

COVID-19 as a leverage in the information war: How Russia tried to change the course of the political campaigns in Belarus and Ukraine*

Vasil Navumau

The outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic took Western countries by surprise, even despite the warnings from Chinese scientists and whistleblowers. Amid the uncertainty associated with the lack of information about the virus, the governments started hastily introducing harsh measures, which led to huge changes in social life and caused a devastating economic decline. The policies were radically different and in some cases inconsistent and ineffective as well as incompatible with the principles on which certain countries have built their political processes. They included the closing of borders, travel restrictions and the suspension of business and educational activities.

In Ukraine, those actively participating in the slow economic and political modernization of the country, who believe in the importance of democratic values, were highly critical of the tough measures introduced by the government. Russia, which has long been interested in destabilizing the situation in the country, was able to use this opportunity to amplify the negative attitudes of the Ukrainians via new waves of disinformation and by intervening further in the democratic political process.

On the eve of presidential elections, which are always a moment of crisis for authoritarian regimes, Belarus was caught up in complicated negotiations about deepened integration with Russia. The results of the presidential elections were falsified, as has been well-documented by the independent observers, however, for the first time

2020 Think Visegrad Non-V4 Expert Fellow at Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)

This analysis was produced within the Think Visegrad Non-V4 Fellowship programme.

Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform is a network for structured dialog on issues of strategic regional importance. The network analyses key issues for the Visegrad Group, and provides recommendations to the governments of V4 countries, the annual presidencies of the group, and the International Visegrad Fund. For more information about Think Visegrad and its members visit www.thinkvisegrad.org.

in ten years civil society has mobilized around an opposition presidential candidate, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Started from the ineffective measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in the beginning of March, the civic activists managed to build the networks of solidarity and launch multiple civic initiatives, indented to assist both the medical professionals and the victims of the pandemic. Together with the mass dissatisfaction concerning the rigged presidential elections and the brutal repressions against the protesters, this resulted this resulted in a wide protest movement.

Russia tried to use the controversy around the COVID-19 and the presidential campaign to launch fake news in Belarus and increase the pressure on president Lukashenko. This appears to have been done to make Lukashenko accept the deepened integration project, proposed by Russia, while also reducing the chances of undesired political changes in Belarus. At the same time, Russia provided Belarus media professionals instead of those, who have been sacked by the government on political grounds. This move allowed tuning Russian propagandist narratives with the Belarusian one, and conducting further work on weakening Belarusian opposition (who are agents of change in Russia's understanding).

In this way, the media sphere in both countries has been overwhelmed by waves of disinformation and fake news, which have exploited the uncertainty and intensified panic among the citizens. Certain Russian websites have been specifically notorious for promoting such materials, trying to sow discord within the neighboring countries and influence the political process. In addition, sometimes even pro-government media (such as in Belarus) disseminated disinformation or "internal fakes", but this time to calm the population or reach other strategic aims.

This paper analyzes the wave of disinformation, generated by various actors between March 1, 2020 (10 days before the recognition of COVID-19 as pandemic) and November 1, 2020 (after the end of local political campaign in Ukraine) in two countries – Belarus and Ukraine in the context of Russia's disinformation campaign against both countries. In particular, it considers the fake news¹ regarding COVID-19, generated by the most aggressive Russia-supported propagandist before and during the electoral processes. It is expected, that Russia will use the dissatisfaction with the measures of coping with the pandemic to launch the disinformation campaign in both countries, as it did previously during the important political events/processes. This will allow to detect the strategic narratives used by the governments during the election campaigns to consolidate the power (as in Belarus, for example), interfere into the local decision-making processes (as in Ukraine) or destabilize political processes in neighboring countries.

¹ Fake news can be broadly defined as "news articles, that are intentionally or verifiably false and could mislead readers" (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017, p.4).

Methodology. To reach this aim, first, I will analyse the disinformation materials in four Russia-supported websites, which were launched in the Ukraine and Belarus (2 in each- Vesti.ua and Politnavigator.net in Ukraine; 4esnok.net and Teleskop.by in Belarus), using content analysis and framing methods. The period under consideration - between 1.03.2020 (the start of the pandemic in both countries) and 1.11.2020 (the end of the electoral campaign in Ukraine). This will allow establishing, whether the quantity and quality of the disinformation materials increased during the electoral campaigns, and identify the strategic narratives, used by Russian propagandist bloggers and journalists, employed in online resources of Ukraine and Belarus. Second, I will conduct interviews with experts and suggest certain measures on how to withstand the waves of propagandist materials on the level of government and civil society. The paper contributes to the volume of texts, analyzing the Russian disinformation and propaganda in Eastern European countries.

