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## Russian influence on news media in Belarus

Joanna Szostek

School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, United Kingdom

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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.*

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 “informationwar” (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” e 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; Sahn, 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” (*yedinoe 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 Sheremet of intentionally distorting information. Sheremet and his cameraman Dmitriy Zavadskiy subsequently received suspended jail sentences for filming "illegally" at the Belarusian-Lithuanian border; a number of other ORT journalists also spent time in custody (Human Rights Watch, 1998). In July 2000, Zavadskiy went missing; it is believed he was abducted and murdered (Wilson, 2011).

During the past decade, Lukashenko has strengthened his defences against Russian information attacks. Fewer Russian newspapers are available in Belarus now than in the past, at least in their offline format. Important changes have occurred in the way Russian TV programmes are transmitted in Belarus. The creation of ONT in 2002 signified the end of full terrestrial broadcasts of Russia's Pervyy Kanal in the country. ONT has gradually introduced more domestically produced content alongside programmes made in Moscow. For years, the full international versions of all major Russian channels (Pervyy Kanal, Rossiya 1/RTR, NTV, TV Tsentr and Ren TV) were available on Belarusian cable networks. However, in 2009 Belarusian cable operators collectively axed transmission of these five channels (Belapan, 2009). Thus, for most Belarusian viewers ONT, NTV-Belarus and RTR-Belarus are now the only platforms where Russian TV news can be watched. This suits Lukashenko because it facilitates censorship. As they are Belarusian state broadcasters, ONT, NTV-Belarus and RTR-Belarus can be instructed to drop Russian bulletins (or other unwanted content) from their schedules, or edit out individual reports should the need arise. Such censorship was a feature of the information war which broke out between Moscow and Minsk in 2010.

## **2. The origins and escalation of the 2010 information war**

Relations between Russia and Belarus ran into trouble in 2010 for a number of reasons. Until the end of December 2009, all crude oil exported from Russia to Belarus was subject to a reduced export duty. However, Russia refused to prolong this arrangement, insisting that Belarus should pay the full export duty on any Russian oil which it refined and re-exported to the West. The Belarusian government naturally objected strongly, because the re-export of cheap Russian oil had been a major source of its income. A compromise agreement was reached on 27 January 2010, but Lukashenko and his ministers continued to grumble loudly and repeatedly. They portrayed the imposition of oil export duties as a "gross violation" of the new

Customs Union which was due to start functioning between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan from 1 July (Belapan, 2010a).

As the date of the Customs Union's launch approached, there was speculation that the Belarusians were dragging their heels over the ratification of key documents in an attempt to extract concessions from Russia on the oil supply issue (Belapan, 2010b). On 18 June Lukashenko even issued an ultimatum (Belapan, 2010c), stating: "To advance in the formation of the Customs Union and sign all documents, all customs duties must be abolished." However, his efforts backfired. On 16 June, Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev instructed Gazprom to give Belarus five days to pay off 187 million dollars of gas-related debt. If Belarus failed to pay, the gas supply would be cut by 85 per cent; a threat which Gazprom began to implement on 21 June. Lukashenko capitulated and ratified the new Customs Code by 3 July, but his indignation at this "blackmail" was fully vented via the media. For instance, the presenter of ONT's Nashi Novosti bulletin accused Medvedev of "cynicism" and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin of "hypocrisy" (BBC Monitoring, 2010). At the end of June Lukashenko expressed his resentment in a letter to the editor of Russian newspaper Pravda, criticizing the "unfriendly policy" pursued by the Russian leadership towards their "closest" neighbour and the "lies and slander" poured out by the Russian media (Yezhednevnik, 2010). By this time there was clearly a personal element to the bilateral tension. As one editorial put it, "the leaders of Russia and Belarus simply do not like each other" (Vedomosti, 2010). The Kremlin was tired of Lukashenko's vitriol and intransigence. Besides the disputes over oil, gas and the Customs Union, there was simmering irritation in Moscow at Lukashenko's continued refusal to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Some friction also arose over events in Kyrgyzstan: in April 2010 Lukashenko publicly criticized Russia for failing to condemn the Kyrgyz protests which had led to the overthrow of Kurmanbek Bakiyev (Khodasevich, 2010). He then offered Bakiyev asylum in Minsk. Bakiyev's arrival in Belarus presumably occurred with Russian consent since he travelled via Russian territory to get there (Zharikhin, 2010). However, the Kremlin had generally been supportive of the regime change in Bishkek (Marat, 2010). The fact that Lukashenko so openly challenged Russian policy on this matter - and allowed Bakiyev to conduct high-profile press conferences - did little to endear him to the Russian leadership. Medvedev hinted at his displeasure on 21 April with a pointed reprimand about "offering permanent residence to people who have lost their job" (RIA Novosti news agency, 2010). Thus, by June the atmosphere in bilateral relations was extremely sour and the Belarusian state media were already in offensive mode. However, full-scale information war really broke out on 4 July when Russia retaliated with an incendiary documentary, *Krestnyy Batka* ('Godfather Lukashenko'), broadcast in Russia on NTV. *Krestnyy Batka* accused the Belarusian president of despotism, complicity in the "disappearance" of his political opponents, self-interested hypocrisy in his dealings with Russia and sympathy for Hitler. It turned out to be the first in a four-part series, with further episodes aired on 16 July, 15 August and 8 October. All four films were censored from NTV-Belarus, but could be watched in Belarus via the Internet. The information war was pursued by both sides until December 2010. Apart from the *Krestnyy Batka* films, other key events included an interview with Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili shown by Belarus 1 on 15 July; a news conference given by Lukashenko to Russian journalists on 1 October; and a video blog criticising Lukashenko that was posted by Medvedev on 3 October.

