

“THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT WORDS – I LOVE THE KGB!”

MAIN DIRECTIONS OF BELARUSIAN PROPAGANDA IN THE FOURTH QUARTER OF 2023



Analytical report

January 2024



**“The Three Most Important Words – I Love the KGB!”
Main directions of Belarusian propaganda in the 4th quarter of 2023
Analytical report**

© iSANS, January 2024

About iSANS

iSANS is an international initiative of experts from different countries aimed at identifying, analyzing, and countering hybrid threats to democracy, the rule of law, and sovereignty of the countries of Western, Central and Eastern Europe, and Eurasia.

About the author

Andrey Kalikh, iSANS analyst

Researcher: Victoria Sakharova

Editor: Yuri Dzhibladze, Head of the Human Rights and Rule of Law
Department, iSANS

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	4
PREFACE	5
Narrative 1: “BELARUS AS AN EMPIRE”	8
Party “cleansing” and “tightening the screws”: preparing for the 2024 elections	8
Official nostalgia for the USSR and re-Stalinization.....	10
“The three most important words – I love the KGB!”: glorification of the special services and the intimidation of critics of the regime.....	11
The Union of Belarus and Russia as the best, inevitable choice	13
“Lukashenka is a recognized international leader.”	15
“Genocide of the Belarusian people”	16
Nuclear weapons in the service of propaganda.....	18
Narrative 2: BELARUSIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES.....	20
Narrative 3: UKRAINE	22
Justification of aggression and war crimes, war with the West	22
Justification of deportation of Ukrainian children.....	25
Narrative 4: “ENEMIES OF BELARUS”: Poland, the Baltic countries, and the “collective West”	27
Media attack on Poland.....	27
Other examples of anti-Western rhetoric.....	29
Surge of anti-Semitism in propaganda against the backdrop of the Hamas terrorist attacks	31
Reaction to anti-Semitic and anti-Israel actions in Russia	32
PROPAGANDA AND CENSORSHIP: Two brothers in the dictatorship family	33
Censorship as an aid to propaganda.....	33
Russian propaganda on Belarus.....	34
CONCLUSION	37

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Main Directions of Belarusian Propaganda:

Belarus

- In the preparation for the February 2024 parliamentary elections, propagandists present the line that Belarus is centralized like an “empire” under the rule of Lukashenka, a successful and internationally respected leader, and use Soviet-era nostalgia and re-Stalinization narratives. They insist that the Union of Belarus and Russia is the best and inevitable choice.

Belarusian Democratic Forces

- Even though supporters of Belarus’s democratic transition were either forced to leave the country or go underground, the intensity of propaganda hatred towards them has not subsided. Pro-government channels continue to viciously ridicule, humiliate, and denigrate “fugitives” and “traitors” every day. At the same time, the regime wants to return political emigrants to their homeland by all means.

Ukraine

- Pro-government media of Belarus follow main Russian ideological lines towards the war in Ukraine. They spread myths about the “lack of independence of Ukraine” and that “Ukrainian people is a part of the Russian people”.

Poland, the Baltic states, and the “collective West”

- According to the propaganda, the Western countries have aggressive plans against Belarus. It claims that the Baltic states and Poland intend to invade Western regions of Belarus and train paramilitary groups of Belarusians in exile who should attack the country. The entire language against the West is very aggressive but mitigating rhetoric also remains.

PREFACE

The words in the title are not a cry from the soul of a communist fanatic or the tortured confession of a prisoner in Stalin's gulag. This is a totally sincere and even illustrative statement from the present day made by Grigory Azarenok, a correspondent for the state television channel *STV*, who is the most detestable Belarusian propagandist and one of the most ardent defenders of the Aliaksandr Lukashenka regime. On December 20, 2023, State Security Officer Day ("Chekist Day") was celebrated in Belarus. Azarenok dedicated an entire program to this "professional holiday," where for 20 minutes he confessed his love for the KGB, a punitive body that has not changed neither its essence nor its name from the Soviet period.

It is obvious that in a "legal democratic state" – which Belarus is, according to its Constitution – no one would force a person to voluntarily say such things on camera. However, for Azarenok this is a totally conscious survival strategy. The political situation in modern Belarus is such that it is important for supporters of the regime to emphasize their loyalty once again to the intelligence services.

Azarenok was born in 1995 and never lived in the USSR, but at the same time he is perhaps the most ardent apologist of neo-Stalinism. Over the last year, there has been a creeping "re-Stalinization" in Belarus – not only the whitewashing of the image of Stalin and the glorification of the special services, but a rallying around the current "Leader" and the creation of a new cult of personality accompanied by brutal repressions against political opponents. According to historian Nikolai Mitrokhin, re-Stalinization also includes the suppression of

political and intra-party discussions, the inculcation of anti-Western and, more broadly, xenophobic, anti-humanistic, and antisemitic views.¹

All these processes have affected modern Belarus to one degree or another. The use of an anti-Western and anti-liberal narrative in propaganda's work on society in modern Belarus and Russia is aimed primarily at justifying an outdated policy of "anti-modernity" that includes the destruction of democratic and legal institutions, a rejection of humanistic goals of society, and the search for an ideological "anchor" in the "wonderful past." Ultimately, all this is geared towards strengthening the personal power of the ruler, satisfying his ambitions, and enriching his circle.

Another important feature of the propaganda of these two and other authoritarian regimes is the militarization and mobilization of society in the face of an external threat. The enemy has many faces. There is the West, where the most dangerous countries for the Lukashenka regime are Poland and Lithuania, and which are supposedly attempting to annex the western regions of Belarus. There is Ukraine, where the Nazis "seized power." There are Belarusian "fugitives" – democratic supporters of a change of power who purportedly seek to stage a coup. Somewhere in the distance is their single "external manager," the United States, that hides behind them. All of them, according to propagandists, are laying plans to divide or weaken Belarus, trying to prevent a union with Russia, however the "wise and strong leader" is defending its interests in the international arena.

In this work, we have attempted to trace how Belarusian propaganda has responded to the main internal and external "irritants" or, as astronomers say, "impact events" in the last quarter of 2023.

iSANS has been analyzing the propaganda activities of the Lukashenka regime since 2019. With the publication of this text, we resume the publication of quarterly analytical reports on the main narratives of Belarusian propaganda. Together with our monthly monitoring reviews and the propaganda section in the weekly Belarus Review newsletter, they form a set of regular iSANS materials on Belarusian propaganda.

In general, the directions of Belarusian propaganda could be described a few years ago in terms of three large thematic blocks or "meta-narratives"² – "Belarus" (and its union with Russia), "Anti-Maidan" (or the fight against "color revolutions") and "Western countries" (including a separate direction or "Poland and the Baltic

¹ Mitrokhin, Nikolai. Russian Party: Movements of Russian Nationalists in the USSR. M // NLO, 2003, p. 137

² Term used by A. Yeliseyev. See more: [Yeliseyev, A. Pro-Kremlin Propaganda in Belarus: Classification of Narratives. iSANS, 2020](#)

countries”), which in turn were divided into more specific “sub-narratives” or subsections.

With some minor adjustments, these “meta-narratives” are still relevant today. However, the system of state ideology has a certain flexibility and adapts to the challenges of our time. New stories appear. For example, with the suppression of an attempt at a peaceful revolution following the falsification of the results of the 2020 presidential elections, the line on discrediting the Belarusian democratic forces emerged as a separate direction, and for the fourth year now has not left the “front pages” of state media.

In the same way, with the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the topic of an “anti-Maidan” emerged as a separate “Ukrainian” direction, in which Belarusian propaganda follows completely Russian norms.³

In recent months, another important news story has been added – the attack by Hamas terrorists on Israel, Israel’s military response, and related world events. A separate chapter is devoted to this topic in the report.

This work is not an exhaustive, detailed overview of all the meanings, storylines, and nuances of Belarusian propaganda during the period under review. Every day, tons of poison, hatred, and dirt continue to pour out from television screens and from the pages of Belarus’s state press against Ukraine, Western countries, or Belarusian defenders of democracy. iSANS monitoring does not seek to cover the entire volume of announcements and statements made by propagandists in full detail for the review period but is interested in analyzing and demonstrating the main directions and lines of propaganda over the last quarter of 2023.

