

Anti-Belarus disinformation in Russian media: Trends, features, countermeasures

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Executive summary

This brief sums up an enduring monitoring and analysis of the Russian media Belarus-related content by the EAST Center in August – November 2016.

A recent national poll discovered that two-thirds of Belarusians watch Russian TV channels on either regular or occasional basis. Furthermore, Russian media enjoy a higher level of trust among Belarusians than both state and independent Belarusian media. This fact makes Belarus very sensitive to probable Belarus-related disinformation campaigns in Russian media.

Belarus has appeared on the list of Russian disinformation campaign objects only recently. Lately, big Russian media outlets, including federal TV channels, started claiming development of nationalistic anti-Russian moods in Belarus. This evolution allegedly revises Belarus's foreign policy which becomes more pro-West.

In addition, some Russian online media, foremost *Regnum* and *EADaily*, published a dozen of chauvinistic materials containing hate speech, questioning Belarusian sovereignty and territorial integrity and spreading degrading statements about Belarusian people, Belarusian language, and culture.

After addressing a number of Russian state organs about degrading Belarus-related articles, Belarusian authorities arrested three *Regnum* and *EADaily* contributors on suspicion of inciting national or social enmity. It remains to be seen whether these radical countermeasures will play down anti-Belarus campaign in Russian media or, on the contrary, will only give it a new impetus.

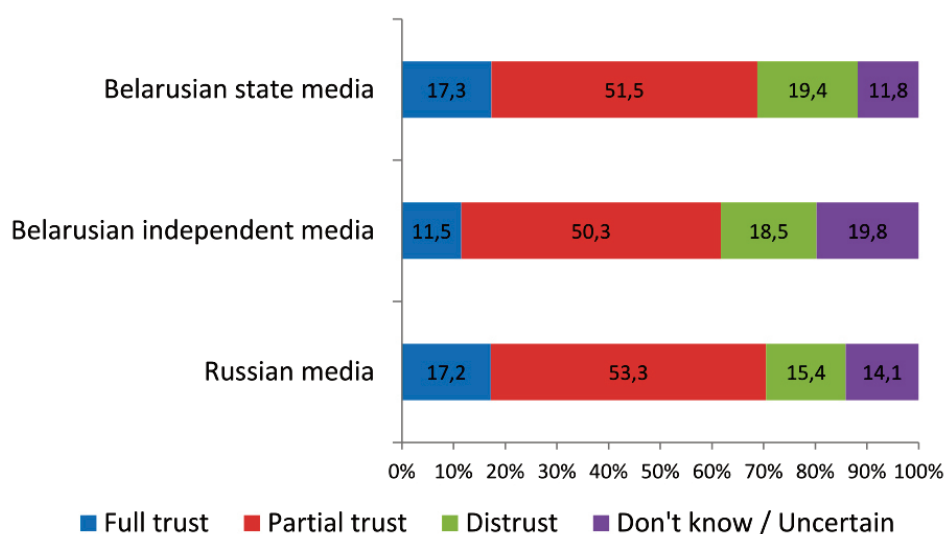
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1. Russian media in Belarus: enormous impact, new trends

Russian media have a considerable impact on Belarusian public opinion. A national poll conducted in May 2016¹ found out that 66% of Belarusians watch Russian TV channels either regularly or occasionally. Furthermore, 70.5% of respondents fully or partly trust messages in Russian media, whereas both Belarusian official and independent media enjoy lesser trust ratings. The same research showed that Belarusians quite often retransmit the main messages of the Russian media about foreign policy and beyond.

Russian media have a higher level of trust among Belarusians than local media.



Source: Belarusian Analytical Workroom, May 2016.

During the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, a new wave of Russian information war emerged, which intensified after the annexation of Crimea and a military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The fact that majority of Belarusians consider truthful an official Russian version of events in Crimea and Donbass², is indeed explained by the enormous influence of Russian media on Belarusians.

Until recently obvious disinformation and media attacks on Belarus were only sporadic and inherent to some marginal Russian online media. However, in recent months one can observe two significant trends in this regard.

¹ Undertaken by Belarusian Analytical Workroom, not published. Researchers used data of two nation-wide public opinion surveys and undertook a content analysis of the media messages popular among Belarusians during and in between the polls.