The following sections describe and explain how Russia was portrayed in Belarus by a range of 13 Russian-language newspapers and TV bulletins between August and November 2010. The findings are based on analysis of a five-week sample of news content and 21 interviews conducted with media professionals in Minsk and Moscow. Two research questions are addressed:

1. How did the leading Russian-language TV news bulletins and newspapers in Belarus vary with regard to the kind of coverage (extensive or limited, favourable or unfavourable) they devoted to Russia?
2. Why did the scale and tone of news coverage about Russia vary from one Russian-language news provider to another?

Among the 13 news providers studied, six were in some respect Russian: the news bulletins *Vremya*, *Vesti* and *Segodnya* were all produced by Russian federal broadcasters before being transmitted on Belarusian state-controlled channels; *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* and *Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii* were both subsidiaries of Russian tabloids; and the weekly paper *BelGazeta* reportedly belonged to the same group of Russian investors as *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii*. The remaining seven were produced without any notable Russian involvement: the state news bulletins *Panorama*, *Nashi Novosti* and *24 Chasa*; the state-owned daily newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*; and the privately-owned weekly newspapers *Obozrevatel*, *Belorusy i Rynok* and *Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus*. This case selection was designed to investigate the hypothesis that a news provider with a shareholder or partner in Russia is likely to generate (a) more extensive and (b) more favourable coverage of Russia than market rivals. However, the case selection is not representative of all news media available in Belarus. Radio, magazines, online media and regional media are excluded from the study, as is news in the Belarusian language. The study therefore provides only a partial view of the Belarusian media environment. Its scope had to be limited for reasons of feasibility.

### **3. Reporting about Russia in TV news bulletins**

The six TV news bulletins behaved fully in line with the hypothesis. All news stories were coded for whether or not they “featured Russia,” that is, whether they contained three or more Russia-related keywords from a list in the coding frame. Proportionally, there were far more stories “featuring Russia” on *Vremya*, *Vesti* and *Segodnya* than on *Panorama*, *Nashi Novosti* and *24 Chasa*, as Table 1 illustrates.

Thus, variation in scale of reporting about Russia was entirely as expected. Variation in tone of reporting about Russia was similarly predictable. Tone of reporting was assessed by comparing each bulletin's selection of stories “featuring Russia”. The primary focus of story selection at *Vremya*, *Vesti* and *Segodnya* was Russia's ruling tandem: the statements, meetings and other activities of Putin and Medvedev received copious and entirely uncritical coverage. Reports expressing criticism of Russian state policy were absent, while reports about social or economic problems in Russia were set within the context of the Russian authorities taking steps to improve matters.