The Background

The measures on containment of COVID-19 in Ukraine. The Ukrainian authorities have been acting harshly and decisively in containing the COVID-19 in the country, which led to certain dissatisfaction among the population. Already in end of January - beginning of February the Ukrainian airline companies SkyUp and UIA ceased operating the flights to China. On February 19 the authorities brought back Ukrainian citizens from the Chinese city Wuhan, the epicentre of the pandemic, which led to a huge controversy among the local population, trying to attack the buses with the evacuees. That did not help, however and on March 3, the authorities informed about the first case of COVID-19 in Ukraine from Chernivtsy region. Already on March 25 the Cabinet of Ministers introduced emergency situation regime on the territory of Ukraine, with the lockdown being enforced on March 11 (the educational establishments were closed, mass events cancelled, international flights stopped, public places and institutions closed). The authorities deployed the mass testing and organized a regular reporting on the numbers of infected, and, in general, have been quite effective in the efforts of containment of pandemic. However, the harshness of measures, lack of reliable information on individual behavior and corresponding protocols on the initial stage of the pandemic led to mass dissatisfaction with the actions.

The measures on containment of COVID-19 in Belarus. The Belarusian authorities, on the contrary, from the very offset decided to ignore the pandemic. The virus was brought to Belarus on February 28 by an Iranian student, who was studying at the National Technical University in Minsk. For a long time the statistics on number of infected has been heavily underreported, with the medical professionals suffering from the lack of basic

necessities. Civic activists came to the rescue and organized the crowdfunding campaign to buy water, masks, protective outwear suits, gloves, and medical equipment.

Despite reports on a disastrous situation with the number of infected in certain regions (e.g. Viciebsk), the authorities did not introduce lockdown, chose to leave public places open (like Belarusian football championship), organized mass events (such as parade on a Victory day), did not close the borders, with Belavia continue being on a regular service. The citizens were disoriented and frustrated with the irresponsible approach, chosen by the authorities, which, as some analysts suggest, have been one of the reasons for the abysmal rating of Lukashenka ahead of the presidential elections.

Russia tried to use the controversy, emerged in Ukraine and Belarus, to put forward its agenda.

Russian disinformation in Belarus and Ukraine

Russian disinformation in Ukraine. Overall, two websites under consideration published 74 news articles devoted to the topic of COVID-19 between March 1 and November 31, partly containing disinformation or outright being the pure fake news. Politnavigator.net was more preoccupied with the local topics (33 articles), than international agenda (11). The articles at Vesti.ua, on the contrary, were mostly devoted to the events outside Ukraine (21 articles), while the local events were covered merely by 9 texts (See Table 1 below).

In what follows I will list main trends, typical for the pandemic-related articles in Ukraine.

Table 1. Quantity of disinformation materials in pro-Russian media in Belarus and Ukraine

| Country | Website | Visitors per month | Materials | Materials per months | | | | | | | | | |
|---------|----------------|--------------------|--|----------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|--|
| | | | | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | |
| Ukraine | Politnavigator | 830679 | Local topics: 33 International agenda: 11 Overall: 44 | 17 | 10 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 2 | |
| | Vesti.ua | 2401615 | Local topics: 9 International agenda: 21 Overall: 30 | 11 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 13 | |
| Belarus | 4esnok.by | N/A | Local topics: 34 International agenda: 12 Overall: 46 | 4 | 11 | 8 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 5 | 2 | 1 | |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|----------------|-----|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Teleskop.media | N/A | Local topic: 27 International agenda: 18 Overall: 45 | 7 | 9 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 7 | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Ukrainian society is disorganized, undisciplined and aggressive

Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea and unleashing of war in Ukrainian Donbas in 2014, the feud between two countries remains unmitigated. The wide-scale propagandist campaign, launched and maintained by Russia in the neighbouring country further deepens the rift between the two peoples. The Russian media were trying to convince, that Ukrainians have quite a bloodthirsty intentions towards Russia and Putin in particular.² The outlets were also criticizing Ukraine’s approach to resolution of conflict in Donbass, allegedly violating Minsk agreements and harassing the local population.³⁴