² As the nationwide survey by the NISEPI in June 2015 showed, 62.3% of Belarusians believed that Crimea annexation to Russia was “restoration for historical justice”, whereas 21.5% thought it was an “imperialistic occupation”. In addition to that, 47.4% supported independence of “Novorossiia” whilst 27% stated that Ukraine should remain an integral territory and 10.5% claimed “there is no Novorossiia, but Russian aggression in Ukraine instead”.

Firstly, occasional media disinformation about political and societal processes in Belarus appeared in big Russian media outlets, including federal channels. The main Russian media message can be outlined as following: nationalistic anti-Russian moods grow in Belarus, the country tends to reorient towards the West, which will likely lead to disastrous events similar to those in Ukraine. The *Time will show* talk-show of the First National Russian Channel aired on November 24, 2016, can be seen as an example.³

Secondly, a number of Russian online media, which are not that popular as nationwide TV channels but not marginal either, started publishing a growing number of chauvinistic materials containing degrading statements about Belarusian state, Belarusian people, language, and culture. Furthermore, a series of articles openly question sovereignty and territorial integrity of Belarus. These media often label many national policies in Belarus as nationalistic and anti-Russian, distorting and manipulating facts.

Below a brief overview of the most influential Russian online media of this kind is given. This selection takes into account the size of the media's audience.

2. Main disinformation providers and their discourses

Imperiyanews.ru

Led by Belarusian citizen Yuri Baranchik this webpage publishes commentaries about Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia-West relations, usually in a derogatory manner. EU and West-related articles usually narrate about migration crisis, economic problems, the decline in moral norms, etc. Most of the *Imperiyanews.ru* content, however, is not unique. Belarus-related materials are usually republished from other chauvinistic Russian online media, such as *Rusnext.ru*, *Cont.ws*, *Regnum* or *Fondsk.ru*.

One of recently republished Belarus-related materials lashes out against historical Belarusian symbols, i.e. a white-red-white flag and a coat of arms *Pahonia* (Pursuer) which were official state symbols in Belarus in

³ The talk-show guests were discussing a history book published by two Belarusian historians. Alleged parallels between the pre-Maidan events in Ukraine and the present-time events in Belarus were given by the TV show presenter. Watch the TV program at <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/sosedi-vremya-pokazhet-vypusk-ot-24-11-2016>

Regnum can be considered as leading Russian on-line media regularly publishing degradation materials about Belarusian state, Belarusian people, its language and culture.

1991 – 1995. In order to derogate them the article links them to Nazi crimes and makes absurd historical claims:

“Hundreds of villages burnt down with their inhabitants, destroyed Belarus, overcrowded concentration camps, orphanages with detained donor kids for German soldiers. Always and everywhere a white-red-white flag of traitors was waving above this all, and the coat of arms Pahonia was placed side by side with swastikas and Hitler’s portraits”.⁴

Regnum.ru

It is a Russian federal information agency which produces unique news content concerning events in Russia and abroad, as well as posting commentaries on socio-political and economic topics. The Webpage, which dates back to 1999, attracts around 1,200,000 visitors per day (based on Yandex.Metrics data). One of the Regnum contributors and an editor responsible for Belarus-related content is aforementioned Yuri Barahchik.

Regnum can be considered as leading Russian online media regularly publishing degrading materials concerning Belarusian state, Belarusian people, its language and culture. Some of the most glaring examples of such *Regnum* statements are given in the next review subchapter. Our monitoring shows that in August, September, and October the number of materials containing Belarus-related humiliating statements ranged between 5 and 7, while in November, it surged to 16.

The authors of derogatory Belarus-related materials are Yuri Baranchik, Alla Bron (alias, real name Dmitry Alimkin), Sergei Shiptenko, Nikolai Radov (alias, real name Yuriy Pavlovets), Igor Shishkin, Anatoliy Shlykov, Evgenii Markov, and Lev Krishtapovich. Three of them, namely Alimkin, Shiptenko and Pavlovets were recently detained in Belarus on suspicion of violation of Art. 130 of Belarus’ Criminal Code, namely deliberate actions aimed at inciting national enmity and humiliating national honor and dignity.

Eurasia Daily (EADaily)

Although this information agency was established fairly recently (late 2015), the Webpage’s readership already reaches up to 400,000 visitors daily (based on LiveInternet data). According to the official mission description, *EADaily* was set up with the aim to cover political and socio-economic processes in Eurasia.