³ See more.: [Kalikh, A. From “Fortress” Rhetoric to the Rhetoric of “War”. iSANS, 2022](#)

Narrative 1: “BELARUS AS AN EMPIRE”

In the preparation for the February 2024 parliamentary elections, Belarusian propagandists present the line that Belarus is centralized like an “empire” under the rule of Lukashenka, a successful and internationally respected leader, and use Soviet-era nostalgia and re-Stalinization narratives. They insist that the Union of Belarus and Russia is the best and inevitable choice.

Party “cleansing” and “tightening the screws”: preparing for the 2024 elections

One of the main tasks that the propaganda is aimed at is the ideological strengthening of unstable positions of power. Today, this task is more acute than ever, with the brutal suppression of an attempt at a peaceful revolution in 2020 signaling the beginning of a large-scale and ongoing internal political crisis. The decline in Lukashenka’s legitimacy – which began during the coronavirus pandemic and became especially obvious following revelations of the falsification of the presidential election results and the “president’s” confusion in the first days of protests coupled with unprecedented violence during the ongoing wave of repression – remains the most important challenge for the regime. The weakening of its stability continued further as a result of its almost total surrender of Belarus’s sovereignty to the Kremlin and the nearly complete international isolation of Minsk.

On the eve of the first elections after 2020, the regime’s actions and accompanying propaganda were aimed at restoring Lukashenka’s legitimacy and clearing the political field completely of the slightest challenges. Although Lukashenka seems confident now, he is unable to forget his panic in mid-August 2020. Hence the ongoing detentions of dozens of people every month for participating in the protests at that time or for subscribing to independent media, the re-conviction of many opposition members, and the brutal treatment of political prisoners. It is equally important for the regime to find ways to effectively respond to the legitimacy of elected President Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the successful self-organization of democratic forces in exile.

At the beginning of October, the large-scale party “cleansings” ended in Belarus, because of which, out of fifteen political parties, only four pro-government parties remained registered. During this period, propaganda efforts were aimed at justifying the need for such purges considering the upcoming parliamentary elections in February 2024. The main semantic line of the propaganda was that

political parties should not interfere with their criticism and pluralism of opinions but assist the “president.” The [“president” himself spoke about this](#) quite directly in one of his speeches:

“Belarusian parties will be useful if they can truly represent the interests of their party members before the state and become an assistant to the authorities in explaining and promoting decisions made.”

His words were echoed by many. Oleg Gaidukevich, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus, one of the four remaining pro-government parties, was the most eloquent:

“[There will be competition](#)... But there will be no fifth column in the elections! They will try, however, to infiltrate the elections by pretending to be regular people...”

“[No more marginalized people in the elections](#). Not only in 2024 and 2025, but also in 2030 and 2035! Patriots should nominate presidential candidates!”

On November 27, the state channel *ONT* published comments on its Telegram channel about the upcoming elections, in which it essentially called for state censorship and to limit the actions of any candidates other than those who are pro-government.

“[We won and have blocked the rebellion](#) [meaning the suppression of peaceful protests in 2020] and now we must and will impose our media policy. We have a new political line: only supporters of the state should get into Parliament. Only those for whom the words Belarus, Unity, Sovereignty, Family, and Peace have a decisive meaning.”

The source of the narrative of strengthening presidential power for propaganda, of course, is the “president” himself. In November, for example, [Lukashenka said](#) that Belarus is not a parliamentary, but a presidential republic, and should remain so because this model of governing the country is “optimal for our society, taking into account historical traditions and the geopolitical situation.” The efforts of propagandists are also aimed at creating the image of Belarus as an independent and self-sufficient power. Clearly, this is a reaction to criticism on Belarus’s loss of sovereignty and independence. One of the main revanchist lines of propaganda is to prove that “we” are an important part of the “big empire” (apparently, the “Union State”). Playing this game, the propagandists have started to try on “imperial clothes.” From Peter Petrovsky:

"The [BELARUS EMPIRE](#). Yes, historically, territorially, and politically this is not true. But take a walk along Independence Avenue. Look at the greatness, the scale, the range, the gigantic strength of giant people. According to our history, according to our spirit, according to the depth of our people, according to our President, we are, of course, an Empire."

"[The Empire is people with a broad scope](#). These are people like Aliaksandr Lukashenka... They tell us that we have a post-imperial complex, a post-colonial complex. They do not separate empire from imperialism. The Empire is big people. These are people with a broad soul. And in Europe they are small and petty."

Official nostalgia for the USSR and re-Stalinization

The end of 2023 included several dates that propaganda sources traditionally use for ideological purposes. In November, there was a rise in Soviet-patriotic rhetoric in state media in connection with the celebration of the Day of the October Socialist Revolution in 1917 (November 7). Belarus remains the only country in the world that officially celebrates this date. State ideology maintains that it was with the emergence of the Soviet system that Belarus supposedly gained statehood for the first time, because the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was formed as part of the USSR in January 1919. The centuries-old existence of Belarusian statehood within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic in March 1918 are downplayed, denied, and degraded by propaganda outlets.

The November 7 holiday gave a new impetus to official nostalgia for the USSR this year. *"Modern Belarus is the direct heir and legal successor of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic,"* the [Belarus Segodnya newspaper wrote on November 7](#). Other state media spoke in the same spirit.

Speaking on November 7 on the Russian "patriotic" channel *Solovyov LIVE*, Minister-Counselor of the Belarusian Embassy in Moscow and one of Belarus's most well-known Belarusian propagandists [Aliaksandr Shpakouski described the importance of Lukashenka for Belarus](#): *"History will remember those who took over a country without a nuclear power plant, but left it with one."*⁴

Grigory Azarenok spoke on *STV* channel in his own style, with a pathetic statement beginning with the words *"I want to go to a country where..."* and subsequently listing the standard myths about the opening of "hospitals,

⁴ A reference to a quote attributed to Winston Churchill about Stalin's role: "He took Russia with a plow and left it with an atomic bomb."

schools, clinics, medical centers, roads, dormitories, and reactors” in the USSR. [In wrapping up he draws the following conclusion:](#)

“Do you know many countries like this? I know one. I look around and see that this is Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s Belarus. Many people call this country the last island of the Soviet Union. They think they are being insulting. But we have read the Gospel, and the last will become the First.”

We note again that young (born 1995) Azarenok has known only one country in his life – “Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s Belarus.”

It is clear that the purpose of this campaign of praising the USSR and emphasizing the legal succession of today’s Belarus from the Soviet Union is to strengthen the legitimacy of the ruling regime.

“The three most important words – I love the KGB!”: Glorification of the special services and the intimidation of critics of the regime

Another Soviet holiday that remains in the Belarusian calendar that we have already mentioned is State Security Officer Day (“Chekist Day”) on December 20. This date is used by propaganda sources to achieve two important goals: to sacralize the image of the secret police while intimidating “internal enemies.”

More from Grigory Azarenok. On December 20, in his program “*Tainye pruzhyny politiki*” [the secret springs of politics] on the state television channel STV, he gave a fiery speech in praise of the KGB. Once again, let us pay tribute to the gift of the “singer” of the regime:

“It’s time to reject all the perestroika filth. To send the “Children of Arbat” away. Yes, it was a complicated history. And there were enemies of the people. And there were bandits. And there were spies and saboteurs. And there were heroic security officers who fought against them. Who fought and won. The winners are not judged. [A monument to NKVD⁵ soldiers should be erected in Kurapaty⁶.](#)”

“These people descend to the very depths of human vice. They resist the scum, but they themselves remain pure, because the core of their soul is the Motherland. They know everything about everyone, but they smile

⁵ The NKVD [in Russian – Народный комиссариат внутренних дел] stands for the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs in Stalin's USSR – a punitive body that carried out mass repressions. It is the predecessor of the Soviet KGB.