The same cannot be said of *Panorama*, *Nashi Novosti* and *24 Chasa*. These three bulletins selected stories which, by the nature of the subject matter, drew attention to injustices, failings or errors on the part of the Russian state or problems with the political status quo in Russia. Here are a few illustrative examples. On 27 August *Nashi Novosti* reported a story from “authoritative German publication *Die Welt*” about the career preferences of Russian youth, who “increasingly want to become MPs or officials”. The presenter said: “It is not only a stable income which attracts the young people...There is a more important reason e corruption...In today's Russia this has acquired a horrific scale. According to the data of an association of lawyers and human rights activists, a sum equivalent to half the Russian GDP is spent on bribes” (*Nashi Novosti*, 2010a). On 6 October *Panorama* announced: “The Russian government intends to economize on social projects. This concerns the ill, children, and pregnant women... The Russian government is counting on saving over 48 billion roubles at the expense of pregnant and ill people” (*Panorama*, 2010a).

*24 Chasa* said little about Russian domestic affairs but on 24 August it reported that more and more Russian citizens were moving to settle in Belarus. The presenter observed that their behaviour was understandable, because Belarus was “more stable” than Russia. Individuals who had moved from Russia to Belarus were shown saying that Belarusian food products were “better than the same ones in Russia”, and that “people in Russia have to rely only on themselves...there is no question of the state helping” (*24 Chasa*, 2010).

Denigration of the Russian state, its integrity and competence was a clearly identifiable trend in the story selection of *Panorama*, *Nashi Novosti* and *24 Chasa* during the sample period. Yet these bulletins also selected numerous stories about beneficial and positive aspects of the Russia-Belarus relationship. For example, they ran reports referring to successful trade and the eastward export of Belarusian goods (toys, trucks and food). Regional economic ties were

emphasized: in the first sample week, Panorama ran a story on trade talks between the Belarusian Council of Ministers and Russia's Lipetsk Region, saying that the two sides could “complement each other” rather than compete (Panorama, 2010b). All the Belarusian-made bulletins covered a meeting between Lukashenko and the head of Russia's Kursk Region.

*Table 1*  
Scale of reporting about Russia in TV news bulletins.

TV news bulletin	Mean number of stories featuring Russia in each bulletin	Mean % of stories featuring Russia in each bulletin
Vremya on ONT	8.22	84.8%
Vesti on RTR-Belarus	8.56	80.8%
Segodnya on NTV-Belarus	7.75	82.7%
Panorama on Belarus 1	2.88	20.8%
Nashi Novosti on ONT	2.13	23.3%
24 Chasa on STV	1.36	16.0%

The Nashi Novosti correspondent described relations with Kursk Region as productive, while Panorama's correspondent declared on 26 August: “Belarus and Kursk Region are linked by a long relationship of partnership and common interests in all areas. This convergence is an objective process, not subject to the political considerations of the moment” (Panorama, 2010c). Interestingly, the samples of Vremya and Vesti content taken from ONT and RTR-Belarus contained no reports at all about Russian-Belarusian relations. This is because such reports were cut out by Belarusian censors prior to broadcast. Segodnya was the only Russian-made bulletin to get material on bilateral ties past the censors a couple of times. Its reporting pulled no punches. On 4 October, a Segodnya correspondent said: “For the first time, the Russian leader publicly and harshly responded to the numerous attacks of Aleksandr Lukashenko...The Russian president essentially exposed Lukashenko's dishonesty and ugly political bargaining” (Segodnya, 2010a). Another Segodnya story on 6 October featured an interview with Russian MP Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who said: “In every way he sabotages all the agreements that are reached, behaves despicably. Lukashenko, Lukashenko, that's who he is. Dirty tricks every day” (Segodnya, 2010b).