⁴ <https://www.imperianews.ru/details/f6a81a28-b5af-e611-9416-2e815323a23f>

Our monitoring shows that in August – November *EADaily* published 5 – 7 Belarus-related disinformation and derogatory materials monthly. They were authored by Artur Grigoriev (alias, real name Sergei Shiptenko), Pavel Yurintsev (alias, real name Yuriy Pavlovets), Kirill Averianov-Minskiy, Kristina Melnikova and *EADaily* Editor Vladimir Zotov. As mentioned above, Belarusian authorities detained Shiptenko and Pavlovets.

Zapadrus.su

This website uses an old denomination of Belarusian territories under Russian Empire which was *Zapadnaya* (Western in English) *Rus'* as its name. Belarus-related articles are published under the category *Belaya* (White in English), *Rus'*. *Russian world* category of the webpage contains articles about present-time Russia and Ukraine and the countries' history. *Zapadrus.ru* promotes Orthodox values and regularly publishes information about Orthodox traditions in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine underlying unity of this religion with the Russian national and imperial ideology.

Sputnikpogrom.com

This is a Russian nationalistic online media which implements a modern webpage design and represents itself as an analytical portal. Its authors consider Russian Empire's dissolution a historical mistake, which led to the creation of new "semi-independent states". The webpage criticizes Putin for not being insufficiently pro-Russian and nationalistic.

Sputnikpogrom articles about Belarus and "its current nationalistic revival" appear under category *Zapadnaya* (Western in English) *Rus'*, a term used in late Russian Empire times for Belarusian territory. In one of his articles for *Sputnikpogrom*, Kirill Averyanov-Minskiy gives a distorted picture of historical events in Soviet Russia and Belarus in the early 1920s. He speculates about possible Belarus' disintegration similar to the Ukrainian scenario:

"Dear readers, we would like to tell you the story of enlargements of the Belarusian Soviet Republic in 1924 and 1926 so that you do not bewilder about the possible future proclamation of Viciebsk, Mahiloŭ, and Homiel People's Republics".⁵

⁵ <http://sputnikpogrom.com/history/32029/bssr/#.WE2QXbnSk4>

***Sputnikpogrom.com* manipulates historical facts and speculates about possible Belarus' disintegration similar to the Ukrainian scenario.**

3. “Belarusians are a Polish project aimed at dismembering Russian people”. TOP 10 ridiculous claims concerning Belarus in Russian media

A collection of the most preposterous claims related to Belarus published in Russian media outlets *Regnum* and *EADaily* in August – November 2016 are listed below.

1. Belarus may become a naval power by adding Lithuania’s and Latvia’s territories. President Lukashenka should discuss with Putin an inevitable partition of Ukraine and the Baltics as soon as possible.

In an article ‘Is Belarus ready to grow in the territory at the expense of Ukraine, Lithuania, and Latvia?’⁶ *Regnum* Editor Yuri Baranchik speculates on the coming EU collapse and redrawing of Europe’s political map. Baranchik advises Lukashenka to start discussing with Putin some future groundbreaking political developments in the Eastern Europe. The article states:

“When the division of Ukraine between Russia, Poland, Romania and Hungary begins, will Belarus be able to get some territories of northern Ukraine populated by Belarusians? [...] The same question goes about Lithuania’s and Latvia’s territories when these countries are eliminated after the EU collapse. We mean the territories from Klaipeda and Palanga to the East along Siauliai – Panevezhis – Daugavpils. As a result of these developments, Belarus will be able to access the sea and to become a sea power”.

2. Belarusian national symbol Sluck sash is worth a tunic of Nazi Germany’s Generalkommissar Wilhelm Kube.

The *Regnum* article ‘The Head of Russian Foreign Ministry condemned revisionists’ “dishonorable attempts”. What next?’ claims that Belarus allegedly “destroys Russian toponymy” (no proof of this statement exists whatsoever) and “spends large volumes of budgetary means on planting new [national] symbols”.⁷

⁶ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2207776.html>

⁷ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2208442.html>

Regnum advises Lukashenka to discuss partition of Ukraine and the Baltic states with Putin.

Accordind to *Regnum*, those who oppose this media outlet work for 'foreign masters' planning to unify Belarus with Poland.

Sluck sash (element of noble men's wear in 17th – 19th centuries) is given as an example of such “new symbol”. In a derogatory manner, the article says that Sluck sashes are in fact not more valuable than a military tunic of Nazi Germany's Generalkommissar Wilhelm Kube, who ruled Nazi occupation regime in the present-time Belarus in 1941 – 1943.