One of the most notable events, that attracted the attention of the pro-Russian outlets in the initial months of pandemic – the famous incident with labour immigrants, who returned to New Sanzhary from Wuhan.⁵⁶ The controversy is extrapolated to the whole country and is said to be symptom of a deep distrust of the Ukrainian citizens to the current government. The isolated event is said to be the beginning of the “Coronamaidan”,⁷ inevitably leading to another change of power.⁸ The emotionally charged articles denounced predicted the collapse of Ukraine⁹ and called to “beat everyone” to restore order.¹⁰

The inefficacy of the measures, introduced by the government

The controversy around the strict measures associated with the pandemic has been turned to a good use by the pro-Russian outlets, which initially criticised the measures introduced by the state,¹¹ stressing, that it will lead to inevitable economic collapse,¹²¹³

² <https://www.politnavigator.net/ukraincy-likuyut-zabolel-vrach-s-kotorym-kontaktiroval-putin.html>
³ <https://www.politnavigator.net/za-zverstva-na-donbasse-general-poluchil-povyshenie-u-zelenskogo.html>
⁴ <https://www.politnavigator.net/za-zverstva-na-donbasse-general-poluchil-povyshenie-u-zelenskogo.html>
⁵ <https://www.politnavigator.net/putin-ne-vinovat-psikhiatr-postavil-diagnoz-ukrainskomu-obshhestvu.html>
⁶ <https://www.politnavigator.net/v-ternopole-ustroili-moleben-chtoby-otognat-ehvakuirovannykh-iz-kitaya-ukraincev.html>
⁷ <https://www.politnavigator.net/nakonec-to-u-poroshenko-obnaruzhili-rossijskij-sled-v-besporjadkakh-pod-poltavo.html>
⁸ <https://www.politnavigator.net/po-ukraine-rasprostranyaetsya-bolezn-strashnee-kitajskogo-virusa.html>
⁹ <https://www.politnavigator.net/karantin-usugublyayet-process-dezintegracii-ukrainy.html>
¹⁰ <https://www.politnavigator.net/ukraina-rassypaetsya-na-nashikh-glazakh-pdit-vsekh.html>
¹¹ <https://vesti.ua/people/gde-v-kieve-zafiksirovan-covid-19-vesti-publikuyut-ulitsy-i-nomera-domov?fbclid=IwARouibSajVz8orJGYyixwgyZmFXWHwdT3OugbupxusKfo4OwSdgJ3H2A6Rg>
¹² <https://vesti.ua/business/economics/doktor-mvf-i-ekonomika-karantinnogo-byudzheta-ukrainy>

because the business will not survive the lockdown.¹⁴ This is a typical false dilemma,¹⁵ which has also been used by the Belarusian state propaganda.¹⁶ That said, the similar (albeit more balanced) has been introduced by the majority of the European countries in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The alleged government's inefficacy in tackling pandemic has been almost never-ending source of material for the authors. Ukrainian authorities are said to be acting "silly and chaotic" and will definitely destruct the system of healthcare.¹⁷ The European vector of Ukraine's development has been deemed a mistake, because the EU countries closed the borders and turned into a stronghold, leaving their neighbours in need.^{18,19} Ukraine is said to be experiment of the Western countries, allowing to reveal how the pandemic expands in the countries with the lack of power, proper healthcare and social security.²⁰

Generation of fears, associated with the pandemic

Also, in the beginning of the pandemic (March – April), the news articles about the main threats of the pandemic were trending, with most of them propagating the fears about the deadliness of the COVID-19 and its unpredictable character. In particular, one of the most well-known conspiracies, surrounding the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, has been the speculation about the artificial origin of the disease: allegedly the outbreak could be a result of the leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the well-known center of research on coronaviruses. The story about the secret biological laboratories in the Ukrainian territory, launched by Americans, has become another variant of this conspiracy.^{21,22}

Russia as a positive example

Against this background, Russia has been represented in an exclusively positive terms, as having a clear plan for tackling the pandemic. The process of development and

¹³ <https://vesti.ua/business/economics/chp-v-ukrainskoj-ekonomike-mezhdu-mvf-i-koronavirusom>

¹⁴ <https://vesti.ua/business/economics/chp-v-ukrainskoj-ekonomike-mezhdu-mvf-i-koronavirusom>

¹⁵ <https://reform.by/tri-mifa-o-koronavirusnoj-jepidemii-v-belarusi>

¹⁶ <https://isans.org/analysis/monitoring/aprel-top-antibeloruskoj-propagandy-i-konspirologii.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.politnavigator.net/glupaya-i-khaotichnaya-komanda-zelenskogo-neizbezno-unichtozhit-zdravookhranenie-ehks-nardep.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.politnavigator.net/pandemiya-pokhoronit-proekt-ukraina-v-nyneshnem-vide.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.politnavigator.net/zapadnye-partnery-nas-brosili-prozrenie-karaseva.html>

