defender of Russia’s western borders**, which “covers the western borders so that our Russian brothers are not stabbed in the back” (Olga Shpilevskaya, March 14, 2022)¹⁹ and will not allow anyone to “shoot a Russian in the back” (Alexander Lukashenko, July 3, 2022).²⁰

Since 2014, the official Belarus has declared itself a peaceful and even “neutral” state regarding the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The self-proclaimed “president” managed to play this for a long time, especially in the early years of the armed confrontation in the Donbas, when, under the auspices of the Minsk agreements, the Belarusian capital hosted the leaders of European countries in addition to those of Ukraine and Russia. But he did not have an opportunity to fool Western countries for long, as the bloody suppression of peaceful protests in August-November 2020 showed the true face of Belarusian “peacekeeping.” The West refused to recognize the presidential elections, turned its back on Lukashenko, and imposed massive sanctions against his regime.

Since then, the broken record called “**The West and NATO are pushing Belarus towards war**” has continued to play non-stop. In this regard, some of Lukashenko’s statements need to be quoted in full: “*Putin never asked me to kill anyone in Ukraine and so on. But they, the West, are pushing us into this conflict to take care of both Russia and Belarus*” (June 17, 2022).²¹ “*I have the right to ask and demand from the president of our brotherly Russia to make [Western powers – ed.] afraid to cross the Belarusian border. Which I did.*” (July 2, 2022).²²

Belarusians fighting for Ukraine are terrorists

A new story has appeared that is directly related to the war: Belarusian citizens fighting on the side of Ukraine (the Kalinovsky regiment, the Pahonia regiment, the Terror battalion,

¹⁸ Mukovozchik, A. Fugitives are trying to lower the threshold for accepting a civil war. Why? Belarus Today, July 9, 2022 <https://www.sb.by/articles/krysinyy-oskal.html>.

¹⁹ <https://t.me/modmilby/12352>.

²⁰ <https://cont.ws/@dyadzka/2323130>.

²¹ <https://soyuz.by/politika/lukashenko-dlya-menya-glavnoe-ne-vlezt-po-ushi-v-ukrainskiy-konflikt-a-chtoby-on-bystree-zakonchilsya>.

²² <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3636018.html>.

etc.) are “terrorists.” Propaganda is trying to create an image of them as “mercenaries” whose “sabotage groups” are preparing to “invade Belarus.”²³ Despite the fact that these citizens have in no way caused damage to Belarus itself and in fact act in the interests of not only the Ukrainian, but also the Belarusian people, their actions are recognized as criminal and at odds with official policy. No wonder, because the Lukashenka regime is a military ally of Russia in the war against Ukraine and an accomplice in aggression, providing territory, footholds, military airfields, and other infrastructure to the Russian Armed Forces.

Anti-Ukrainian narratives. Discrediting and dehumanizing Ukraine, the Ukrainian authorities, and Ukrainians

Discrediting, “dehumanizing” Ukrainians, the disgusting ridiculing of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the Ukrainian authorities, and the Ukrainian state itself, heinous and vile fake news – the entire anti-Ukrainian campaign is designed to inspire hatred and contempt for Enemy No. 1 and justify the full-scale Russian aggression and the Lukashenka regime’s complicity.

Most of these narratives have their origins in pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus beginning in 2014, but they began to be used more intensively and in their most radical form as the start of the war approached.

Ukraine is a Nazi / Russophobic / satanic state

When there are no arguments or evidence of the crimes of Ukraine’s “Nazi regime,” it is precisely these most radical “hellish” labels that are hung on them, because this is how tried and tested propaganda principle works: “the most monstrous lie, repeated a thousand times, becomes the purest truth in the minds of the crowd.”

“This state is a beast,” Grigory Azarenok, the most radical Belarusian propagandist, says about Ukraine. “It has sung the praises of the meanest human feelings. It has encouraged murder and cultivated bullying” (March 23, 2022).²⁴ From him again on the following day: “Ukraine is a satanic state. Christ will conquer the devil” (March 24, 2022).²⁵

At the same time, the President of Ukraine is essentially labeled a global leader of evil, a drug addict, a clown, an “inadequate” and, of course, a Nazi. Still, propaganda media does not have any problem with the fact that, at a minimum, Zelensky cannot be a “Nazi” because of his Jewish origin. (See Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov’s anti-

²³ Vadim Gigin, July 7, 2022 <https://www.sb.by/articles/na-grebne-voyny-krisi.html>.