3. The West wages hybrid war against Russia from the Belarus' territory.

The *Regnum* article ‘What kind of “hybrid war” Belarus is getting ready and against whom’ says:

“Belarus with its prevailing Russian population, which is proven by the fact that 99% of the country's population use Russian, is not attractive to the West, which runs a hybrid war against Russia from the Belarus' territory... It is time [for Belarus] to face it and to understand where you actual brothers, and where the monsters, who treat you just as a square on a chessboard, are”.⁸

Yet another *Regnum* article claims that “those [Belarusian] opposition members and officials who oppose *Regnum* actually work for foreign masters, for the plans which envisage Belarus as a small coin in the creation of the Fourth Commonwealth of Poland, for destruction of the [Belarusian] republic and turning it into the failed state akin southern outskirts of the Russian world [*the authors apparently meant Ukraine here*]”.⁹

4. The Belarusian nation does not exist. Belarusians are a Western / Polish project aimed at dismembering Russian people.

In the *Regnum* article ‘Let me explain in simple terms what is going on in Belarus’ a number of preposterous degrading claims about Belarusian people are made:

“Belarusians as a nation do not exist. Germans or Armenians do, but a “Belarusian nation” is so far just a project. [...] Project “Belarusians” are being created by Poles in order to dismember Russian people. This project's customer is the West, where Poland is an executor. [...] The former seeks to weaken its geopolitical competitor [the authors meant Russia], the latter looks to augment its territories and population...

⁸ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2182151.html>

⁹ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2199564.html>

So long as Belarusization is not very visible, Russians lose people day by day. Little strokes fall great oaks. Each day new people, affected by enemy propaganda which took under control all Belarusian media resources during three last years, grow up to become Russophobic”.¹⁰

Yet another Regnum article claims that that majority of Belarusians “support reunification with their big Motherland Russia”.¹¹ In fact, a number of national surveys show that while a large part of Belarusian population favors various forms of political and economic integration with Russia, only a tiny minority (2 - 5% of country's population) supports the idea of joining Russia with a loss of country's sovereignty.

5. Belarusian is either an artificial language or a dialect of Russian. It was invented with the aim to turn Russian into Poles. Speaking Belarusian deteriorates ability to speak proper Russian, which in turn points to a person’s low origin and hinders social development.

Regnum article ‘Belarus stealthily leaves the Russian world, taking into account Ukrainian experience’ unleashes plenty of degrading arguments about Belarusian language, Belarus as a national state and the country's history as well as about people speaking the Belarusian language.¹² Among other things, in this article Belarus is called “a mad pseudo-state aiming to break its neck on Maidan following the neighbor's example”.

According to the article, the Belarusian national state is a fiction as Belarusians are “a local variety within Russian people”. The Belarusian language is called an artificial invention “in order to turn Russians into Poles”. Every person speaking Belarusian is explicitly called a Russophile. “In case you are a Russophile, you better learn Polish, you do not need [Belarusian] as intermediate”, article claims.

The author cautions Belarusian parents not to take their kids to kindergartens where the Belarusian language might be episodically used, as “[a kid] will speak [Russian] with an accent... and inability to speak the literary language is considered to be a sign of low social origin, which breaks social development”. Another Regnum article says “it is easier to find a yeti in Belarus than a Belarusian-speaking person”.¹³ As 2009 population census shows, 23% of Belarusians stated that they use the Belarusian language as a mode of communication, down from 37% in 1999.

According to Regnum, Belarus is “a mad pseudo-state aiming to break its neck on Maidan” following the Ukraine’s example.

¹⁰ <https://regnum.ru/news/society/2200252.html>

¹¹ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2196715.html>

¹² <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2196715.html>

¹³ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2182151.html>

EADaily presents linguistic situation in Belarus upside down, saying that Russian-speaking majority is discriminated by excessive promotion of Belarusian in the educational sphere.

6. Belarusian pupils can only study in Belarusian or Belarusian and Russian languages, which discriminates Belarus' Russian-speaking population.

Belarusian language, although it has a state language status along with Russian, has been largely marginalized in Belarus as a result of deliberate a two-decade state policy. According to official statistics, only a few percent of first-grade pupils study in schools with Belarusian as a language of instruction. Belarusian is only taught at schools a couple of hours a week, similar to studies of a foreign language. Russian is an instruction language of all other school subjects in the absolute majority of primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, in the country there is not a single high education institution with Belarusian as a language of instruction, in fact high education in Belarus is entirely provided in Russian.