⁶ Kuropaty is a memorial to the victims of Stalin's terror near Minsk at the site of mass executions.

kindly, in the hope that we will improve. They are the guardian angels of the State. [They are the shield and the sword. They are the KGB.](#)"

"I love the oprichnina [a state policy of repression of the boyars] of Tsar Ivan the Terrible. I love the guardsman when he swings his saber. I love the gendarme. The Secret Chancery. The Third Administration. I love this boot. I love the Cheka, the OGPU⁷, the NKVD. I stand against slander against them. [Those who warranted it got what they deserved.](#)"

"The winners are not judged. You are the winners. [Three times more ruthless, three times more vigilant...](#)"

"The KGB was not destroyed. It went to Belarus. Into the partisan forests. And called their leader. Aliaksandr Lukashenka served in the border troops. In Soviet times, these were the troops of the USSR's KGB. And here, in Dzerzhinsky's homeland, the security officers did not become bandits, bankers, mafia protectors, nationalists, and businessmen. [They again raised their shield and sword.](#)"

"The three most important words – [I love the KGB.](#)"

But KGB Officer's Day is not the only date in Soviet history that has inspired the young propagandist to sing laudatory odes. In Azarenok's address on the birthday of Leonid Brezhnev⁸ – who went insane toward the end of his life and became the object of popular ridicule – the secretary general is depicted as "cool":

"This guy owned half the world, suppressed fascist uprisings, launched rockets, built entire cities, planned a flight to Mars, and helped free dozens of countries from colonialism, while the people lived better and better every year. It's not his fault that after him the a...holes came and sold it all and screwed it all up. And during his time, currency speculators were shot. And the kids had Artek [a former Young Pioneer camp]. Our parents grew up and studied under him. Ask them, they will say they were happy. Happy Birthday, Leonid Ilyich. [You're a cool dude.](#)"

On Stalin's birthday (December 21), Azarenok addressed the "leader" directly and informally. It seems that under Stalin a person could have been shot for such a

⁷ The All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage (AREOC or VChK) and the United State Political Administration (OGPU) were special services in the 1920s and 1930s – predecessors of the NKVD and the KGB.

⁸ Leonid Brezhnev – General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee from 1964 to 1982.

familiar manner of address, but young Azarenok can be forgiven for not knowing this:

“Hello, Joseph Vissarionovich. Apologies for the informality. In my consciousness you are the King, the Emperor, and Lord of half the world. And since ancient times, the Kings and Princes of our land have been addressed informally... You became the ruler of half the world. From Berlin to Beijing, dozens of nations prayed to you. And then everything collapsed. Today your beloved Ukraine, which you cherished on your sore arm like a baby, has become a monster. But in Belarus there is your Line. And there is your bust. [I bow to you, Leader / I reject all slander against you / Above you only the Lord God.](#)”

The Union of Belarus and Russia as the best, inevitable choice

On December 9, 2023, state media celebrated another holiday in common – the 24th anniversary of the so-called “Union State.”⁹ Nearly 25 years later, it remains essential for both authoritarian regimes that they emphasize friendship, inseparability, and the absence of any differences. This is an important part of the response to their international isolation.

In Moscow and Minsk, ceremonial events were held on this occasion, all in the same Soviet spirit. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry hosted a meeting of the so-called “Consultative Council on the Affairs of Belarusians Abroad,” which was attended by representatives of national diaspora organizations loyal to the regime in different countries, most of which are in Russia. Belarus’s Minister of Foreign Affairs [Sergei Aleinik, speaking at the meeting](#), said that he “values the contributions of Belarusians abroad in conveying truthful information about Belarus.” Of course, this does not mean those “Belarusians abroad” who were forced to leave the country for fear of reprisals, but those who support Lukashenka’s political regime abroad.

In Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking on the occasion of the holiday, said that Belarus is Russia’s [“closest strategic partner and ally.”](#) [The minister made it clear](#) that the novelty of the two regimes is their confrontation with the democratic West and an attempt at rapprochement with authoritarian regimes in Asia and Africa:

“Our agenda is rich and, in some ways, even innovative, since it is totally focused on the Global South and the Global East – the majority of the

⁹ On December 9, 1999, the agreement on the creation of the “Union State” was signed.

world. On countries that are open to cooperation based on equality and mutual benefit, without ultimatums and threats, let alone sanctions.”

The task of pro-Kremlin media is to develop and deepen these positions. For example, on December 9, Russian “expert” [Konstantin Shadrov, in an interview with the Belarus 1 television channel](#), stated that in fact it is not Russia and Belarus that are isolated, but Western countries:

“Belarus is greeted with joy in China because cooperation with Belarus is beneficial. And if we talk about international isolation, it is more likely to happen in relation to Western countries. Because by turning away from Belarus, they have demonstrated that this is not an empty void. We have something to fill the gaps with and there are no problems in finding other partners and building normal relations with them.”

[Russian Education Minister Sergei Kravtsov pledged](#) to organize a “common lesson on the Union State” in all schools of both countries. The idea was also supported in Minsk, although by the end of January 2024 there were no plans made to conduct such lessons.

“Journalists” did not neglect their chance to speak out either.

The ONT television channel called the 1999 agreement on the creation of the “Union State” [“an act of historical justice.”](#) Russian pro-Kremlin “political scientist” Sergei Mikheyev said in an interview with ONT that the union of Belarus and Russia is a [“unique sovereign civilization”](#) and [Vsevolod Shimov](#), an expert at the Center for Belarusian Studies at the Institute of Europe in the Russian Academy of Sciences, argued that Belarus has no other choice but an alliance with Russia:

“In the new multipolar world order, which is being formed before our eyes, small states like Belarus must choose their fundamental foreign policy and foreign economic directions. The choice for Minsk in this situation is obvious – only Russia, as a long-standing and proven partner and reliable ally.”

Sergei Lushch, the leader of the social movement “Union,” which is an organizer of the pro-Russian network in Belarus, revealed the reasons for the accelerated construction of the “Union State.” [According to him](#), if not for the protests of 2020, the Belarusian authorities would not have rushed to strengthen the alliance with Russia so quickly:

“The events of 2020 in Belarus became a catalyst in the dynamics of union building; from that moment forward began an active process of making up for lost time in integration processes.”

“Lukashenka is a recognized international leader”

Propaganda outlets are trying their best to emphasize that Lukashenka is not a political outcast on whom the entire civilized world has turned its back, but a leader in demand on the world stage and a respected and equal participant in the most important international negotiations.

Here is a typical example of the artificial “inflating” of the regime in an interview with the Belarusian “military expert” [Nikolai Buzin to the state agency BelTA under the heading](#) “Buzin: the example of Belarus’s attitude towards other countries can be used as the basis for a multipolar world”:

“If Europe does not want to build relations with Belarus, then our country will build relations with other regions. Europe is not the richest part of the world today. This is a stagnating region. And if Europe continues to show this attitude towards other countries of the world, then Europe will not be among the new centers of power.”

The “expert” also commented on Lukashenka’s meeting in December with the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon: “This is what is called ‘multi-vector,’” *BelTA* quotes Buzin.¹⁰

Another typical example was state media’s coverage of Lukashenka’s participation in the UN climate change conference in Dubai from November 30 to December 13. This was the only major international event that Lukashenka was able to attend in 2023. The *Pul Pervogo* Telegram channel, which is close to the presidential administration, framed his participation as if the leaders of different countries were literally lining up to shake his hand. It is enough just to see the headlines:

“[The Belarusian leader was greeted](#) by UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres”

“[Next in line to meet Lukashenka](#) is the President of Botswana”

“[I’ll get contact information from my brother.](#)” How African leaders share Lukashenka’s contacts”

¹⁰ From the same source.

["The First President has a place in the front row!"](#) (regarding a general photo of meeting participants)

Having lost economic ties and political contacts with the West, Belarus, following Russia, has rushed to the East and South. During his visit to Beijing on December 4, Lukashenka tried in every way possible to flatter Chinese leader Xi Jinping, thanking him for taking the time to receive him because "the Chinese chairman bears the burden of the leader of the planet":

"The most important thing is that you have decided on the common destiny of humanity as your goal. Unlike Western countries that try to cut everything into pieces, you have set a single goal for everyone. Who can argue with that? Nobody. The world will be grateful to Great China for this. [Belarus is very interested in the greatness of China.](#)"

He gained Xi's favor in response:

"[China firmly supports Belarus's path of development](#) that is suited to its national conditions and opposes interference by external forces in Belarus's internal affairs."