²⁰ <https://www.politnavigator.net/ukraina-vybrana-v-kachestve-obrazca-dlya-budushhego-posobiya-po-ehpidemiologicheskim-katastrofam-ehkspert.html>

²¹ <https://www.politnavigator.net/smertonosnye-virusy-ukrainskikh-laboratorij.html>

²² <https://www.politnavigator.net/kiiev-po-prikazu-vashingtona-prinyal-uchastie-v-proekte-opasnom-dlya-vsego-chelovechestva.html>

production of the Russian vaccine has been under the close attention of the propagandist outlets. In particular, during the election campaign, Russia is said to be the only chance of Ukraine to save itself from the pandemic: to save the face, the government, allegedly, ordered to buy the vaccine via Israel.²³ It will also be used by the “most aggressive Russophobes.”²⁴ Pro-Russian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, the chairman of the political council of the “Opposition Platform - For Life” (Oppoblock) party (who is also V. Putin's godfather),²⁵ has been particularly active in Russian medical diplomacy: he is reported to conduct negotiations on Russian vaccine.^{26,27} The whole story has been used to increase the popularity of the Oppoblock candidates during the upcoming elections.

Russian disinformation in Belarus

Overall, two websites under consideration – 4esnok.by and Teleskop.media published 101 news articles (45 and 46 respectively), with both of them devoting more attention to local topics vis-à-vis the international ones (27 against 18 in the former case; 34 against 12 in the latter case).

Lukashenka's approach to the pandemic represented rather in neutral terms

While Lukashenka's notorious “laissez-faire” treatment of pandemic raised eyebrows in the whole world, his shenanigans were rather neutrally represented by the pro-Russian outlets²⁸ (sometimes they dared to criticize him discreetly). This trend continued throughout the summer months, even despite the famous fallout with Russia and the arrest of 33 Wagner mercenaries.

For example, the decision of the authorities to conduct military parade has been represented as justified, because of the importance of the Victory Day for the people.²⁹ The sacralized victory of the USSR over Nazist Germany celebrated on May 9, is a key element of the Russian official ideology.³⁰ Ahead of this day, Russia implements various projects to attract attention to this event and popularize the narrative, legitimizing the

²³ <https://www.politnavigator.net/ukraina-budet-cherez-izrail-zakupat-rossijskuyu-vakcinu-ot-covid-19-ehkonomist.html>

²⁴ <https://www.politnavigator.net/rossijskojj-vakcinojj-budut-privivatsya-dazhe-samye-yarye-ukrainskie-rusofoby.html>

²⁵ *Украинская правда* (2020). Медведчук снова приехал к Путину на поклон. 6 октября 2020 г. URL: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/10/6/7268999/index.amp>.

²⁶ <https://vesti.ua/politika/ot-zelenskogo-nuzhno-potrebovat-zakupit-vaktsinu-ot-covid-19-v-rf-blogger>

²⁷ <https://vesti.ua/strana/medvedchuk-nastavivaet-na-peregovorah-s-rf-po-zakupke-vaktsiny-ot-covid-19>

²⁸ <https://teleskop.media/2020/03/20/lukashenko-poruchil-pomoch-rossiyanam-vernutsya-domoj-iz-polshi/>

²⁹ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/reshenie-po-paradu-pobedy-v-minske/>

³⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/5/9/victory-day-and-russias-war-cult>

country's ambitions of great power.³¹ Hence, it was not surprising, that pro-Russian outlets supported this event, as it is one of the vehicles of promoting the ideology of the Union State.

The president of Belarus himself became the source of embarrassing recipes on treatment of coronavirus, which he himself called no other than “psychosis”. Interestingly, even the Ukrainian pro-Russian websites in neutral terms described Lukashenka’s bizarre offer to cure COVID-19 with sports,³² vodka and tractor.³³ Lukashenka’s less odious solutions, such as permission to let the children study from home, got exclusively positive treatment.^{34,35} The rigged statistics, published by the Belarusian Ministry of Health was accepted at its face-value even when the disinformation became evident for the majority of population.³⁶

Generation of fears, associated with the pandemic

One of the trends, typical for pro-Russian outlets in Ukraine and Belarus, has been the generation of fears, amid the uncertainty and lack of protocols, associated with the pandemic. For example, during the initial stage of the pandemic, the authors suggested that COVID-19 is more dangerous to Asians than those from Europe or Africa. Another possible consequence of pandemic, according to the authors – complete abolishment of paper money to increase control over the economic life of the citizens.³⁷ Moreover, the pandemic could also lead to tightening the screws in the civil society, with the human rights increasingly becoming less important concept.³⁸ This message obviously justifies the authoritarian mechanisms, being put in place in Belarus and Ukraine and hint that this will become the “new normality”.