Meanwhile, Panorama, Nashi Novosti and 24 Chasa all conveyed the words of Lukashenko about relations with Russia, including his reaction to the *Krestnyy Batka* films. Their coverage included clips of politicians, pundits and “ordinary Russians” voicing support for the Belarusian president. The Kremlin's media attacks were portrayed as backfiring. For instance, on 8 September the Nashi Novosti commentator Aleksey Mikhilchenko told viewers Some call it an information war; I call it free advertising ... Visit any Russian internet forum and you will see that the stones thrown at Belarus all inevitably fall on Russian soil. They write about the horrors of the regime; readers in their comments recall vacations spent happily in Belarusian sanatoria and the cleanliness of Minsk streets. They sew funny suits for the Belarusians; the Russians try them on their own politicians, making the latter look even funnier... (Nashi Novosti, 2010b) There is a straightforward and obvious explanation for the content variation found between Panorama, Nashi Novosti and 24 Chasa on the one hand and Vremya, Vesti and Segodnya on the other hand. The editors of the former answer to the Belarusian Presidential Administration, while the editors of the latter answer to the Kremlin. When interviewed, senior media professionals at ONT, Belarus 1 and STV were quite willing to acknowledge that their news broadcasts were coordinated with the Belarusian Presidential Administration. For example, an interviewee at Belarus 1 said: “We are a national channel and of course we have to defend the interests of the state...We carry the state position and convey it. So yes, it happens at the level of the Presidential Administration, of course, certain aspects are conveyed to us, which it would be desirable to report. And of course, we take them into account in our work” (Anonymized interviews, 2012).

A more puzzling question is why Vremya, Vesti and Segodnya continue to be broadcast on Belarusian state-controlled channels even when their message (a rosy-eyed view of the Russian authorities) is at odds with Belarusian state propaganda. Three explanations emerged from the interviews. First, there are audience expectations. A programme director at ONT said: "We never considered the possibility of removing the Vremya bulletin, because our viewer associates our schedule with a number of Russian-produced programmes, including Vremya. I think our viewer would be displeased if we took it off air" (Anonymized interviews, 2012). She added that Vremya enjoyed a 36 per cent share of the audience in its prime-time slot, which is roughly the same as Nashi Novosti, which means that viewers tend to watch the programmes back-to-back. She linked Vremya's continuing popularity in Belarus to the common identity and close ties which she said were shared by Russians and Belarusians: "Taking into account the long Soviet past and friendly ties and relations e many people have relatives and friends living in Russia e so the majority see themselves as one country. They continue to think that way" (Anonymized interviews, 2012).

The likelihood of Russian objections is the second explanation. At STV (which controls RTR-Belarus), a senior representative said

It is written in our contract that we cannot interfere in that [Vesti broadcasts]. At particularly critical moments there were sometimes cases when reports appeared that we really didn't like ... We replaced them, or rather we didn't replace them; we tried to cut out such reports. But firstly that spoils the timing of the bulletin ... And secondly there were complaints from our [Russian] partners. Then we decided not to do it. To the purely Russian [Vesti] news bulletins we attach our bulletins [10-minute Novosti-Belarus bulletins shown at 19.50 before the Vesti bulletin at 20.00]. They are scheduled together in order to resolve that issue, to provide a mix of information (Anonymized interviews, 2012).

Third, it emerged from the interviews that Belarus effectively relies on the Russian-made bulletins to provide news coverage of certain topics. Reporting international stories requires a level of resources which the Belarusian broadcasters do not have - their network of foreign correspondents is relatively limited. So the Russian bulletins, which have greater resources at their disposal, fill the gap. This is particularly true of Vremya and Nashi Novosti. An ONT representative explained that the two bulletins are viewed as a single package and Nashi Novosti editors avoid replicating topics already covered by their counterparts at Vremya. International news with no Belarusian participation is a topic which Nashi Novosti commonly leaves for Vremya to report. The interviewee explained

If Pervyy Kanal reports a story in its news and we understand that it will be a long report, then there is no sense for us to repeat it five minutes later with our journalist's version...At best we would repeat it, or worst of all, produce a report of poorer quality. So we don't. Instead we concentrate more on domestic Belarusian events. For big events involving Russia or the CIS we have Moscow assistants, so to speak (Anonymized interviews, 2012).

There were indications that Belteleradiokompaniya (to which both Belarus 1 and NTV-Belarus belong) also relies on its Russian partner to provide coverage of international affairs. A senior representative of NTV-Belarus observed: "Unfortunately, due to financial restrictions Belteleradiokompaniya lacks so-called permanent foreign correspondents. Russia has far more of them ... Our international news [on Belarus 1] mainly comes from the exchange e video news" (Anonymized interviews, 2012). He suggested that the Russian bulletins' capacity to report extensively on foreign affairs might partly explain their continued popularity in Belarus. Normally, according to the interviewees, reporting of Russian domestic affairs is left to Vremya, Vesti and Segodnya. A Panorama journalist stated: "Of course, our viewers can get the fullest picture of Russia directly from the Russian news. We understand that perfectly well. So if certain events happen in Russia, purely Russian domestic matters, in principle we don't pay much attention to it unless it's something big, for example a terrorist attack or an explosion" (Anonymized interviews, 2012). The interviews thus suggest that the considerable attention paid to Russian domestic problems by Panorama and Nashi Novosti during the information war

period was exceptional; Belarusian bulletins would tend to talk less about Russian domestic matters when bilateral relations are calm. The interviewees from Panorama, Nashi Novosti and 24 Chasa all stressed that reports about Russia should normally have a Belarusian angle in order to be selected.