Propaganda sources describe a tour of Africa and the Middle East and negotiations with China in November and December as another foreign policy success for Lukashenka. On the *ONT* television channel, "expert" of the state-run Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies (BISI) Sergei Vergeichik said that China views Belarus as "[an important participant in the transformation of the modern world order.](#)"

"Genocide of the Belarusian people"

In 2021, the General Prosecutor's Office of Belarus opened a criminal case "on evidence of committing crimes of genocide against the Belarusian people during the Second World War." Since then, the Lukashenka regime has used the rhetoric of "Belarusian genocide" as an important element of anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian propaganda, portraying the West as the direct heir of German Nazism, responsible for war crimes in Belarus during the Second World War, and Ukraine as a country of collaborators and accomplices controlled by the "Nazi junta." [Prosecutor General of Belarus Andrei Shved](#) said that Belarus will demand compensation for damages estimated at \$2.3 trillion. How this will materialize is unknown. In addition, the [Prosecutor General's Office announced plans to send 10-15 criminal cases to court in 2024](#) against those accused of war crimes during WWII, however it is clear that all those accused have long been dead.

In January 2022, a new article 130.2 titled “Denial of the genocide of the Belarusian people” was introduced into the Criminal Code, providing for punishment of up to 10 years in prison.

The topic of “genocide” occupies an important place in propaganda rhetoric and is intended, on the one hand, to contribute to the task of denigrating the “collective West” and rallying audiences against an “external threat,” while on the other hand creating an idealized image of Belarus as a victim of an external enemy. The main propagandists in this area are government officials, primarily the Prosecutor General Shved himself, who speaks a lot on this topic and published a book titled “Genocide of the Belarusian People” in 2022. [Here is how he argues the relevance of this topic for today's Belarus:](#)

“The investigation into the crimes of genocide against the Belarusian people, which began in 2021, is necessary to prevent the glorification of Nazism. The events of 2020 have shown that our society is not sufficiently aware of the crimes of Nazi Germany... In the policies of the countries of the collective West towards Russia and Belarus, continuity with the ideas of Nazi Germany is observed.”

In addition, for the second year in a row, the Ministry of Education has been organizing special lessons on the topic of “genocide” in Belarusian schools and issuing methodological recommendations. The updated school textbook now includes a chapter dedicated to the “genocide of Belarusians.”

Thematic events are held throughout the country. Several such events took place on December 9, 2023, the International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Genocide.¹¹ For example, in one of the Orthodox churches in Minsk, a funeral liturgy was held “in memory of the innocent victims of genocide.” The ceremony was attended by the Minister of Internal Affairs, the assistant to the “president,” the head of the Minsk police, and other high-ranking [officials](#).

Also on this day, a conference was held in Minsk to mark the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the International Convention on Genocide.¹² Speaking at the event, Prosecutor General Shved said that in the West “young people know nothing about the Great Patriotic War”:

“We need to convey this information [to Western citizens] in every way possible. We are conducting extensive illuminating work. Together with

¹¹ The full name is International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide, Honoring Their Dignity and Prevention of this Crime. Established by the UN in 2015.

¹² Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Adopted by the UN on December 9, 1948.

television channels, we have prepared and will continue to prepare series of programs, documentaries, and publish printed materials. There should be many more projects like this.”

The fact that propaganda rhetoric about genocide is directly related to today is best conveyed by a [quote](#) from a speech by the deputy head of the “president’s” administration, Igor Lutsky:

“After what happened to the Belarusian people during the war, the countries imposing sanctions against Belarus do not have the moral right to recommend anything to us, to manage us somehow, or to advise us something. I’m surprised that the Austrians and Germans behave this way towards us. Their people must return to this history once again and understand that what they are doing now is repeating. These are small steps towards a big war and a big confrontation, towards a big death.”

Nuclear weapons in the service of propaganda

In March 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that he had reached an agreement with Aliaksandr Lukashenka on the supply of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) to Belarus. In June 2023, according to reports from Lukashenka himself, the first units of tactical nuclear weapons appeared in Belarus. Propaganda outlets trumpeted that now Belarus has a “reliable shield.” It is obvious that with the help of “nuclear bravado” Lukashenka, frightened by the mass protests of 2020, is seeking only one goal – [maintaining his own power](#):

“I will repeat this for the hundredth time. We are not threatening anyone. We are simply learning ‘diplomatic etiquette’ from those who made the language of power a global trend. Only the presence of powerful weapons guarantees security in the region and gives us the right to vote in the international arena.”

In his congratulations to nuclear industry workers on Energy Day on December 22, 2023, Lukashenka said that Belarus was [“strengthening its position as a nuclear power.”](#) even though he was talking about launching the second power unit of the Belarusian nuclear power plant.

On the eve of the New Year, propaganda outlets reported the receipt of tactical nuclear weapons as “one of the positive results of the year.” On December 27, in an interview with *Sputnik Belarus*, former opposition member and now pro-government politician [Yuri Voskresensky called](#) the delivery of Russian tactical nuclear weapons “the main event of the year,” as this “will ensure our defense capability, our security, our political, economic, and military sovereignty for many

years and will cool Western heads who want to cut off the Belarusian 'balcony' to make a protected zone on the western flank."

[This topic was further developed by Alexander Tishchenko](#), an "expert" on national security:

"The West has been forced to change its strategy towards Belarus. We are no longer easy prey for them. They cannot handle us anymore... They require armies of collaborators, mercenaries, and traitors. But do these guys really think that if they replace regular units with all sorts of riffraff that we won't consider it a full-scale invasion purely for legal reasons?"

He is [echoed by Marat Markov](#), director of the state television channel ONT:

"I wish we could move on. Because be that as it may, no one is going to leave us alone. They will try to shake us up as much as possible by all means from abroad. The good must show its fists."

Narrative 2: Main Target for Propaganda: Belarusian Democratic Forces

Even though supporters of Belarus's democratic transition were either forced to leave the country or go underground, the intensity of propaganda hatred towards them has not subsided. Pro-government channels continue to viciously ridicule, humiliate, and denigrate "fugitives" and "traitors" every day. At the same time, the regime wants to return political emigrants to their homeland by all means.

The representatives of democratic forces are often accused of planning a coup and terrorist attacks. These allegations are intended to justify the use of criminal trials in absentia against opposition leaders on charges of serious crimes against the state and the inclusion of hundreds of regime critics on lists of terrorists and extremists.

Still, the Belarusian state makes efforts to bring them home by deception or coercion. For this purpose, in March 2023, for example, the so-called "Return Commission" was created, which considers applications from "fugitives" with their requests to forgive them and take them back.¹³ Its members include pro-government public figures, officials (including the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Chairman of the KGB) and propagandists. The "commission" is essentially a regime media project designed, through promises and deception, to bring about the return of protest participants who left. They have been assured that after consideration of their cases they would not be bothered and would be allowed to live in peace. Fortunately, few fell for this trick. According to the Prosecutor General's Office, from February to September 2023, the "commission" received only a little more than 100 applications. Independent media reported that some of those who applied to the "commission" were deceived. Despite promises, arrest awaited them upon their return.¹⁴ In January, [Lukashenka extended the deadline for submitting applications](#) to the commission until the end of 2024.

In 2023, the state took legislative measures to force "fugitives" to return. Among these is the transfer of authority to issue personal documents and powers of attorney for citizens from Belarusian consulates abroad to authorities inside Belarus.

¹³ The full name is "Commission for the consideration of appeals from citizens of the Republic of Belarus who are abroad regarding the commission of offenses," created by decree of the "president" on February 6, 2023.

¹⁴ More details: [Today is the last day of work of the return commission](#). "Nasha Niva", 12/31/2023.