Defamation of Belarusian political opposition

While the Belarusian authorities continued ignoring the pandemic, civic activists started raising the funds for the basic equipment to help the medical professionals and the victims of the disease. For such an activity the Belarusian opposition has been compared

³¹ <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2019-12-31/myth-great-patriotic-war-a-tool-kremlins-great-power-policy>

³² <https://vesti.ua/mir/lukashenko-izobrel-novoe-lekarstvo-ot-koronavirusa>

³³ <https://vesti.ua/lite/health/pandemiya-ne-strashna-lukashenko-smelo-zdorovaetsya-za-ruku-i-ne-nosit-masku>

³⁴ <https://teleskop.media/2020/03/19/lukashenko-razreshil-ne-vodit-detej-v-shkolu-perenes-zanyatiya-v-vuzah-i-poruchil-izmenit-grafiki-transporta/>

³⁵ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/evrofejki-o-belarusi/>

³⁶ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/tendenciya-po-covid-19/>

³⁷ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/koronavirus-zapret-nalichnyh-deneg/>

³⁸ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/koronavirus-kontrol-obshhestvom/>

to ghouls,³⁹ demon-like creatures, eating human flesh. They are said to be making profits from the pandemic by taking the money from the Belarusians and using them for good living. Motolko and Babaryko were named among the most dishonest activists.

In attempts to sow the discord within the electorate, the outlets also tried to associate certain candidates with the authorities. For example they bad mouthed blogger Siarhei Tsikhanousky, who was particularly popular among the middle-age Belarusians, who was arrested before the start of the elections.⁴⁰ Traditionally, the wave of criticism was directed against Statkevich.⁴¹

Several articles were discussing the role of COVID-19 in the electoral campaign, suggesting, that the “self-assurance” of authorities will lead to an increased support of Lukashenka.⁴²⁴³

NATO military exercise

NATO military exercise has been another popular topic of the articles within the period under consideration. During the spring of 2020, NATO had planned to carry out one of the largest military exercises seen in Europe since the Cold War, ‘Defender Europe 2020’. Those plans had to be down-sized and adapted due to the coronavirus pandemic. However, according the movement of US personnel and military equipment into Poland continued despite widespread travel restrictions throughout the continent.⁴⁴ It is noted, that of the NATO member states, the US military had the highest number of recorded diagnoses of COVID-19, with Italy having the largest number of infected high-ranking officers. The author suggests that the continued actions of NATO in Poland and the Baltic States was bound to lead to an increase in COVID 19 cases amongst not only soldiers, but also the general population.⁴⁵⁴⁶ This means, that the military exercise poses not only military, but biological threat for Belarus and Russia.

Russia represented in a positive way

Amid the disarray, associated with the nasty election campaign and irresponsible approach of authorities towards the containment of COVID-19, Russia has been represented exclusively in a positive light. In particular, pro-Russian civic initiative

³⁹ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/guli/>

⁴⁰ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/strana-dlya-zhizni-i-nachalo-izbiratelnoj-kampanii/>

⁴¹ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/podstavnoj-socialnyj-protest/>

⁴² <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/koronavirus-kak-faktor-izbiratelnoj-kampanii-2020-v-belarusi/>

⁴³ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/elektoralnaya-virusologiya-kak-pandemiya-vliyaet-na-provedenie-vyborov/>

⁴⁴ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/defender-europe-2020-otrabotat-zadachi-ne-schitayas-s-poteryami/>

⁴⁵ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/ssha-i-nato-skryvajut-istinuju-ugrozu/>

⁴⁶ <https://4esnok.by/mneniya/covid-19-ostanovil-boevuju-podgotovku-vojsk-nato/>

“Soyuz” Sergey Lushsch launched a petition to support Belarusian business,⁴⁷ the move, which was aimed at increasing popularity of the initiative amid its attempt to register itself as a party. In another article, Russia is said to be launching “medical special forces” to deal with the infection⁴⁸ and is building new hospitals for those suffering from the disease,⁴⁹ with the Russian system of “biological security” being named the best in the world.⁵⁰ Against this background, Teleskop was propagating the articles about the inefficacy of the Belarusian economy which will not survive the pandemic.^{51,52} Such a contrasting picture was created to make the audience realise that it is not possible for Belarus to retain its autonomy without economic and political integration from Russia, which is one of the key these of Russian propaganda.