#### **4. Reporting about Russia in the Russian-language press**

There was support for the hypothesis among the newspapers too, although there was some exceptional behaviour among the weeklies and they were all less vitriolic than the TV bulletins. Belarusian state-owned Sovetskaya Belorussiya was compared against Russian-owned Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii. Table 2 shows that the proportion of stories “featuring Russia” in Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii was on average about six percent higher than in Sovetskaya Belorussiya. A two sample t-test revealed this difference to be statistically significant at the 5 per cent level:  $t(44) = -3.28$ ;  $p = 0.002$ .

The five weekly newspapers are compared in Table 3. Russian-owned business weekly BelGazeta was found to devote the most attention to Russia; the other business-oriented publication, Belorusy i Rynok was not far behind. Contrary to the hypothesis, Russian-owned tabloid Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii was found to have the lowest proportion of stories “featuring Russia”. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the Bonferroni follow-up test showed differences to be statistically significant at the 5 per cent level between BelGazeta and Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus ( $p = 0.033$ ); BelGazeta and Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii ( $p < 0.000$ ); BelGazeta and Obozrevatel ( $p = 0.003$ ); there was also a statistically significant difference in mean between Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii and Belorusy i Rynok ( $p = 0.006$ ). Differences in mean between Obozrevatel, Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus and Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii were not statistically significant; nor were differences between BelGazeta and Belorusy i Rynok. Thus, it was the two business-oriented publications which had the most to say about Russia on this measure.

Tone of coverage was again assessed primarily on the basis of story selection. There were some similarities between Sovetskaya Belorussiya and Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii in this regard. In both daily papers, Russia appeared most often as a banal place of business, travel or residence. There were also noticeable differences between the dailies. Reports about Russian problems and failings were far more numerous in Sovetskaya Belorussiya than in Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii. Moreover, Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii ran no editorials about Russia at all, whereas Sovetskaya Belorussiya was heavily laden with editorial opinion. Stories referring directly to the information war were not numerous in either daily paper. There were two reports on this topic in the Sovetskaya Belorussiya sample and three in the sample from Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii. The range of views cited about the dispute was very limited. In Sovetskaya Belorussiya, only the editor-in-chief, one journalist and Lukashenko expressed opinions on the matter. Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii cited only Lukashenko and Medvedev, without any further commentary. In stark contrast to the TV bulletins, both these papers appeared to play down the seriousness of the information war. The following illustrative quote comes from a front-page editorial in Sovetskaya Belorussiya: “Now lots of people are talking and writing about Medvedev's video blog. But a few days will pass, the waters will settle and a number of circumstances will become clearer ... political misunderstandings between Minsk and Moscow always end positively ...” (Yakubovich, 2010). The video blog referred to here was a major event of the “information war” in which the Russian leader accused his Belarusian counterpart of acting dishonourably and breaking basic rules of behaviour (BBC, 2010).

When reporting the posting of Medvedev's critical video blog about Lukashenko, Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii did not take sides. Its coverage consisted of quotations from both Medvedev and Lukashenko under subheadings “The people”, “Relations at the top level” and “Hopes for improvement”. The words of Lukashenko from his press conference to Russian journalists and Medvedev's words from the video blog were alternated without any analysis whatsoever. The article was accompanied by a photo of the two presidents together,



smiling, captioned: “Both Dmitriy Medvedev and Aleksandr Lukashenko are convinced that the relationship between the two countries has good prospects” (Kozlik, 2010).

*Table 2*

Scale of reporting about Russia in daily newspapers.