Propaganda outlets, following the state's lead, is making efforts to lure those who left back to the country. They promote the idea that "these are our people too," however, in a typically mocking manner. For example, Alena Krasovskaya, a pro-government "human rights activist," [writes in the newspaper Belarus Today](#):

"If anyone poses a threat to the national security of any country, it is only our zmagars [freedomfighters].¹⁵ They are arrogant, and a feeling of gratitude is unusual for them. A couple of years will pass, and they will start barking at Lithuania, because they are always unhappy. Don't say later that we didn't warn you... So, maybe don't wait until you are forcibly taken to the border and return on your own? Take your Lithuanian wives, husbands, children, and even pets with you. We will be happy to see them too. And in our country, you are always welcome. Come home for good, Belarusians!"

At the same time, the propagandists clearly did not come together on a common position. As always, the [most frightening statements were made by Grigory Azarenok](#):

"Anyone who crosses the border of Belarus, even a centimeter, even a millimeter, for one second, will be destroyed instantly. Quickly. Ruthlessly. Killed. Into dust. Shot. Blown up. Torn apart. Without any hesitation. It's good the army and the Ministry of Internal Affairs are preparing."

[Oleg Gaidukevich](#), a pro-government politician, also threatened the following:

"After all their statements, our intelligence services have the right to do whatever they want within the framework of the law and international documents. These are terrorists. If they meddle they will be destroyed."

And the "columnist" Andrei Mukovozchik of the pro-government newspaper Belarus Today [passionately defended denunciations](#):

"Our ancestors were no more stupid than us when they burned out this infection [the opposition] with a hot iron... For them there was no question of "to inform or not to inform," "to snitch or not to snitch," to help the "bloody KGB" or not. And it's not for us to tell them how to deal with accomplices and agents. Not us. We should learn from them."

¹⁵ Zmagar – fighter, champion, zealot in the Belarusian language; used by propaganda as a mocking label denoting Belarusian citizens who oppose the authorities

Narrative 3: Ukraine

Pro-government media of Belarus follow main Russian ideological lines towards the war in Ukraine. They spread myths about the “lack of independence of Ukraine” and that “Ukrainian people is a part of the Russian people”.

Justification of aggression and war crimes, war with the West

From the very beginning of preparations for Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Lukashenka regime unconditionally took Russia's side. After February 2022, not a trace remained of the image of “neutrality” that Belarus tried to maintain since 2014, offering itself as a negotiating platform. Since Belarus has offered up its territory, airspace, and infrastructure to the Russian armed forces for their attack on Ukraine, the Lukashenka regime has rightly been perceived by the world community as an accomplice to the aggression.

In Putin's war against Ukraine, Belarusian propaganda became an integral part of Russian propaganda. If before the war Belarusian media still had minimal space for different points of view, then after the outbreak of aggression any liberties were no longer permissible. Now, in relation to Ukraine, Belarusian propaganda totally follows the Kremlin's ideological guidelines.

In the last months of 2023, the world's perception of the Ukrainian war was influenced by serious international events.

The monstrous Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent large-scale Israeli military operation in Gaza temporarily overshadowed the news from the Ukrainian fronts. Not one, but two serious armed conflicts have become the focus of international attention. Russian and Belarusian propagandists openly rejoiced at this, believing that international assistance to Ukraine would inevitably end, and Russia's victory was just around the corner.

Victorious reports about the fact that the West is allegedly ceasing to help Ukraine dominated the Belarusian media environment for more than a month. This myth is pushed, first of all, by the “main propagandist” of Belarus – Aliaksandr Lukashenka himself:

[“Ukraine will still be ours.](#) Nobody needs Ukraine. Only Russia and Belarus need it. Therefore, this region is our region, in the sense that we will be together.”

[“I warned Zelensky](#), if there is a mess somewhere or for some other reason, they will forget about you. And here you go: the Middle East, the internal situation in America. What happened is that the poor guy is walking around with his hand outstretched.”

Lukashenka's words were picked up by propaganda sources. For example, in a political talk show on the STV channel, the dean of the educational faculty of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus, Andrei Bogodel, said that Ukraine belongs to the so-called “Russian world”:

[“Ukraine as a sovereign state will lose the war](#) – that is beyond any doubt. Maybe it will freeze, unfreeze, and go on for decades, but still Ukraine will belong to the ‘Russian world.’ Because it is a part of the ‘Russian world.’”

It should be noted that in covering Israel's war against Hamas, Belarusian media also took the Russian, and therefore Palestinian, side. After the appearance of openly anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic articles in the Belarusian press immediately after October 7 (more about this in the section on Israel) and the scandal that erupted after this, propaganda outlets apparently decided not to mention the distant and complex Middle Eastern topic at all and returned to Ukrainian news.

Statements about the failure of Ukraine as a state again began to appear in the press. As in previous months, Belarusian propaganda resources expressed sympathy for “ordinary Ukrainian brothers” forced to die for the interests of Zelensky, who is backed by the West. After all, the West (and not Russia), according to the propaganda, began the war in Ukraine against Russia.

Similar statements were made by Sergei Mikheev, a Russian propagandist, [in an interview with channel ONT](#):

“The collective West forced us, the Slavs, to kill each other for their own benefit... We ourselves gave our enemies the opportunity not only to tear us apart, but also to force us to fight against each other. Unfortunately, many people are gleeful about this... We did not have enough inner wisdom and respect for our own civilization to avoid this.”

Oleg Voloshin, a former deputy of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and pro-Russian “political scientist” [said the following in an interview with STV](#):

“The war in Ukraine is a source of enrichment for Western corruption.”

[He was supported in the same program by Kirill Molchanov](#), director of the Institute for the Study of the Consequences of the War in Ukraine (Russia):

“For the U.S. and its allies, Ukraine is a kamikaze country.”

On December 13, the exhibition “Ordinary Nazism” about the “crimes of Ukraine,” organized by the pro-government Russian Historical Society (RIS), opened at the House of Moscow in Minsk. At the opening, the [permanent chairman of RIS and head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergei Naryshkin, said:](#)

“Getting acquainted with these exhibits, there is no longer any doubt that this hotbed of Ukrainian neo-Nazism, the creation of which was largely facilitated by the deliberate actions of Washington and other Western regimes, poses a real threat to Russia, Belarus, Europe, and the whole world.”

Yet, despite the aggressive anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, an analysis of the statements of propagandists and officials is inconclusive regarding Belarus’s readiness to support Russia more actively in the war against Ukraine, beyond providing infrastructure and springboards for deploying troops, training Russian mobilized military personnel, transferring military equipment and weapons, and participation in the production of drones. Moreover, along with bellicose statements, Belarus itself is increasingly expressing interest in starting peace negotiations – on Russian terms, of course – and appealing to the conscience of Ukraine, not Russia. Obviously, Lukashenka is now extremely interested in regaining the image of a peacemaker who brings the parties to the conflict to the negotiating table:

“You know that today Russia is ready and has never refused negotiations. At that time Zelensky was restrained by the West, now they point to Zelensky and say, “If he agrees to negotiations, [we are also ready.](#)”

“[But we are missing the most important thing:](#) we will not escape Ukraine. We will have to work in Ukraine. No Americans or the West will help them. Vladimir Vladimirovich and I talk a lot about this. They will come to us for help. A huge amount of work. We will have to help the Ukrainians.”

However, in general, as noted above, the focus of propaganda during this period shifted from Ukraine to other events. True, this continued only until December 29, 2023, that is, until large-scale mutual missile attacks between Russia and Ukraine at the end of December 2023 to the beginning of January 2024, after which the propaganda again began to fiercely discuss the Ukrainian issue.

Pro-government media gloated about Russia's shelling of Kharkiv, Kyiv, Lviv and Zaporizhzhia and, in line with Kremlin propaganda, called the retaliatory shelling of the Russian city of Belgorod a "terrorist attack," presenting Russia as the injured party and keeping silent about the victims of Russian aggression. "Political scientist" Alexander Shpakovsky called the attack on Belgorod "another war crime of the Kyiv regime" and said that ["it is impossible to negotiate with terrorists."](#) Pro-government "political scientist" [Aliaksei Dzermant echoed him:](#)

"Alas, this terror will not stop until there is a retaliatory destruction of the Ukrainian ruling elite."