²⁴ <https://youtu.be/YqWvkiR4YW8>

²⁵ <https://youtu.be/9spq2L7zmo4> (the video is not available because the YouTube account associated with it has been deleted)

Semitic arguments regarding Volodymyr Zelensky to the effect that “Hitler also had Jewish blood”).²⁶

“Zelensky is betraying Nenko²⁷ to the Poles in a brazen way. Will Taras Bulba’s heirs really not stop him!? What bottom has not yet been reached by this ‘adequate’ druggie who is ‘caring for’ the well-being of Ukrainians?” (Yellow Leaks, September 4, 2022).²⁸

Azov, Aydar, the territorial defense units and others are Nazis

This is a new wartime narrative created and maintained to justify military action (and war crimes) against “Nazis” and to “denazify” Ukraine (e.g., in now-destroyed Mariupol). It is alleged specifically that there is some kind of “national corps” – civilian wing of Azov – which “for 8 years has purposefully formed Nazi organizations in cities in southeastern Ukraine consisting of young people and teenagers. These structures associated with Azov now form the backbone of Ukraine’s civil defense” (Andrey Lazutkin, April 21, 2022).²⁹

“Ukraine is a puppet and weapon of the West against Belarus and Russia”

Another storyline is that Ukraine is not free and is a dependent country and under external influence. The West manipulates and controls Ukraine and is seeking to weaken/destroy Belarus and Russia through Ukraine.

“If only Joe Biden would say, ‘That’s it, guys, we’ve fought – in Russian terms, we’ve hit each other in the face — let’s stop. Nobody needs war, it’s not helpful,’ everything would stop in a week.” (Alexander Lukashenko, May 5, 2022).³⁰

“The current Ukrainian regime sees only Western countries as guarantors of its present and future, but we understand perfectly what they have done to Ukraine over the past two decades, actively arming it, spreading Russophobia, and pushing Ukraine to war.” (Sergey Zhitikhin, April 9, 2022).³¹

“Ukraine is hatching aggressive plans against Belarus”

Along with the previous propaganda idea, the narrative that Ukraine itself is a threat and is making its own aggressive plans for Belarus coexists perfectly in the minds of

²⁶ <https://www.sibreal.org/a/lavrov-o-zelenskom-u-gitlera-tozhe-byla-evreyskaya-krov-/31830367.html>

²⁷ “Nenko” in Ukrainian stands for both “Mommy” and “Mother Ukraine” and is used to reflect strong emotional attachment to the motherland. In propagandist’s statement, it is used in an ironic, mocking way.

²⁸ https://t.me/zheltye_slivy_premium/3282

²⁹ <https://mlyn.by/21042022/kult-smerti-za-chto-voyuyut-azov-i-vsu>.

³⁰ <https://ukraina.ru/20220505/1033917241.html>

³¹ <http://www.sb.by/articles/glava-soyuza-suvorovtsev-i-kadet-belarus-ne-dolzha-byt-v-storone-ot-peregovornogo-protsesssa-po-ukra.html>

propagandists and the audience they cultivate. For some reason, Ukrainian sabotage groups dream of capturing regional centers in Belarus.

In confirming these treacherous plans, propaganda media outlets occasionally create such absurd headlines as “Belarus has discovered that Ukraine is planning an invasion of Minsk” (Ukraina.ru, May 27, 2022)³² and “KGB of Belarus: Western forces in Ukraine are preparing militants for capturing a national regional center” (Federal News Agency (RIA FAN), October 11, 2022). In this second article put out by Prigozhin’s “media factory” FAN, the head of Belarus’s KGB, Ivan Tertel, says that “Western intelligence services in Ukraine are training about 300 militants with the goal of capturing one of Belarus’s regional capitals.” Why Western intelligence agencies would need to take over a regional town in a sovereign state was not disclosed.³³

Justification of the war against Ukraine and Belarus’s complicity

This is a new propaganda storyline in Belarus that appeared in the gearing up for the aggression against Ukraine and which has intensified significantly during the war.

Starting in October-November 2021, the myths about Ukraine being “captured by Nazis” and the demands for “denazification” and “demilitarization” of Ukraine gradually overtook all other narratives from both Russian and Belarusian propaganda in terms of their intensity. The rhetoric of hatred towards Ukraine reached a particularly high level of hysteria in the first days after the start of Russia’s attack. It openly and clearly traces the calls for an armed invasion of Ukraine, for a coup d’état, a change of power in Kyiv, etc. The main motif here is that Russia launched a “preemptive strike” on Ukraine, thereby stopping aggression by the West (and NATO). Had it not struck first, the West would have hit Russia and Belarus through Ukraine.

“It is obvious now to everyone that if the military special operation in Ukraine had not begun, literally the next day an attack from NATO would have begun through the hands of Banderites and neo-Nazis. The Russian soldiers were just in time, which means they saved hundreds of thousands of lives.” (Lyudmila Gladkaya, March 4, 2022).³⁴

“... And now I will show you from where the attack on Belarus is being prepared. And if a preventive strike had not been launched on these positions six hours before the operation... they would have attacked our troops – Belarusian and Russian – who were conducting exercises. Therefore, it was not us who unleashed this war, our conscience is clear. It's good

³² At the same time, there is not a word about Ukraine’s plans to invade Minsk in the article itself.
<https://ukraina.ru/20220527/1034049044.html>

³³ <https://riafan.ru/23691984-kgb-belorussii-zapadnie-sili-na-ukraine-gotovyat-boevikov-dlya-zahvata-raitsentra-respubliki>.