Newspaper	Mean number of stories featuring Russia in each issue	Mean % of stories featuring Russia in each issue
Sovetskaya Belorussiya	5.91	19.6%
Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii	7.17	25.8%

As for the weekly newspapers, it is hard to argue that Russian-owned Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii and BelGazeta selected stories that flattered Russia more than the stories published in Obozrevatel, Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus and Belorusy i Rynok. In the case of Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii, the majority of stories “featuring Russia” were apolitical. However, the paper twice published full-page articles drawing attention to problems in the Russian political system. Both were written by the columnist Vyacheslav Kostikov. On 8 September he discussed the “alienation” of the Russian public from the Russian authorities (Kostikov, 2010a):

Reliant primarily on higher-level bureaucrats and satisfied with what is happening in the country, the [Russian] authorities are trying to ruin the opposition. In essence the goal has been achieved: independent parties have been sidelined and dunce's hats placed on their leaders' heads. The words ‘democracy’, ‘democrat’ and ‘human rights activist’ have basically disappeared from the official dictionary ... The people are told that life is good and democracy isn't necessary if there is nanotechnology, good oil prices, Olympic Games, football World Cups and jolly television.”

On 3 November Kostikov then wrote about the Russian middle class's “deep disillusionment” with the current political system (Kostikov, 2010b). These two articles constituted the most forthright criticism of the Russian state in the Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii sample, but a sceptical attitude towards the Russian establishment could be seen elsewhere in the paper every week.

During the sample period BelGazeta did not run any reports that focused specifically on problems in Russia, nor did it pick stories which overtly drew attention to Russian achievements or strengths. However, a couple of contributors referred to Russia's democratic failings and corruption in the course of discussions on wider issues. For instance, retired Russian colonel Vladimir Kvachkov was quoted saying on 1 November (Martinovich, 2010): “Compared to the mess in Russia, with the orgy of liberal democracy which killed off almost all our own industry, agriculture, science and culture ... Belarus is a blessed land.”

In the area of Russian domestic affairs BelGazeta's story selection centred on the machinations and manoeuvring of Russia's political elite. On 6 September, for instance, it ran two full-page interviews about Putin's much-publicized road trip around the Russian Far East in a yellow Lada. One interview was with Russian journalist Andrey Kolesnikov; the other was with a man from Chita whose video of the extra Ladas in Putin's cortege had become an internet hit. Kolesnikov was generally sympathetic towards Putin, suggesting that the Russian premier's popularity had been boosted by the publicity stunt. The video-maker said he begrudged the amount of money spent on Putin's journey. Yet evaluation of Russia's leadership or political system was not paramount in any BelGazeta articles. Rather, events and developments involving Russia were generally scrutinized for their future implications - particularly for Belarus.

There was a curious contrast between BelGazeta and Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii in their reporting of Russian-Belarusian relations. In BelGazeta, bilateral ties, especially tensions and trade, were a dominant theme. Stories relating to the spat between Lukashenko and the Kremlin made BelGazeta's front page in three of the five sample weeks. The sample editions of Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii, on the other hand, contained no articles at all that dealt

specifically with the political or economic relationship between Russia and Belarus. BelGazeta did not obviously support either Lukashenko or the Kremlin; it reported diverse views on the bilateral tensions, publishing quotes from both Belarusian and Russian politicians. In the remaining weeklies, stories containing mockery or explicit criticism of the Russian state or its authorities were either rare or entirely absent. Obozrevatel ran one report of note in this regard: a full-page article on 27 August about the political consequences of Russia's wildfires. In the article, pundit Boris Kagarlitskiy, Russian opposition politician late Boris Nemtsov and environmentalist Yevgeniy Shvarts all pointed to flaws in the Russian political system. Kagarlitskiy wrote: "The fires revealed the problem of the authorities in a catastrophic way...Whenever a problem arises, the ruling circles do not try to understand its causes or do something to resolve it. Rather, they brilliantly block any political consequences which the given problem might have had. In the long term the results of such government threaten to be disastrous ..." (Kagarlitskiy, 2010). The majority of stories "featuring Russia" in Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus revolved around Belarusian socio-political or economic themes. There were no reports that dealt exclusively with Russian domestic affairs. Russia was briefly discussed in several interviews with Belarusian presidential candidates, none of whom spoke out against ties with Moscow. The most substantial analysis on Russia-related topics was written by regular columnist Valeriy Karbalevich. Karbalevich produced columns about a Collective Security Treaty Organization summit in Yerevan where Medvedev met Lukashenko; an attack on the Russian embassy in Minsk; the impact of the feud with Russia on the Belarusian presidential election; and the personality clash between the Russian and Belarusian leaders. He described the background to these developments and speculation surrounding them; he offered his own interpretation of the key newsmakers' objectives and tactics. However, he managed to avoid value judgements and emotive evaluations of events.

