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## Russian influence on news media in Belarus



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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates Russian media influence in Belarus during the second half of 2010, when an “information war” broke out between Moscow and Minsk. Samples of news content are analysed to reveal the varying portrayals of Russia generated by leading broadcasters and publishers; interviews with media professionals shed light on the forces which shaped the news. The article considers the outcomes of the information war and argues that the impact of Russian news exports lay more in their capacity to provoke than their capacity to “elicit attraction” as envisaged by the literature on soft power.

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Researchers in the field of post-Soviet politics rarely mention the Belarusian media beyond brief references to President Aleksandr Lukashenko’s “propaganda machine” (Eke and Kuzio, 2000), “propaganda empire” (Hill, 2005) or “assaults on media freedom” (Ioffe, 2008). The dominant narrative is a simple and depressing tale of “control and repression” (Sahm, 2009): most media in Belarus do the state’s bidding while independent voices are marginalized.

This narrative of control and repression is not inaccurate. However, it is insufficient for a full understanding of the Belarusian media landscape. There are other dynamics within the Belarusian media system which merit attention. This article considers Russian influence on traditional (offline) news media in Belarus, a topic which has been neglected in the literature despite its political salience. The article begins by outlining the nature, scale and evolution of Russian involvement in the Belarusian market for news, identifying partnerships and investments. It then describes the “information war” (*informatsionnaya voyna*) which broke out between Moscow and Minsk in the second half of 2010. Content analysis is used to expose variation in how Russia was portrayed during this turbulent period by 13 different news providers in Belarus, including bulletins on the main state TV channels, Russian-owned tabloids and a number of smaller-circulation independent newspapers.

The content analysis findings are explained by drawing on more than 20 original interviews with journalists, editors and other media professionals who work in Belarus or Russia. These interviews shed light on factors which shape reporting about Russia in Belarus, including the role played by Moscow-based partners or investors. The final sections of the article reflect on what the 2010 information war can teach us about the balance of power in Russian–Belarusian relations and the role of the media in Russian foreign policy. The media are frequently associated with “soft power” – the power of attraction in international relations (Nye, 2008). However, this article contends that Nye’s concept of soft power is inadequate to fully capture the nature of Russian media influence in Belarus. Pro-Kremlin news providers are undoubtedly a tool in Moscow’s relations with Minsk but their significance lies as much in their capacity to provoke as their capacity to “softly” persuade a mass audience. Moreover, the Russian news providers which operate in Belarus are vulnerable in varying degrees to constraints within their operating environment.

## 1. The Belarusian media landscape and the “Single Information Space.”

Aleksandr Lukashenko assumed office as president of Belarus in July 1994. His desire to subjugate the media became clear quite quickly. In December 1994 several of the country's state-owned newspapers experienced direct censorship when they attempted to publish a report containing allegations of corruption in the Presidential Administration (Eke, 2002; Sahm, 2009). A number of leading publications saw their editors-in-chief replaced by presidential appointees in the course of 1995. Once Lukashenko had tamed parliament by means of the 1996 constitutional referendum, legislation governing the media became progressively more restrictive. A series of amendments to the 1995 Law on the Press and Other Mass Media were adopted in the latter half of the 1990s, along with a “barrage” of presidential decrees, resolutions, by-laws and changes to the Criminal Code which had an adverse effect on the right to free expression (Prina and Pugsley, 2003). As things stand in 2015, it is illegal to defame the honour and dignity of the Belarusian president or disseminate information on behalf of unregistered organizations, for example, certain opposition groups.

No media outlet in Belarus can function without an official licence and the state has the power to suspend or terminate the operations of any publisher or broadcaster, essentially at will (ZRBOSMI, 2008). Cumbersome registration requirements apply to cable TV operators, who must obtain official consent before offering any extended package of channels to customers. Satellite TV transmission is harder to control, but an article in the Belarusian Code of Administrative Violations stipulates a fine for the “unauthorized installation of satellite or other antennas” on facades, balconies, loggias or roofs (KRBOAP, 2003). Some privately-run publications have been denied access to state-controlled printing presses, retail outlets and distribution systems. The toolkit used by the Belarusian authorities to manage the media is so extensive it cannot be catalogued here in full; these are just select examples.