³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J72UyO-AqVc&t=341s>

that we started.” (Alexander Lukashenka at a meeting with Vladimir Putin in Moscow, March 11, 2022).³⁵

“They accuse Russia and say that Russia is the aggressor, along with us. If the preventive special operation had not started then, Belarus would have been hit first by a missile strike.” (Alexander Lukashenka, September 1, 2022).³⁶

“We are not at war with the Ukrainian people, and Russia is not at war with the Ukrainian people. Russia opposes Nazism and, in its extreme manifestation, fascism... I am sure that, together with Russia and a friendly China, we will not let Nazism raise its head and carry out its terrible deeds.” (Irina Lukanskaya, July 5, 2022).³⁷

However, unlike Russian propaganda, it is difficult or almost impossible to find direct calls for the murder of Ukrainian citizens and violence against civilians in the aggressive narratives of Belarusian media.³⁸

“The Ukrainian army is not combat-ready and the war will not last long”

Before the war and at the very beginning Russian and Belarusian propagandists, “military experts,” officials, and generals tried to convince their audiences of the weakness of the Ukrainian army and that the rapid defeat of Ukraine was inevitable. This, it seems, was their main mistake.

“Ukraine will never fight against us. This war will last a maximum of three or four days! There will be no one to fight against us.” (Alexander Lukashenka in an interview with Vladimir Solovyov, February 5, 2022).³⁹

But the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian people have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to defend their country and – with the all-encompassing military and economic assistance of the entire democratic world – to prevail.

³⁵ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67963>

³⁶ https://t.me/ATN_BTRC/73727.

³⁷ <https://www.belta.by/society/view/deputat-mirnaja-belarus-budet-razvivatsja-dalshe-blagodarja-silnomu-lideru-s-muzhskim-harakterom-511991-2022/>

³⁸ Compare this with the direct calls of Russian propagandists to kill Ukrainians, destroy Ukraine, peaceful cities, infrastructure, etc.: Krasovsky, Simonyan, Mardan, Solovyov, and others, as well as similar statements made by the Russian military and the “DPR” and “LPR” broadcasted by Russian media (see Gubarev et al.). See also Top 100 Kremlin Political Managers: A Directory. The Kremlin propaganda machine: A directory of the top 100 media managers, public figures, experts, and ideologues. iSANS, August 2022.

³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kb9jgyJskGE>.

“There is a civil war being fought in Ukraine”

One of the main storylines of anti-Ukrainian propaganda in Belarus is that everything that is happening in Ukraine is nothing but a “civil war” in which peaceful people are dying through the fault of the “Nazi” government. This narrative dates back to 2014, when, according to Kremlin narratives, ordinary workers and miners in the Donbas rebelled against a “Nazi coup” on the Maidan in Kyiv. It was easy for the Kremlin to dismiss the hostilities in the Donbas as an “internal conflict” in Ukraine, as the participation of Russian troops in the conflict was never recognized by the Kremlin. What was happening though was obvious to the whole world and undeniable. Despite the absurdity of this idea following Russia’s full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, pro-Kremlin propagandists continue to promote the “civil war” narrative and that Ukraine itself is to blame for what is happening.

This is stated, for example, by Olga Shpilevskaya: “For me, what is happening in Ukraine is a real civil war that did not begin on February 24. It has been ongoing since 2014. This is a case where people have been pushed against each other and where people have not been allowed to live and develop in peace. **This is the kind of civil war that will wipe Ukraine off the face of the earth, unfortunately.**”⁴⁰

Note the particular cynicism of this statement. It was made not at the beginning, but at the very height of Russia’s war in Ukraine on July 30. By that time, Mariupol had long been wiped off the face of the earth, other cities and towns (Lysychansk, Bakhmut) were turned into ruins, civilian infrastructure was shelled by the Russian army (in part from Belarus), and most importantly, after the atrocities and crimes committed by the Russian army against the civilian population of Ukraine became known.

These kinds of statements about “civil war” and “internal conflict” make it easier for propagandists to introduce yet another cynical narrative – that the shelling of peaceful cities and massacre of civilians in the territories occupied by Russia are the work of the Ukrainians themselves and the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Denial, silence, and lies about war crimes committed by Russian troops

Another new line of wartime propaganda that came up in response to the emergence of reports on the numerous war crimes committed by Russian troops against the civilian population is the denial of these crimes. This, foremost, regards the massacre of civilians (including women and children), torture, terror, robbery, looting, and rape in the temporarily occupied territories. This thread is based on the denial of **Russian war crimes, deliberate disinformation, fake news**, and the creation of conspiracies about the intervention of a “third party.”