Conclusions

The strategic aims of Russia in Belarus differed: while in Ukraine Russia rather uses quite harsh rhetoric to drive a wedge within the population (vaguely described as having a “pro-Russian” and “anti-Russian” position), delegitimize the political leadership and discredit the grassroots revolution via maligning EuroMaidan (which is one of the phobias of the Kremlin), in Belarus, pro-Russian outlets rather tried to put forward much softer narrative, designed to support the Belarusian authorities, convince Belarusians in the necessity to integrate with Russia within the Union State project and demonize the Belarusian opposition.

It should be said, that Russia’s strategy in Ukraine turned out a moderate success. Before the local elections, Russia has increased the quantity and quality of the disinformation materials via the TV-channels NewsOne, 112 Ukraine and ZIK, as well as websites Politnagivator.net and Vesti.ua, using COVID-19 as one of the themes to manipulate the public opinion and increase the popularity of pro-Russian candidates. that opposition-sponsored media outlets deliberately shaped a strongly positive image of Putin and popularized the country-aggressor⁵³. In particular, the preparedness of Russia to supply vaccine to Ukraine has been represented as a solution to ineffective and chaotic actions

⁴⁷ <https://teleskop.media/2020/03/19/sergej-lushh-podderzhat-belorusskij-biznes/>

⁴⁸ <https://teleskop.media/2020/03/16/rossiya-vozdila-meditsinskij-spetsnaz-dlya-borby-s-epidemiyami/>

⁴⁹ <https://teleskop.media/2020/03/22/bolnitsa-v-podarok-ot-virusa-v-rf-postroyat-srazu-neskolko-novyh-klinik/>

⁵⁰ <https://teleskop.media/2020/03/13/mihail-shhelkanov-v-rossii-luchshaya-v-mire-sistema-biologicheskoy-bezopasnosti/>

⁵¹ <https://teleskop.media/2020/03/19/zagranichnye-predpriyatiya-belarusi-rabotayut-v-ubytok/>

⁵² <https://teleskop.media/2020/03/18/ekonomika-belarusi-oskolok-sovetskoj-modeli-ili-samostoyatel'naya-edinitsa/>

⁵³ Полякова, Виктория (2020). На Украине проверят показавшие встречу Путина и Медведчука телеканалы. РБК. 15 октября 2020. URL:

<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/10/2020/5f885e949a794740de83df92>

of the Ukrainian government. This tactics turned out to be a success: the largest number of deputies who got into local councils were representatives of the pro-government "Servant of the People" (17.6% of the votes), "Batkivshchyna" of Y. Tymoshenko (12.4%), and Oppoblock (11.8%)⁵⁴. That meant that party Oppoblock finished in the top three. Moreover, the candidates from the Oppoblock occupied the leading positions in 11 regions, winning the first places in six regions.

In Belarus the results have been rather mixed: because of the falsifications and brutal repression of protest, Belarusian society became sharply polarized and a lot depended on Russia's treatment of the conflict. As soon, as Russia suggested its support in repression of protests by deploying the reserve of the law-enforcement agents near the Belarusian border, it became evident, that Russia is prepared to suppress the peaceful Belarusian protest (BBC, 2020). Despite the best efforts (Moscow launched and sponsored civic organizations, political parties, and media outlets in the regions of Belarus), merely 40,4 percent of Belarusians voice their support to the Union State, according to the polls, conducted before the 2020 presidential elections (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Nowadays this number is likely even lower (Krawatzek, 2020), taking into account Russia's factual support of Lukashenka's recent atrocities.

In general, the Belarusian information field is significantly influenced by the Russian one, with the main reasons for this situation being, largely, twofold a) ineffectiveness of the content-strategy of the state media; b) strict work rules for the independent media and repressions of the independent journalists. It should be also stated, that the ideologically-laden materials are being disseminated via two methods: a) political statements from the highly ranked public officials (i.e. Putin, Lavrov, Mezentsev), b) Russia-centric representation of information.

⁵⁴ Устимович, Юлия (2020). «Слуга народа», «Батьківщина» и ОПЗЖ: за кого українці отдали більше всего голосов на місних виборах. URL: <https://thepage.ua/news/mestnye-vybory-2020-cik-rezultaty-partij-po-vsej-ukraine>