Contrary to the actual situation in the Belarusian education sphere, *EADaily* article 'Belarusian public is set to stand against "quiet discrimination" of Russian-speaking majority' gives an entirely distorted picture, claiming that Belarusian kids "have options either to study entirely in Belarusian, or in Russian and Belarusian".¹⁴ The article states: "Even in kindergartens and schools with Russian as the language of instruction the kids are forced to learn the "Belarusian" language [*NB: the word 'language' is intentionally given in Belarusian in inserted commas for derogatory means*], including the subjects other than the Belarusian language". Therefore, continues the article, this allegedly discriminates "Russian-speaking majority of Belarusian citizens".

In other words, the fact that one of the state languages is taught as one of the compulsory secondary school subjects is represented by the *EADaily* as discrimination of country's Russian-speaking population and a violation of the country's Constitution. According to the 2009 national Census, 53.2% of Belarusians called the Belarusian language as their mother tongue, a decrease from 73% in 1999 as a result of Russification policy under Lukashenka.

7. Outside Russia's political and cultural space, Belarus degraded to a regional province. Svetlana Alexievich, Nobel Prize in Literature winner, has become a symbol of some Belarusians' aspirations to become anti-Russian.

The title of article 'Culture of Empire and Anti-culture of Limitrophe' speaks for itself. According to Regnum, "after 1991 Belarusian literature

¹⁴ <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2016/09/13/beloruskaya-obshchestvennost-namerena-vystupit-protiv-tihoy-diskriminacii-russkoyazychnogo-bolshinstva>

exists in the form of small town get-together, with nothing worthy of mention”.¹⁵ Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich, who won Noble Prize in Literature in 2015, is heavily criticized with ridiculous claims. “Alexievich has become a symbol of some Belarusians’ intention to change their identity, i.e. to turn from Russian world’s people in the Western world’s ones, to turn from Russian into anti-Russians”, states *Regnum*.¹⁶

8. Belarusians are two separate nations: one favors the union with Russia and Russian language, the other supports Belarus’ accession to the EU and a forced Belarusization. Russia has to take the former “under its wing”.

In his column ‘Belarusian against Litvins: Ukrainian scenario for Minsk’ *EADaily* contributor Averianov-Minsky gives an incredibly simplified picture of societal and political processed in Belarus:

“Russian Federation has to take under its wing the Belarusian majority, which is a stabilizing factor in the Western part of Russian world. Otherwise, divided into two nations, Belarus risks to follow a Ukraine’s path, where Ukrainian political nation exterminates a Russian one in all senses of this word”.¹⁷

9. Lukashenka runs Belarusization policy, which is characterized by de-Russification and revisionism. As a result, Belarusians has become anti-Russian.

During Lukashenka’s rule the usage of Belarusian language in a public sphere has decreased dramatically. However, *Regnum* turns the actual situation in cultural sphere upside down saying that Lukashenka “launched the policy of Belarusization almost ten years ago, which is accompanied by de-Russification, revisionism and other aspects of nation-building”.

They believe that “there is not a single Russian high school, secondary school or pre-school, no Russian media [in Belarus]”.¹⁸ This sounds absurd, bearing in mind that Russian indeed is a language of instruction in all Belarusian higher education institutions and the majority of secondary and primary schools, as well as the language that clearly dominates in Belarus’ media sphere.

As a result, “Belarusians being a part of the Russian world, incrementally but steadily, in some underground algorithm of swamp swallowing, have turned into amorphous, obviously anti-Russian, substance”.¹⁹

¹⁵ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2200415.html>

¹⁶ <https://regnum.ru/news/2204159.html>

¹⁷ <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2016/10/18/belorusy-protiv-litvinov-ukrainskiy-scenariy-dlya-minsk>

¹⁸ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2178468.html>

¹⁹ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2202373.html>

Under Lukashenka the usage of Belarusian language in public sphere has been extremely marginalized.

Nevertheless, Russian media say that Lukashenka runs Belarusization policy, which makes Belarusians anti-Russian.

Regnum claims that Belarus allegedly seeks to host the largest American embassy in the Eastern Europe, while Poland dreams of making Belarus its eastern frontiers.