⁴⁰ <https://www.belta.by/society/view/shpilevskaja-v-ukraine-sejchas-idet-realnaja-grazhdanskaja-vojna-516338-2022/>

An example is the massacre of civilians in Bucha. The city of Bucha, Kyiv region, was under Russian occupation from February 27 to March 31, 2022. After the withdrawal of Russian troops, many bodies of civilians were found on the streets of the city, including those shot with their hands tied behind their backs, regarding which there are numerous photo and video confirmations and survivor testimonies. Among those killed were women and children.⁴¹ From the very beginning, the Russian leadership and the military denied the involvement of Russian troops in the crime.⁴²

Belarusian propaganda not only copied statements made by Russian propaganda media, but actively participated in the disinformation campaign.⁴³

“We know who organized this facade [in Bucha]. They were mostly British people who arrived in cars... from Lviv, who filmed in Bucha and then threw it into the media space... Therefore, there is no need to talk about Bucha.” (Alexander Lukashenko, May 5, 2022)⁴⁴

The essence of the propaganda idea of denying the crimes is consistent with the “civil war” narrative: in the statements of propagandists, the idea is often held that the crimes in Ukraine were committed by the Ukrainians themselves, including the military personnel of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, etc.

“Non-coverage of the war”: a silencing of the Ukrainian Armed Forces’ successes

It is worth mentioning the behavior of Belarusian pro-Kremlin propaganda, characteristic since the war began, which can be called not informing, but an “eloquent silence.” This regards specifically the **silencing of Ukraine’s successes on the battlefield, including the successful counter-offensive of the Ukrainian Armed Forces**, which began in May-June 2022 near Kharkiv and came as a big surprise to full-time Belarusian propagandists. Clearly, their silence is due in no small part to their unpreparedness for such a development of events, as well as the lack of clear instructions from the Belarusian leadership and supervisors from Moscow.

This is especially evident from the monitoring of Belarusian media, which is regularly published by the Telegram channel of the independent initiative Belarusian Hajun. The most recent example is the liberation of Kherson by the Ukrainian Armed Forces in early

⁴¹ <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/04/06/kak-ubivali-lyudey-v-buche>

⁴² See a detailed analysis of fake news and disinformation by Russian propaganda about the massacre in Bucha <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/04/06/kak-ubivali-lyudey-v-buche>.

⁴³ “...Bucha has been staged by that part of the Ukrainian elite that does not want normal negotiations, that really wants a war towards a victorious end. In general, this is the same pro-Western elite through which the U.S. broadcasts its influence on President Zelensky.” (Alexander Alesin, April 6, 2022) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLgRJx7rcF0>.

⁴⁴ “Stop lying.” Lukashenko responds to an American journalist’s question about Bucha and Mariupol. Telegram channel ATN News, May 5, 2022 https://t.me/ATN_BTRC/63112.

November 2022. Judging by an overview of media there was not a single mention of this victory by the Ukrainian Armed Forces on the news of the largest Belarusian channels:

“Almost half a day had passed since the announcement of the withdrawal of the Russian army from Kherson, a city that, a month and a half ago, was supposedly a part of Russia forever. How did Belarusian propagandists react to the news?”

Belarusian agency BelTA – 0 messages about the retreat of the Russian Armed Forces.

Sovietskaya Belarus – 0 reports of Russia’s retreat from Kherson.

Television News Agency (ATN) – 0 messages.

National Television (ONT) – 0 messages.”

(Belarusian Hajun, November 10, 2022)⁴⁵

Narratives about Poland and the Baltic states

The information war against Poland and the Baltic countries, especially Lithuania, is what little was left to Belarusian propagandists from their traditional “local” pre-war stories after the start of large-scale aggression against Ukraine. For the Russian media, these topics are too “small” and do not have the kind of vital importance the confrontation with the “hegemon of capitalism” – the U.S. or the entire “collective West” – holds. Attacks on these close neighbors of Belarus and Russia are conducted by Russian propagandists only in the general context of stories in which Russia sees its interest.

Aggressive plans of Poland and the Baltic states

The promotion of hostile myths around Poland and the Baltic states began long before plans for a Russian invasion of Ukraine emerged. In Belarus, Poland and Lithuania have long been elevated by pro-Kremlin propaganda to the rank of main enemies or as an “assault squad” of the “collective West” on its eastern frontier that dreams of settling scores with Belarus and Russia.

In their view, **these countries are making aggressive plans, trying to break the Belarusian-Russian “alliance” through Ukraine**, hitting it with Ukrainian sabotage groups while dreaming of regaining the western territories of Ukraine and Belarus and taking Kaliningrad.

“The West intends to take Western Ukraine and Western Belarus for itself, said Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko at a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi.” (Alexander Lukashenko, May 23, 2022).⁴⁶

⁴⁵ https://t.me/Hajun_BY/5762

⁴⁶ <https://ukraina.ru/20220523/1034014347.html>

“It is important to remember that in Lithuania back in 2014 they prepared a theoretical basis for how to take away the Kaliningrad region from Russia.” (Alexander Tikhansky, June 20, 2022).⁴⁷

As a full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine approached, these storylines took on special urgency.