*Table 3*  
Scale of reporting about Russia in weekly newspapers.

Newspaper	Mean number of stories featuring Russia in each issue	Mean % of stories featuring Russia in each issue
Obozrevatel	7.4	21.0%
BelGazeta	15.4	37.4%
Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus	8	24.9%
Belorusy i Rynok	14	30.7%
Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii	10.8	15.5%

Belorusy i Rynok was similarly oriented towards news affecting Belarus in its selection of stories "featuring Russia" (the only domestic Russian news story to receive substantial coverage was the departure from office of Moscow mayor Yuriy Luzhkov). Trade with Russia was a particularly common theme. Sometimes the paper highlighted problematic elements of bilateral trade relations (for example, the risk of domestic buckwheat shortages due to rising demand in Russia; Belarusian refineries suffering due to Russian oil duties) but it did so without pointing a finger of blame. A couple of times Belorusy i Rynok referred to Russia's "imperial" intentions" (Skuratovich, 2010) or "desire to dominate" (Alesin, 2010) in the post-Soviet region. However, analysis of Russia's geopolitical manoeuvring occupied relatively little column space. Interviews were conducted with representatives from each newspaper to explain these content analysis findings.

At Sovetskaya Belorussiya there was no hiding the fact that the tone of reporting about Russia is determined by a strict editorial chain of command running back to the Presidential Administration. Speaking anonymously, an interviewee said: "Usually the editor-in-chief goes [to meetings at the Presidential Administration], or his first deputy. These meetings take place

every Monday. And afterwards, each Monday, it becomes more or less clear what the tone of reporting about Russian-Belarusian relations is going to be” (Anonymized interviews, 2012). However, the editor-in-chief does not just convey instructions from above; he is apparently influential in his own right. When asked why Sovetskaya Belorussiya had reacted less strongly than the state-controlled TV bulletins to Medvedev's video blog, the interviewee said: “It is all connected to [the editor-in-chief's] personality and personal influence on the Presidential Administration ... He doesn't like the idea of being a reckless propagandist. The people who work on TV are younger, they have less influence ... The editor of Sovetskaya Belorussiya is old and experienced” (Anonymized interviews, 2012).

At Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii, an interviewee explained why the paper had not been more supportive of the Kremlin during the information war. She made it clear that the paper tries to avoid aggravating the Belarusian authorities, saying: “With anything concerning the [Belarusian] state, we try not to enter into a conflict ...Anything relating to ideology we simply try to avoid. If there are some really important matters, we simply refer to them in a factual tone. Here is one opinion, there is another. Here is one Russian quote, there is a Belarusian one.” (Anonymized interviews, 2012). She added that her priority was to keep the paper stable and profitable, which would obviously be difficult if it criticized Lukashenko. She said: “Komsomolka is a business project ... The shareholders' interest lies in having a profitable business in Belarus, which operates in a stable way, with a growing readership, so the capital increases ... Nobody understands this in Belarus, because the attitude towards media here is still the same as it was in the Soviet Union” (Anonymized interviews, 2012).

In both Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii and Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii, all reports about Russian domestic matters are written in Moscow but selected for publication by editors in Minsk. According to the interviewee from Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii, story selection for the Belarusian edition is not coordinated with colleagues in the Russian editorial office. Articles from Moscow are chosen on the basis of their “relevance to the consumer”; prices and everyday life are priority topics, politics “to a lesser extent”. Yet Vyacheslav Kostikov's columns about Russian politics (described above) are always selected because “the people love him”. The interviewee explained

Kostikov is always rather predictable, always writes about the same topics, just changing the direction or perspective. The people love him. And it works out that in Russia he berates the Russians and they let him; he's their own, after all. He is not berating ours [authorities], so [changes tack]. But I have to say he is very popular ... I think there are better journalists, but the people love him, so we always run Kostikov, whatever happens. (Anonymized interviews, 2012)

The mild criticism of Russia's political system observed during the sample period would thus appear to be driven more by the preferences of Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii's readership than by political positioning. According to the interviewee, Kostikov is known to be popular because his articles are well-read on the paper's website; his columns also generate reader responses by phone and letter.