With no factual proof whatsoever, in yet another article *Regnum* claims that Belarusian foreign minister lobbies for opening in Minsk the largest American embassy in the Eastern Europe, with the number of employees to exceed 1200 persons.²⁰

10. Eastern Partnership was invented by Polish chauvinistic circles in order to annex Belarus and to crusade Moscow.

According to a *Regnum* contributor, the real aim of the Eastern Partnership is to annex Belarus to Poland:

“Eastern Partnership is a specific Trojan horse, built in Polish chauvinistic circles in order to drag it into Belarus and crack on civilizational basis of Belarusian society [...] Eastern Partnership’s aim remains as it was during foreign intervention against Soviet Russia [*in 1919*], namely crusade on Moscow [...] Under the guise of Belarusian nationalism, or so-called Litvinism, a Polish-gentry clique stands aimed at transforming Belarus into Poland’s eastern frontiers. Eastern Partnership is designed with the same purpose”.²¹

4. Belarus’ countermeasures. Conclusions.

On 1 November 2016 Belarusian Ministry of Information sent an official letter to Special Representative of Russian President on International Cultural Cooperation Mikhail Shvydkoy, informing that "a number of biased, sometimes clearly destructive materials towards the Republic of Belarus, has recently increased in a number of Russian offline and online media".²²

The letter mentions a number of Belarus-related pieces published by *Eurasia Daily*, *Politoboz*, *Lenta.ru*, *Regnum*, as well as a video story about Belarus on the TV program ‘International power-saw bench’ by the *NTV channel*, broadcasted on 2 October 2016. The letter states that earlier controversial publications of this kind were posted by *Sputnik and Pogrom*. The abstract of this official letter appeared in Russian media.²³

Belarusian Minister of Information Liliya Ananich later confirmed that Belarusian authorities sent a similar notification to the Russian Ministry of Communications and Mass Media, as well as to the Federal Service for

²⁰ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2185406.html>

²¹ <https://regnum.ru/news/society/2207768.html>

²² The abstract of this official letter appeared in Russian media. See <https://www.imperiyanews.ru/details/3fb29241-34b6-e611-9416-2e815323a23f>

²³ See, for instance here: <https://www.imperiyanews.ru/details/3fb29241-34b6-e611-9416-2e815323a23f>

While Russian media outlet considers the arrested contributors to be political prisoners, Belarusian authorities view them as “destructive forces” trying to bring discord into Belarus - Russia relations.

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Supervision in the Sphere of Telecom, Information Technologies and Mass Communications (Roskomnadzor).

Between 6 December and 9 December 2016 Belarusian authorities detained Belarusian citizens Dmitry Alimkin, Yuriy Pavlovets and Sergei Shiptenko on suspicion of inciting national or social enmity or discord (Article 130 of the Belarusian Criminal Code). Previously these persons had contributed to *Regnum* and *EADaily*. The heaviest punishment envisaged by the mentioned criminal article may result in imprisonment for up to five years.

Regnum editorship issued a special statement saying that it considers the detained contributors “political prisoners, who are repressed for their principal view against actual cooperation of Belarusian authorities with chauvinistic, Russophobic and neo-Nazi part of Belarusian opposition”. It continues that the arrest of *Regnum* authors was a provocation by the Belarusian special bodies “aimed at pushing Belarusian President Lukashenka towards the path of the Ukrainian ex-President Viktor Yanukovich”.²⁴

In turn, Belarusian Information Minister Liliya Ananich, stated during her interview by the state telegraph agency that “the authors of these articles and their customers were trying to bring discord between our countries and peoples [*i. e. Belarus and Russia*]. She assured that this was not the position of the Russian leadership, but of destructive forces which try to split out deep friendly relations [between the two countries] and the process of building the Union State”.²⁵

It is yet to be observed how the criminal proceedings will develop and whether the critical reaction of high-ranking Russian officials about the arrests will follow. The arrests must have been sanctioned by Lukashenka or his close circle, meaning that Belarusian officials take the impact of Russian media disinformation seriously. An effective long-term method would be creation of Belarusian high-quality media product. However, this is an expensive instrument and will take quite a long time.

So far the Belarusian authorities have implemented the most radical and cheapest method available in conquering anti-Belarus campaign in some Russian media, namely arresting contributors to such media. Following reaction of the Russian media to these developments in the near future will be crucial. Whether the anti-Belarus campaign fades away or, on the contrary, takes a new impetus, either way is of great importance in assessing evolution of Russian Belarus-related media propaganda.

²⁴ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2215855.html>

²⁵ <http://www.belta.by/society/view/mininform-schitaet-nedopustimym-ispolzovanie-smi-v-tseljah-razzhiganiya-natsionalnoj-rozni-naneseniya-223063-2016/>