“Russophobia,” totalitarianism, and Nazism

Western neighbors, according to state propagandists, are still **“Russophobic,” totalitarian, and Nazis, and conduct a foreign policy hostile to Belarus and Russia.** They hate those who *“stopped fascism decades ago.”⁴⁸*

“They’ve outdone Hitler and fine people for watching Belarusian television channels.”⁴⁹

“In the West, there is a desire to involve Russia in several conflicts at once. Create several fronts for it at the same time... The issue is that the Russians expect, as they say, trickery from other allies of the collective West – from Poland and the Baltic countries. There is a great danger that the forces of the West may stir up the situation in the Central Asian region.” (Alexander Alesin, May 18, 2022).⁵⁰

Insults and direct threats to Belarus’s neighbors

The most terrible curses and threats made by Belarusian leaders and propagandists are addressed precisely to these European countries. Not afraid of responsibility, they allow themselves **direct threats of military attack and insults on ethnic grounds.** It is impossible not to quote a few of the more egregious statements:

“These Poles are strange people. The master from Washington told them no, but they continue to keep their heads down. If they keep this up they could also get the Warsaw People’s Republic on the world map. (Telegram channel Nevolfovich, March 14, 2022).⁵¹

“Putin and I once said in St. Petersburg that we would also convert Belarusian Su planes so that they could carry nuclear weapons. What do you think we’re talking about? Everything

⁴⁷ <https://mlyn.by/20062022/politiki-litvy-rabotayut-na-tretyu-mirovuyu-voynu/>.

⁴⁸ <https://www.belta.by/society/view/zapad-sorevnuetsja-v-rusofobii-i-nenavisti-k-tem-kto-desjatiletija-nazad-ostanovil-fashizm-495387-2022/>.

⁴⁹ https://t.me/ATN_BTRC/60993.

⁵⁰ <https://www.belta.by/world/view/voennyj-ekspert-na-zapade-est-zhelanie-vovlech-rossiju-srazu-v-neskolko-konfliktov-502637-2022/>.

⁵¹ <https://t.me/nevolf/9386>.

is ready!... Decision-making centers – we know them.” (Alexander Lukashenka, August 26, 2022).⁵²

“...Calm down, Poles⁵³, get a hold of yourselves, and stop these provocations. There will be no Rzecz from sea to sea... But if children’s tears do not bring you to your senses, then the strategic Tu-22M3 aircraft of the Russian Military Space Forces will... Run, Poles.” (Grigory Azarenok, November 12, 2021).⁵⁴

“All your vile plans are clear – to unleash a war in Europe. The Poles are distracting Belarusian troops and the Bandera psychopaths are attacking Russia. The Poles and the “extinct” Balts are drawn in. The EU is falling apart and although Eurasia is winning this war, it is suffering losses and the States are again the world hegemon. Just remember, you damn humanoids – you like to start wars, but we end them. And we will finish it not in Vilnius and Warsaw, but in London and Washington.” (Grigory Azarenok, December 3, 2021).⁵⁵

Such statements can be condemned according to international legal norms that prohibit war propaganda and calls for aggression. But Belarusian national legislation is also sufficient to qualify such statements as crimes, for example according to Articles 122 (preparing or waging an aggressive war), 123 (propaganda of war), or 130 (incitement of racial, national, religious, or other social hatred or discord) of the Criminal Code of Belarus.

Poland and the Baltic states are puppets of the U.S., NATO, and the EU who are threatening Russia

As was said, the promotion of hostile myths around Poland and the Baltic states began long before the plans for an invasion of Ukraine appeared. After the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in the Donbas, hostile rhetoric against these countries intensified and became most frequently used after the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

According to propagandists, these European countries are incapable of making independent decisions, as they are puppets of the U.S. (NATO, EU, etc.). The narrative of their dependence is a constant presence in the speeches of the “president” of Belarus Alexander Lukashenka. A few weeks before the start of the war, for example, he said, “Without the support of the United States of America, Poland and Lithuania will forever

⁵² <https://eadaaily.com/ru/news/2022/08/26/prezident-belorussii-predupredil-zapad-celi-dlya-voennogo-otveta-u-nas-uzhe-opredeleny>.

⁵³ Azarenok uses the term “Lyakhs” which in this context is derogative.

⁵⁴ Blocked link <https://youtu.be/TQk9JQ2XidM?t=137>. Indirect link <https://www.facebook.com/antifashist.org/posts/3526940240865530>.

⁵⁵ Blocked link <https://youtu.be/VIRTeAEPcwk?t=1086>. Indirect link <https://euroradio.fm/ru/eto-deystvitelno-kak-1941-y-propaganda-pugaet-belorusov-voynoy>

*remain the dull outskirts of Europe... Our western neighbors – Poland, Lithuania – are actively acting in line with Washington’s policy. For them, it’s a survival strategy.”*⁵⁶

But as in the case of Ukraine, this narrative coexists easily alongside another that maintains that **Poland itself is threatening Russia and even forces its demands on America**: *“Do you know who is the main initiator who is betting on the use of nuclear weapons? Poland. It is provoking you – the U.S. – to make some moves with nuclear weapons. (Alexander Lukashenka, October 14, 2022).*⁵⁷