In this highly illiberal context, the Belarusian government's attitude towards the cross-border flow of news from Russia has been paradoxical and contradictory. Politicians in both Moscow and Minsk have repeatedly endorsed the idea of a “single information space” (*yedinoye or obshcheye informatsionnoye prostranstvo*), implying that citizens of their respective countries should enjoy unimpeded access to the same news providers. For instance, Belarusian Minister of Information Vladimir Rusakevich said in 2008 that creating a single information space with Russia was an important strategic objective for both sides (Embassy of Belarus in the Russian Federation, 2008). In some respects, the authorities in Minsk have indeed allowed and facilitated Russian participation in their country's media environment.

In the period under study, two of the most widely read newspapers in Belarus were *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* and *Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii*. They are subsidiaries of the Moscow-based tabloids *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Argumenty i Fakty*; they carry articles from their parent publications alongside a substantial amount of locally-written material. In the period under study, three of Belarus's major state-owned TV channels had line-ups based wholly or substantially on Russian-made content: *ONT (Obshchenatsionalnoye televideniye)* was getting about 50 per cent of its line-up from Russia's *Pervyy Kanal*; *RTR-Belarus* had an almost identical schedule to Russia's *Rossiya 1*; while *NTV-Belarus* described itself as a “Belarusian state commercial TV channel, broadcasting in the Republic of Belarus on the basis of the concept, programme line-up and programme content of [Russia's] NTV” (*Belteleradiokompaniya*, 2013). In addition, there are a number of non-commercial media produced under the auspices of the Union State of Russia and Belarus for consumption in both countries; these include the satellite TV channel *TRO-Soyuz* (*Teleradioveshchatelnaya organizatsiya Soyuznogo gosudarstva*) and the newspapers *Soyuz* and *Soyuznoye Veche*.

However, it is the abovementioned tabloids and TV broadcasters which carry information from Russia to the widest Belarusian audiences. In 2012, each daily edition of *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* had a print run of around 50,000, rising to 300,000 for the weekly *tolstushka* (“fat” edition containing the TV guide); its readership was around one million (*Anonymized interviews*, 2012). *Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii* had a weekly print run of roughly 150,000 (*Anonymized interviews*, 2012). A 2011 survey conducted for the Broadcasting Board of Governors found that 45 per cent of Belarusians named *NTV-Belarus* among their top three sources of information; *RTR-Belarus* was named by 30 per cent of respondents. The leading source of information in Belarus was *ONT*, which broadcasts the *Vremya* news bulletin from Russia's *Pervyy Kanal* just before its own bulletin, *Nashi Novosti*. Some 63 per cent of survey respondents named *ONT* among their top three sources of information (*Broadcasting Board of Governors and InterMedia*, 2011). Terrestrial signals of *NTV-Belarus* reached around 64 per cent of the Belarusian population in 2013, while *RTR-Belarus* reached 95 per cent and *ONT* reached 98 per cent (*Belarusian Ministry of Communications and Informatization*, 2013). All three channels were also part of the basic package which cable TV operators are legally obliged offer customers at a regulated, state-subsidized tariff – less than a dollar per month in 2013.

Such high-profile Russian involvement in the Belarusian media landscape has certain advantages for Lukashenko and his administration. It keeps the population happy – Russian television programmes and tabloids are well-liked because they often have higher production standards than Belarusian alternatives; they also feature more prominent and glamorous celebrities. There is a financial reward, as Russian TV shows attract large audiences and therefore generate advertising revenue for the Belarusian state broadcasters which carry them. Moreover, the accessibility of Russian media reinforces Lukashenko's preferred image as a leader who facilitates fraternal relations between the two Slavic nations – an image that apparently goes down well with Belarusian voters.

However, the single information space has had drawbacks for Lukashenko as well. At times, reports disseminated from Russia have been less than flattering about the Belarusian regime. Back in 1997–1998, unsympathetic reporting by Russian federal channels *NTV* and *ORT* (as Russia's *Pervyy Kanal* was then known) led to journalists from those channels losing their accreditation to work in Belarus. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry accused *ORT*'s bureau chief in Minsk Pavel Sheremetov of

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