Justifying the deportation of Ukrainian children

At the same time, propaganda justifies not only Russian crimes against Ukrainians, but also war crimes by the Lukashenka regime. They reject accusations of the involuntary transport of children to Belarus for "rehabilitation" due to the threat of the International Criminal Court issuing an arrest warrant for Alexander Lukashenka, as was done in respect of Vladimir Putin.

In early October, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus organized a meeting with Ukrainian children, where representatives of the diplomatic corps accredited in Minsk were invited. Western diplomats boycotted the invitation, which, of course, [was used by propaganda:](#)

"Not a single representative of the EU countries was present; they ignored this opportunity to face the truth. Once again, they showed their face: they are ready to work with the world only in the context of mentorship, ready to blame entire countries and their leaders, those who did not want to betray their national interests",

– pro-government paralympian Aliaksei Talai, head of a foundation that organizes the transfer of Ukrainian children to Belarus "for rehabilitation," told *Sputnik* news agency. Talai is a regular guest on propaganda talk shows. In 2023, Russian "president" Vladimir Putin awarded him with the Order of Friendship ["for services in strengthening friendship and cooperation between peoples"](#).

On November 1, 2023, the Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova arrived in Minsk. In March 2023, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for her, along with Vladimir Putin on suspicion of organizing the involuntary transport of Ukrainian children to Russia. Despite this, at a public meeting in Minsk with the participation of Lvova-Belova, Russian Ambassador [Boris Gryzlov essentially announced](#) the readiness of Russia and Belarus to continue to remove children from Ukraine:

“If we speak the language of facts, no country or organization in the world has done as much for the safety and well-being of Ukrainian children as Russia and Belarus.”

Other Belarusian officials also spoke about this issue. On November 11, the Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Belarus to the UN, Pavel Evseenko, at a meeting of the UN Security Council, [stated during a discussion of the issue of Ukrainian children](#):

“Belarus is seriously concerned about the manipulation of the ‘children’s agenda’ at the UN and is extremely disappointed by the politicization of Belarus’s humanitarian activities in organizing holidays for children from foreign countries in Belarusian health institutions.”

On November 28, the Minister-Counselor of the Belarusian Embassy in Russia, propagandist [Aliaksandr Shpakouski](#), said that Belarus will continue to remove children from Ukraine, despite international sanctions and condemnation:

“We simply don’t listen to these squeals from abroad and won’t take them into account... We give these children medicine, shelter, food, a good way to pass the time, and friendship. And they [the West] give them bombs, bullets, and planes.”

On December 10, the so-called “Ambassador-at-Large on Crimes of the Kyiv Regime” (a position established under the Russian MFA in August 2023) [Rodion Miroshnik, in an interview with the Belarusian state television channel STV](#), said that the return of Ukrainian children is a “gesture of goodwill” by Russia:

“Ukraine says that they have returned three hundred and something children. It was not Ukraine that returned them, but the Russian Ombudsman for Children who found them, paid for their parents’ travel, and checked their genetic data. Frequently, it was at the Minsk site that transferring these children to Ukrainian parents or relatives took place.”

At the same time, the “ambassador on issues of crimes of the Kyiv regime,” himself a former Ukrainian politician who went over to the Russian side¹⁶, confirmed the previously established fact that Russia uses Belarus as a “neutral” platform for the transfer of Ukrainian children.

¹⁶ Rodion Miroshnik is a former press secretary for the head of the pro-Kremlin Party of Regions and President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich and from 2014 to 2022 was the so-called ambassador to the “Lugansk People’s Republic” in Russia.

Narrative 4: “ENEMIES OF BELARUS”: Poland, the Baltic countries, and the “collective West”

According to the propaganda, the Western countries have aggressive plans against Belarus. It claims that the Baltic states and Poland intend to invade Western regions of Belarus and train paramilitary groups of Belarusians in exile who should attack the country. The entire language against the West is very aggressive but mitigating rhetoric also remains.

Media attack on Poland

The parliamentary elections in Poland on October 15, 2023, without question became one of the main media occasions for Belarusian propaganda outlets in the last quarter of the year. For some time, Polish topics even eclipsed other topics in Belarus. And this is not surprising, because Poland is Belarus’s closest and most powerful western neighbor and maintains a hard line towards the authoritarian regimes in Minsk and Moscow.

Belarusian propaganda outlets assessed the elections held in Poland as [“the dirtiest, most scandalous, most corrupt”](#) (ONT), and the candidate parties were all “equally bad.” At the same time, state media “experts” claimed that the elections would go smoothly, because “no one will give Poland permission to organize a color revolution” and there will be no socio-political changes, as a result of which Poland “will withdraw from the number of active opponents of Russia and Belarus” ([Igor Shishkin in an interview with BelTA](#)).

Polish pro-Kremlin “expert” [Tomasz Gryguć also claims](#) that nothing depends on the elections because “we Poles are completely dependent on the United States. The U.S. decides who will be in power.” In general, no elections will change the “anti-Belarusian consensus formed in Poland,” but [“one must distinguish between the Polish government and the Polish people”](#) (Aliaksandr Shpakouski). However, the “president” of Belarus himself unexpectedly praised the citizens of Poland for the election results, in which the opposition broke the monopoly of the ruling Law and Justice” (PiS) party:

[“Well done, Poles. I didn't expect this outcome. They simply did not play this game with PiS. Well, Poles, I praise the people of Poland. Well done! They showed them who's boss. And the opposition was essentially brought to power. Poland will not be the same.”](#)

In general, despite the largely unfriendly tone of official Belarus towards Poland, Lukashenka made several “softening” statements following the Polish elections.

[Specifically, he stated](#) that “Belarus always extends a hand to its neighbors and does not throw stones in their direction... Our neighbors come from God, and we must live with them.”

On October 6, in responding to a question about the upcoming elections at that time, [Lukashenka remarked](#):

“We don’t want the Poles to consider us strangers, enemies. Our goal was never to aggravate relations. We are not building up armed forces near the borders of Poland and the Baltic countries to attack them.”

On November 11, Lukashenka congratulated Poland on their National Independence Day. The tone of the address was [largely conciliatory](#):

“Our common past includes a centuries-old common Christian and cultural heritage and broad and friendly contacts between residents of both countries. I hope that Warsaw will listen to the voice of its citizens with their call to live in peace and harmony with representatives of all nations and religions and will consider the friendly hand of cooperation extended by Belarus.”

On the same day, Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Aleinik said in an interview with the state television channel ONT that Minsk is open to dialogue with the Polish authorities. At the same time, [he again accused Poland](#) of taking hostile steps, to which Belarus was “forced to respond”:

“We were not the initiators of the deterioration of relations with Poland. We were forced to respond to numerous systemic unfriendly steps by the Polish authorities towards Belarus. We have always advocated and continue to advocate for dialogue, but this dialogue must be mutually respectful and conducted without any preconditions.”

On November 3, speaking in the city of Astravets, Lukashenka returned to his traditional anti-Polish rhetoric and said that he did not expect any improvements in Poland’s policy towards Belarus after the parliamentary elections. He called the Law and Justice party “pro-American” and the leader of the opposition Civic Platform party, Donald Tusk, a “pro-European politician”:

[“But this does not mean that tomorrow policies towards Belarus will change.](#) We are a sovereign independent state. We will pursue policies that meet the interests of our people. If they are ready for this, tomorrow we are ready to shake their hand anywhere and we are ready to cooperate with them.”

In December, iSANS noted a new round of the anti-Polish campaign against the backdrop of a change of government in Poland. The message conveyed to audiences was that the new government would remain “under the control” of the EU or “Anglo-Saxons.” For example, participating in the Editors Club program on December 23, the [leader of the pro-government LDPB party Oleg Gaidukevich said](#):

“In Poland the political field has very much been cleared. There was and is no democracy or rules of speech there. There is a showdown between two political centers. One party was supported by the Americans. When it came to power, it promised to support national interests, but instead fell to the U.S.”