Socio-economic decline and the energy crisis

The new narrative is one of socio-economic decline and the energy crisis in Poland, the Baltic countries, and the West broadly, which is deepening due to the sanctions imposed on Russia and Belarus. Propaganda storylines such as **food shortages** in the West fall on fertile ground in a country where the genetic memory of hunger and scarcity still lives on. *“Look at what is happening with neighboring Lithuania and Latvia and the Poles... They were so happy, so cheerful. They lived a prosperous life, had everything. And where are they today? They stand along the border and ask us to let them into Belarus. At least to buy buckwheat. Okay, grains. And no salt, they ask us for salt.”* (Lukashenka, April 24, 2022).⁵⁸

Or about the **lack of hot water** in residential buildings due to the energy crisis: *“When there is a lack of cleanliness, four places should be washed: the space between the buttocks, the shoulders, the legs, and the groin... And what of the rest? I’m afraid the saying “scratch a European and you’ll find a Nazi” will soon have to be taken literally.”* (Andrey Mukovozchik, August 9, 2022).⁵⁹

Migration crisis

In this host of toxic stories, echoes of the **migration crisis on the border of Belarus and the EU countries** in 2021 are heard, and which since then has not been fully resolved. For example, through the Russian agency Sputnik Belarus (a division of the Rossiya Segodnya media holding, not to be confused with the Russia Today television channel) and other pro-Kremlin media as far back as 2015, narratives were propagated about an aggressive West and the inevitable decline of the EU due to migration flows in Europe during the height of the war in Syria.

⁵⁶ Alexander Lukashenka’s address to the Belarusian people and the National Assembly, January 28, 2022 <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-bez-podderzhki-ssha-polsha-i-litva-navsegda-ostanutsja-unyloj-okrainoj-evropy-481699-2022/>.

⁵⁷ <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-prizval-ssha-ne-pljasat-pod-dudku-obezumevshih-politikov-v-voprose-jadernogo-oruzhija-529268-2022/>.

⁵⁸ April 24, 2022 <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-sosedjam-belarusi-davajte-berech-mir-i-zhit-druzjno-497963-2022/>.

⁵⁹ <https://www.sb.by/articles/bolnye-mesta-evropy.html>.

Due to the influx of wartime refugees from Ukraine beginning February 24, 2022, a new thread has appeared on the propaganda agenda – the juxtaposing of Middle East refugees of 2021 to Ukrainian refugees from the period of the Russian war against Ukraine: *“Refugees are suffering from the actions of Polish border guards... This is cruel and the degrading treatment contrasts sharply with the warm welcome Poland offers to displaced people from Ukraine.”* (Marta Gubay, April 11, 2022).⁶⁰

The “collective West”

The anti-Western narrative is central to the global propaganda concept of a “fortress surrounded by enemies.” It is the West – without specifying borders and without elucidation – **that is the main enemy. It is the West that wants to weaken / destroy / divide Belarus and it is Russia that the West is at war with in Ukraine.** Of course, it is the West that coordinates “color revolutions” and Maidan, as is known, is the number one danger for authoritarian regimes. The West can only be bad and insidious. And it does not matter that the propagandists themselves, upon closer inspection, are often found to have very close ties with the West, with citizenship, residence permits, and real estate in EU countries or in the U.S.

Possibly, if the West did not exist, then there would be no Putin-Lukashenka regime, which lives on the proceeds from the sale of natural resources to Western countries and at the same time maintains power thanks to anti-Western propaganda (and repression). If this were not the case, it would still need to be invented.

Sometimes, from the narrative of the “common (collective) West” in the flow of propaganda, more terrible enemies are singled out, for example, the U.S., NATO, Poland, and the Baltic countries. But in general, the image of the West, without any explanation, evokes primarily strong negative emotions among consumers of propaganda.

But not everything is so bad. After all, in the universe invented by propagandists, **the West depends on the Great Russia. It is split**, with Russophobia uniting it for a while, but overall, it is **experiencing the “end of transatlantic consolidation,”** and we are now witnessing the imminent collapse of the dollar (for the umpteenth time in the last twenty years).

Color revolutions

The story about how the “collective West” is **organizing a “Maidan” in Minsk** according to the Ukrainian scenario is as old as the Maidan itself – the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine. For a long time, this concept served to mobilize and militarize the Belarusian public consciousness in the face of the threat of “color revolutions.”

⁶⁰ <https://mlyn.by/11042022/dobro-pozhalovat-v-guantanamo-bezhency-stradayut-ot-dejstvuj-polskih-pogranichnikov/>.

After the start of the war in Ukraine, this rhetoric was “freshly charged” and is being exploited with renewed vigor. *“They didn't succeed. They are now walking and grinding their teeth. It didn't work out and now they need to somehow turn it over. That's why sanctions have been imposed against Russia and, frankly, against Belarus, so that Russia cannot bypass its sanctions.”* (Alexander Lukashenka, April 26, 2022)⁶¹

“Western genocide”

Other new “military” narratives have also emerged: **Western sanctions are “genocide”** and a “total war” of the West against Belarus and Russia.

“Today, a sanctions war has been openly declared against Belarus and the Union State in the form of an ethnic genocide,” writes “political scientist” Shchekin.⁶² Sanctions on Belarus need to be lifted to prevent a food crisis around the world, other “political scientists” say.

It is worth mentioning here that the word “genocide” in Russian-language propaganda is mentioned almost more often than the word “Putin.” Now only lazy individuals do not talk about “genocide” on television screens, with the “geopolitical genocide” of the West, the “memory genocide in the EU,” and the “genocide of sanctions” making up just a small part of the “newspeak” put into circulation by state media journalists in Belarus after the start of the war.

But there are many genocides, and there is only one Belarus. And it is ready to take steps towards peace, for example, in taking on the transportation of Ukrainian grain through the country to prevent a global food crisis, however only in exchange for the lifting of sanctions: *“Remove sanctions from Minsk and the grain will go through our territory to the Baltic ports. And the Balts will profit (at last launching their dead ports), and we will have calm!”*⁶³

Russophobia and the West's hatred of Russia

In the “military” propaganda narratives that arose before and especially after February 24, the West is described as **a bunch of Russophobes and Nazis who for some reason feel hatred for everything Russian, who want to weaken and reduce the influence of Russia, seize its wealth,** etc. *“All the talk about ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom of speech’ suddenly disappeared. Only savage hatred for Russia remained. And the West... is ready to fight to the last Ukrainian, Moldavian, Pole, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian. And if necessary, Washington and London, without blinking, are ready to throw the whole of Scandinavia into the slaughter along with the whole world, if only to achieve their long-planned goal of*

⁶¹ <https://iarex.ru/articles/85329.html>.

⁶² <https://riafan.ru/23114439-politolog-schekin-nazval-genotsidom-sanktsionnyu-voinu-zapada-protiv-soyuznogo-gosudarstva>.

⁶³ Alexey Avdonin, June 12, 2022 <https://mlyn.by/12062022/kak-belarus-i-rossiya-bogateyut-a-sankcionnaya-model-zapada-vyzyvaet-ottorzhenie-u-investorov/>.

destroying Russia, even at the cost of destroying the entire planet.” (Yuri Uvarov, May 7, 2022).⁶⁴

“There is probably no need to prove the validity of the formula ‘an anti-Soviet is always a Russophobe’ (as well as a Belarusophobe and even an anti-Semite). Now an extension has been added: an anti-Soviet always carries within himself the seeds of Nazism. And as soon as the dead moisture of Western values falls on the grains of Nazism in the soul of an anti-Soviet, neo-Nazism... flourishes.” (Andrey Mukovozchik, December 7, 2022)⁶⁵

“The collective West has essentially become a collective Hitler interested only in control over the world.” (Nikolai Volovich, June 6, 2022)⁶⁶

At the same time, propaganda media actively promotes the ideas that **“the West is against the Belarusian-Russian Union,” “the West is trying to attack Russia through Belarus,”** and opposes the integration of Belarus and Russia (Nikolai Shchekin: *“The West has declared a full-scale war on the Union State”*).⁶⁷ *“The modern fascists of NATO countries have not disappeared, and they have not died. They are planning to strike [Russia – ed.] through Ukraine and Belarus.”* (Alexander Lukashenko, December 7, 2022).⁶⁸

A weakening West looks at Belarus with hope

Among the ongoing plot and semantic lines of propaganda media critical of the West, it is also worth mentioning eschatological narratives about the “coming end” of the West. They have diverged for two decades anyway, because, in fact, the propaganda “concept of happiness” is based on the myth of the imminent “overthrow” of the West, where only two just and strong powers would remain in the world – Russia and Belarus. But these narratives became especially popular with the outbreak of the war. Their logic is based on the belief that **Europe and Western countries are in energy (economic, investment, etc.) dependence on the “union state,”** that they (and not us) suffer under the weight of their own sanctions imposed against Russia and Belarus, and that Western governments and societies are split/divided relative to Russia and Ukraine:

“When Polish historians say that they want to take Vilnius for themselves, when their soldiers sing songs about Lviv and Vilnius as their cities, this is a sincere position. They really

⁶⁴ <https://mlyn.by/07052022/za-kogo-i-za-chto-prolivayut-krov-ukrainczy/>.

⁶⁵ Mukovozchik A. “Anyone once poisoned by ‘Western values’ goes the path of Hitler to Walesa.” Belarus Today, July 12, 2022) <https://www.sb.by/articles/antisovetchik-neonatsist.html>.

⁶⁶ Volovich N. “Through sanctions to power. How Western adherents of neo-Nazism want to conquer the world.” Minskaya Pravda – mlyn.by, June 6, 2022 <https://mlyn.by/06062022/chez-sankczii-k-vlasti-kak-zapadnye-adepty-neonaczizma-hotyat-zavoevat-mir/>.

⁶⁷ <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/schekin-zapad-obijavil-polnomasshtabnuju-voynu-soiuznomu-gosudarstvu-495755-2022/>.