It is still being asserted that Poland expects to take the territories of Western Ukraine. For example, pro-government “human rights activist” Alena Krasovskaya writes that there is an agreement between Presidents Duda and Zelensky on the transfer of the Volyn, Ternopil, Rivne, and Lviv regions to Poland, and warns the Poles that in the event of such an accession, “[Western nationalists](#) with the support of Ukrainian criminals (already in Poland) can organize another ‘Volyn massacre’ in the country and effectively seize power.”

Other examples of anti-Western rhetoric

On December 13, the Head of Belarus’s KGB, Ivan Tertel, said that CIA agents had been identified in Minsk. [He noted](#) that during counterintelligence work, “the arrival of foreign diplomats, sometimes intelligence officers for various purposes” is noted:

“They have an interesting reaction when they visit Minsk and various sites. Recently there were CIA officers here and they moved around Minsk very actively.”

According to Tertel, CIA employees were supposedly surprised by the “good situation” in Belarus, which did not correspond to ideas prevailing in the West. “[One of the goals of the West](#) is the destruction of integration and fraternal ties with Russia” and other countries of the former USSR, and the Belarusian “diaspora in Poland is preparing to conduct terrorist attacks in Belarus,” Tertel said.

Belarusian propaganda outlets continue to employ totally disgraceful methods, including insults against individual Western politicians. During the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in St. Petersburg on December 25, Aliaksandr Lukashenka called the head of EU diplomacy, Josep Borrell, who had previously

expressed fears that Russia could attack NATO countries, [“a foolish person who has no place in politics.”](#)

Propagandists began to discuss his words with pleasure and went even further, calling Borrell a “fool” ([Novikov](#)), a “blockhead” ([Gladkaya](#)), while at the same time insulting other European politicians (von der Leyen, Sikorsky, Barroso, etc.).

Vadim Elfimov, a pro-government political scientist and columnist for the *Minskaya Pravda* newspaper, went even further. In an article entitled “Sharikoff von der Leyen: a man or another professor’s experiment,” [he worked through the appearance of the head of the European Commission:](#)

“Just look at her crooked legs on which she patters about in constantly skimpy trousers along the echoing corridors of Western power. These legs never get tired. Looking for what? Another billion euros to put in its pocket.”

At the same time, as noted, statements by regime ideologists sometimes contain “conciliatory” motifs and proposals to “forget old grievances” and return to old friendships to conduct business as usual. [Ivan Tertel, Chairman of the KGB:](#)

“We did not impose sanctions against Poland or close checkpoints. On the contrary, the head of state gave instructions to the government to establish decent, good neighborly relations and discuss problematic issues without preconditions. Unfortunately, there was no response.”

On November 21, in response to a statement by Vice-Speaker of the Polish Senate Maciej Żywno that [Warsaw needs to start negotiations with Lukashenka](#), member of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus Sergei Klishevich said that Mr. Żywno “sees that the Poles want to live normally with Belarus”:

“[They want to talk](#), to be friends, trade, visit each other, as we did before. There is no other choice. They need to come to an agreement with the Belarusians, sit down at the negotiating table, resolve issues, and coexist more or less normally.”

Of course, in his commentary, Klishevich did not mention the real reason for the suspension of Polish-Belarusian relations, namely, the Lukashenka regime’s direct support for Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The subject of Belarus's desire to cooperate and its neighbors' refusal to do so was developed by [Aliaksandr Volfovich, State Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus](#):

“All our messages and appeals to Poland and the Baltic countries – “Let’s talk constructively, including on the topic of migration, to find ways out of this situation, to find ways to resolve it” – remain unanswered.”

[Lukashenka himself spoke on this issue](#) at a meeting with employees of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant in the city of Astravets:

“We will restore relations with Lithuania and Poland is not going anywhere. The basic principle is that neighbors cannot live badly. I always say that neighbors come from God, they are not chosen... There are disagreements, quarrels, and so on, but this is temporary. The time will come when we live with them as we always have, even in Soviet times...”

Surge of anti-Semitism in Belarusian propaganda against the backdrop of the Hamas terrorist attacks

On October 7, the terrorist organization Hamas carried out an audacious attack on Israel and conducted a bloody massacre, during which more than 1,200 civilians were brutally killed. The world was shocked by the cruelty of the terrorists. On the same day, a military operation against Hamas began with Israeli armed forces entering Gaza.

Initially, the tone of Belarusian propaganda relative to these events was moderately neutral. The tone was set by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, which published a statement on the day of the tragedy that referred to “the unacceptable attacks on civilians,” but did not specify whose attacks they meant. It also [did not name the terrorists](#) and essentially assigned responsibility to both sides of the conflict.

However, propagandists quickly took the Palestinian side. On October 8, the state newspaper Minsk Pravda published a radically anti-Israeli article by Igor Molotov, a columnist for the Russian state media holding *RT* (formerly Russia Today). In this article, Molotov defended the attack on Israel, calling the country a “fascist state” and proposing exploding a thermonuclear bomb over Israel. Moreover, the article said that [“\[t\]he victory of Palestine in the occupied territories is a victory for Moscow and Minsk.”](#) However, the next day the article was removed from the publication's website.

A day later, on October 10, an interview with the chairman of the Jewish Religious Association of Belarus, Artur Livshits, [appeared in Minskaya Pravda](#), likely to mitigate the negative consequences of the scandal caused by Molotov's article. Almost immediately following the terrorist attack, propagandists began to discuss how the new escalation would affect the war between Russia and Ukraine.

On October 8, pro-Russian "political scientist" [Aliaksandr Shpakouski said](#), "I am confident that the war in the Middle East will not lead to any 'easing' for the Ukrainian theater of operations. There is no precondition."

The "president" of Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, remained silent for a long time regarding the Hamas terrorist attack and the Israeli anti-terrorist operation that followed. He later made several statements condemning Israel and blaming the West for unleashing the aggression. On October 27, addressing journalists, Lukashenka declared the "Americans" to be at fault for starting the conflict and called for the creation of a ["Palestinian state."](#)

The independent media portal *MediaIQ* published an analytical review titled "Conspiracy theories, disinformation, incomplete facts – how Belarusian state media are covering the conflict between Israel and Hamas," which shows [how one-sided and biased official Belarusian media were from the first days of the conflict](#).

Reaction to anti-Semitic and anti-Israel actions in Russia

The Belarusian media and private blogs of propagandists decided to ignore the series of events in the North Caucasus, where pro-Palestinian rallies turned into openly anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli actions and pogroms. The television channels *STV*, *ONT*, and *ATN* mostly made do with light neutral news about the closure of the airport in Makhachkala or reposting messages from Russian state media. Propagandist Grigory Azarenok repeated on his channel, echoing the head of Dagestan Sergei Melikov, that ["behind the riots in Makhachkala were traitors Banderites from Ukraine."](#) and the state publication *Belarus Segodnya* reprinted [Putin's quote](#) that "the events in Makhachkala were inspired from Ukraine by the hands of agents of Western intelligence services."

PROPAGANDA AND CENSORSHIP: Two brothers in the dictatorship family

Censorship as an aid to propaganda

In addition to inciting hatred towards neighbors on the western border, Ukraine, and “internal enemies,” the Belarusian regime at the end of 2023 was engaged in solving another important issue for itself: tightening censorship and control over the media. It would seem that the media field has been cleared out. The last independent media have been destroyed or forced to leave the country after the suppression of the 2020 protests, access to their publications on the internet has been blocked, and people have been subjected to repression for subscribing to “extremist” media resources. But authoritarianism never stops there when it comes to tightening the screws and repressing. At the end of the year, the authorities began to “nationalize” the last remaining, completely neutral, apolitical, regional publications not yet controlled by the authorities.

On December 2, the independent newspaper *Nasha Niva* reported on the takeover of popular small media by large state entities that had begun in Belarus. The publication was made aware of at least three such cases: the reconstitution of the city of Lahoisk Telegram channel, the seizure of the Instagram channel *Stolbtsy City* and the change of owners of the independent website *Kraj.by*.

According to *Nasha Niva*, in October 2023, the independent channel *Lahoisk (un)officially* was renamed *Our Native Land Lahoisk*. Later, the new channel published news that “extremist materials” had been found on the original channel, so a new one was developed on its foundation. All posts on the old channel have been deleted. And the new one now publishes news and articles from the state propaganda newspaper *Minsk Pravda*.

Similar changes have been seen on the *Stolbtsy* page on Instagram, which has more than 10,000 subscribers. It is reported that this page is now also run by *Minsk Pravda*. In the summer of 2023, the output of the popular non-political publication *kraj.by* was also changed to *Minsk Pravda*. There were no reports on this. *Nasha Niva* concludes that the pro-government [Minskaya Pravda is trying to gain control over all](#) – state and non-state – media in the region.

There are also quite serious conversations being held about clearing libraries of ideologically incorrect books. On December 5, at a meeting of the National Council on Historical Policy under the “presidential” administration, the prospect of removing “publications that distort historical truth and extremist

publications” from national libraries was discussed. [This entire project was called “cultural import substitution.”](#)

On December 6, State Secretary of the Union State Dmitry Mezentsev said that the Soviet practice of Russian and Belarusian schoolchildren writing propaganda letters to their peers in Western countries [“about the horrors of war and in support of peace”](#) would be revived.

On December 15, a meeting of propagandists – the heads of state news agencies of the CIS countries – was held in Minsk. Usually at such meetings, ways of closer cooperation between propaganda media and the state are discussed. Speaking at the meeting, Deputy Secretary General of the CIS Leonid Anfimov said that “the rampant democracy in Telegram channels is unacceptable”:

“[If speaking about Belarus](#), 2020 taught us a lot. We allowed this freedom with rampant democracy, where everyone could say in Telegram channels whatever they wanted, whatever came into their head. And 99.9% of it was not true.”

Russian propaganda on Belarus

Russian officials and propagandists often speak out in support of the Belarusian regime, some examples of which have already been given above in quotes from official Belarusian publications. In general, pro-Kremlin propaganda is aimed at finding common, unifying pages in the history and present of the two countries to convince their audiences that Belarus has no other choice but to be with Russia. Belarusian propagandists themselves actively assist in promoting this narrative.¹⁷

In November 2023, a monument to the Russian Grand Duke Alexander Nevsky was inaugurated near the Russian Embassy in Minsk. What Nevsky has to do with Belarus and Minsk explained archpriest of the Belarusian Orthodox Church Fyodor Povny, who is a propagandist and frequent guest of state television channels:

“[The inhabitants of White Rus'](#) called themselves Russians, and the princely family of Rurikovich ruled our ancestors as well. Alexander Nevsky became a common symbol for the Soviet peoples of victory over the enemy in the Great Patriotic War.”

¹⁷ See statements about the “Belarus Empire” in the section of the same name.

In 2022, the [Interparliamentary Assembly of the CIS countries declared](#) 2023 the Year of the Russian language as a language of interethnic communication. Summing up the results of the year, the head of the upper house of the Belarusian “parliament” – the Council of the Republic – Natalya Kachanova, speaking on November 17 at a meeting of the Interparliamentary Assembly in Bishkek, said that the Russian language is a “national treasure” of CIS countries:

“[The great Russian language](#) is a powerful unifying principle for millions of people, an important factor in Eurasian integration, and the common heritage of all peoples of the Commonwealth.”

On November 15, the first meeting of the joint Expert Advisory Russian-Belarusian Council on History took place in Minsk. The Council is an ideological project of the “Union State” aimed, among other things, at [“countering the falsification of history.”](#)

At the same time, despite the apparent unity, disagreements also arise in the leadership of the “Union State.” The most serious situation arose at the end of October 2023, when Aliaksandr Lukashenka unexpectedly demanded that Russia pay compensation for the delay in the construction of the Belarusian nuclear power plant. Such a statement from a dictator totally dependent on Russia in other circumstances would have looked like an extremely daring step, but the Russian government tried to tamp down the brewing conflict. Russian State Duma deputy Aleksey Chepa then called Lukashenka’s demands a “business issue” and said that they [“have no political subtext.”](#)

In addition, despite seemingly having reached agreement, the creation of a “single media holding” of the “Union State” has been postponed for the third year. According to State Secretary of the Union State Dmitry Mezentsev in an interview with the Belarus 1 television channel, the creation of the holding is hampered by “conceptual differences.” However, later an agreement seemed to be reached when a draft resolution on the creation of a single media company of the [Union State](#) was finally published on January 22, 2024.

On December 5, a forum was held in Minsk dedicated to the memory of the head of Chechnya (until 2004) Akhmat Kadyrov. It was organized by the Muslim Religious Association in Belarus and special representative of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Chechnya in Belarus, [Badrudin Turloev](#). The organizers did not explain what relation Akhmat Kadyrov has to Belarus.

On December 31, Russian Ambassador to Belarus Boris Gryzlov said in his New Year’s greeting that, despite Western sanctions, the economies of Russia and

Belarus showed strong growth, and the “Union State” remained a real bastion of stability:

“Not a single ‘prophecy’ of foreign skeptics, critics, and ill-wishers who predicted a crisis and decline for us has come true. [Everything has turned out exactly the opposite.](#)”

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the storylines of Belarusian propaganda in the second half of 2023 allows us to draw the following conclusions:

On the domestic side, the efforts of propagandists are concentrated on strengthening the legitimacy of power and supporting the positive image of the “president”, emphasizing his significance, uniqueness and indispensability, achievements in the international arena, successes in negotiations, etc.

Propaganda continues to look for examples of the good life in the past and exploit nostalgia for the USSR while simultaneously touching on the rehabilitation of the positive image of the tyrant Stalin, the glorification of the Soviet intelligence services and the criminal methods of their work. This framework fits a series of memorable dates that propagandists have not failed to exploit for this purpose, including Chekist Day, the birthdays of Stalin and Brezhnev, and the anniversary of the creation of the “Union State.”

At the same time, propaganda outlets actively employ the image of Belarus as a victim of German Nazism to deepen anti-Western narratives, inviting the manufactured topic of “genocide of the Belarusian people” during the Second World War.

Discrediting the Belarusian democratic forces remains one of the main goals of propaganda outlets. This foremost results from the need to somehow respond to the actions of the united opposition and the legitimacy of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Propaganda is filled with threats against oppositionists. This intimidation is intended to reinforce the brutal repression taking place daily. At the same time, the authorities are extremely interested in the return of the “fugitives.” To achieve this, combined efforts are made through coercion (and compulsion) and false promises.

The regime’s efforts have also been aimed at tightening control over the media (both national and regional), purging the media space to deprive small media outlets of the last remnants of independence while strengthening censorship.

Internationally, the world’s focus temporarily shifted to the Middle East in October and November, prompting pro-Kremlin propagandists to claim that Western aid to Ukraine would be reduced. This also reflects a global change. The reasons for this are not only the shift of attention to the acute conflict in the Middle East, but also due to the suspension of the Ukrainian counter-offensive and, more generally, a periodic lack of significant news from the front. This applies to the period before December 29, that is, before the large-scale mutual

New Year's rocket attacks, after which the topic of the Russian-Ukrainian war again returned to the front pages of Belarusian state media.

As before, propaganda outlets continue to fiercely defend the authorities on the issue of the illegal forced transfer of children from Ukraine and emphasize the “humanism” of the regime.

Despite the aggressive anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, analysis of propaganda statements does not allow for any conclusion regarding Lukashenka's desire to directly enter the war against Ukraine on the side of Russia. On the contrary, propagandists themselves have increasingly expressed interest in starting peace negotiations, addressing such demands, of course, to the authorities of Ukraine and not Russia, in the same offensively boorish manner that has been characteristic. It is obvious that Lukashenka himself is very much interested in reclaiming the image of a peacemaker who brought the warring parties to the negotiating table, and it is desirable that this table be in Minsk.

Among Western countries, the “poisonous sting” of propaganda is aimed primarily at Poland and Lithuania as countries that take the toughest and most uncompromising position towards the authoritarian regimes in Belarus and Russia. State media devote much attention to discussing domestic political events in these countries, for example, the elections in Poland. In December, a new round of the anti-Polish campaign was noted in Belarusian state media against the backdrop of the recent change of the Polish government.

iSANS will continue to analyze the main directions of propaganda in Belarus and Russia in 2024.