⁶⁸ <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2022/07/12/lukashenko-zayavil-o-fashistah-v-nato>.

hate each other. They are now temporarily united by Russophobia, but the transatlantic consolidation is collapsing before our eyes.” (Vadim Gigin, July 2, 2022).⁶⁹

“Washington, through pressure on the EU on the issue of imposing sanctions against Russia and Belarus, is turning it into an economic department of NATO... Brussels is ready to fight to the last to please the U.S... All these years they’ve dreamed of avenging the Victory of our fathers and grandfathers in the Great Patriotic War.” (Alexey Avdonin, April 15, 2022).⁷⁰

From these narratives follows another, quite exotic construction: soon everything “there” will collapse, and therefore **the eyes of the West, full of hope, are directed “at the sun rising in the east”**:

*“Europe, we see you are peering at us carefully. Yes, you are bound hand and foot, yes, you are humiliated and trampled on, yes, you are occupied, but your eyes have not yet swollen with the rottenness of multiculturalism and tolerance. And you peer at us, peer at the sun rising in the east. **You want it, you want Lukashenka!**” (Grigory Azarenok, July 24, 2022).⁷¹*

“Lukashenka called friendship with Russia and Belarus happiness for the European Union.” (RIA FAN, July 22, 2022).⁷²

A call for cooperation with the West

At the same time, with Belarus’s growing international isolation and the weakening of its last economic ties with the West, beginning in spring-summer of 2022, worrisome notes have appeared in the speeches of propagandists. They are perplexed as to **why the West has turned its back, imposing sanctions, because Belarus has not been guilty of anything up until now**: *“We were not the instigators of today’s discord. We have not taken a single direct anti-European step.” (Anatoly Glaz: June 8, 2022).⁷³* They have even called for cooperation: *“Foreign Ministry of Belarus: We will have to engage with the West” (June 21, 2022).⁷⁴*

In *Minskaya Pravda*, in an article titled “The President’s transparent hint – Lukashenka invites Europeans **to prepare for winter together,**” the “president” is quoted saying the

⁶⁹ https://t.me/ATN_BTRC/68565.

⁷⁰ <https://mlyn.by/15042022/ot-bresta-do-vladivostoka-za-nami-kosmos-i-pobeda-kak-my-budem-razvivatsya-a-evropa-vyzhivat/>.

⁷¹ <https://ctv.by/azaryonok-evropa-ty-vsmatrivaeshsya-na-voshodyashchee-na-vostoke-solnce-i-ty-hochesh-ego-hochesh>.

⁷² <https://riafan.ru/23549865-lukashenko-nazval-druzhbu-s-rossiei-i-belorussiei-schast-em-dlya-evrosoyuza>.

⁷³ June 8, 2022 <https://eodaily.com/ru/news/2022/07/08/mid-belorussii-ob-otnosheniyah-s-es-my-gotovy-k-dialogu>.

⁷⁴ <https://eodaily.com/ru/news/2022/06/21/mid-belorussii-nam-prividetsya-vzaimodeystvovat-s-zapadom>.

following: *“We need to think about what [Western – ed.] peasants and workers will get, and not about the rich. The most important thing is that Duda and Morawiecki will not freeze in Poland... maybe they will come to their senses.”* (September 15, 2022).⁷⁵

Conclusions

iSANS’s analysis shows that before the start of Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine, pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus acted in the wake of the Russian propaganda machine, retaining however the dominance of “local,” Belarusian stories. These stories were mainly built around the fight against the internal opposition and the West, especially with Belarus’s immediate neighbors – Poland and the Baltic countries – which were elevated by propaganda to the rank of a Western “assault squad” in its “struggle against Belarus.”

With the start of preparations for the invasion of Ukraine (end of 2021), local stories began to gradually give way to Kremlin war propaganda narratives in the media agenda.

After the start of the large-scale invasion in February 2022, propaganda in Belarus became completely synchronized with Russia’s. From there on out, it has been operating strictly within the semantic framework assigned to it by Russian supervisors (media managers and “journalists” of Russian state media) and has been subordinated to the single goal of the ideological mobilization of Belarusian society following Russia’s example. Its main statements are aimed at substantiating and justifying the Russian military invasion of Ukraine as the pinnacle of its confrontation with all “world evil” as represented by the West and NATO with the Lukashenka regime’s complicity, denying war crimes committed by Russian troops and downplaying the successes of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Of the remaining “local” narratives, one could perhaps note the ongoing discrediting of the Belarusian past, the disparaging of national history, language, identity, and statehood, the belittling of national symbols and historical figures and the concurrent emphasis on historical unity of the Slavic peoples (“Slavic brotherhood”) to justify the need for a union with Russia while undermining support for the Belarusian democratic opposition inside the country.

Because of the war, new “anti-Belarusian” narratives have appeared concerning the “genocide” of Western sanctions, Belarusian “terrorists” and “Nazis” fighting on the side of Ukraine, and that Belarus could save the world from a food crisis.

iSANS will continue to observe and analyze the main propaganda narratives in Belarus during hostilities in Ukraine and the impact of Russian propaganda on those narratives.

⁷⁵ <https://mlyn.by/15092022/prozrachnyj-namek-prezidenta-lukashenko-predlagaet-evropeiczam-gotovitsya-k-zime-vmeste/>