Although Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii journalists in Minsk do not write about Russian domestic matters, they can produce reports about Russian-Belarusian relations, the interviewee said. It is not the paper's permanent policy to avoid writing about bilateral ties and yet the content sample contained no articles on this topic at all. It appears that Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii was choosing not to report the tensions between Moscow and Minsk in an attempt to avoid offending anyone. As the interviewee explained.

We didn't always report [news about bilateral tensions], not always, because of the position we are in. Although we are a Belarusian paper to a large extent, we are still considered a Russian publication. And we can't say the things a Belarusian newspaper can say because from us it would be considered [pro-Russian] propaganda ...And Russia for its part would see it as Belarusian propaganda... (Anonymized interviews, 2012)

During the information war Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii was in an “extremely complicated position”. “Both sides were ours [i te i te svoi]”, the interviewee said; consequently the paper adopted a “centrist” position.

Despite the care taken by editors to avoid controversy, *Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii* still runs into trouble sometimes, the interviewee added. Asked whether articles in the paper ever prompted the ire of the authorities in Russia or Belarus, the interviewee said: "It is a never-ending process. After the publication of each issue, someone always finds something that they don't like. With Russia it's simpler to resolve, the editor-in chief resolves it; he explains our situation. They don't really understand ... Of course, on the Belarusian side it is eternally difficult" (Anonymized interviews, 2012).

Regrettably, no full-time member of BelGazeta's editorial staff could be persuaded to participate in this research. The BelGazeta contributor who did consent to an interview was not in a position to answer all the questions posed. The interviewee acknowledged that Russia featured heavily in BelGazeta's news coverage but could not explain why this was so. She suggested it might be due to "the fact that a lot of the journalists have contacts in that area, with Russian counterparts". It should be noted that Viktor Martinovich, the deputy editor of BelGazeta, is considered an expert on Russian-Belarusian relations; he is responsible for much of the paper's reporting on Russia-related matters and his personal influence may be one reason for the high level of attention which Russia receives. The interviewee had not observed any consistent editorial stance towards Russia being enforced from above.

The remaining weeklies - *Obozrevatel*, *Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus* and *Belorusy i Rynok* - are each owned by their respective editors-in-chief, who clearly play a major role in determining the shape of their publications' news content. *Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus* is a small operation with few full-time staff. Its editor-in-chief Vasilii Zdanyuk said

Only I determine [the editorial policy] here. They [referring to the other members of staff in the room during the interview] agree. It's all me, only my worldview. Whether that's a bad thing or a good thing, that's the way it is. It would be better if there were 10 people here who got together and worked out joint decisions. But since there aren't 10 people, there's only me, I have to do it. And the reader has to trust me or not trust me. (Minsk, October 2012)

The editor-in-chief at *Belorusy i Rynok*, Vyacheslav Khodosovskiy, pointed to his control over appointments when asked how his own views affected the work of his journalists. He said: "At our newspaper the situation is as follows: nobody who supports the [Belarusian] regime will come to work here, they wouldn't work and we wouldn't offer them a position at the paper. Our newspaper is an opposition newspaper. We are independent." (Minsk, October 2012)

The interviewee from *Obozrevatel* did not go into detail about the nature of owner Sergey Atroshchenko's general influence on editorial policy (Atroshchenko is generally considered loyal to the Belarusian president). Regarding his views on Russia, however, the interviewee said: "The editor-in-chief (he owns *Obozrevatel*) holds views about Russia which are traditional for the majority of Belarusians. He sees Russia as an important strategic partner. I don't think articles offending the honour and dignity of Russians would be published ... Considered criticism in the context of Russian-Belarusian relations is present though" (Anonymized interviews, 2012).

The interviewees from *Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus* and *Belorusy i Rynok* made clear that they favoured a European future for Belarus over further integration with Russia. Khodosovskiy said: "We [at *Belorusy i Rynok*] support a liberal economy, democracy and the values professed by most countries in the European Union...By integrating with Russia we are heading towards non-reform, towards a degrading country, a country which is falling apart, which flouts all democratic norms of the law."

Zdanyuk, similarly, spoke of Putin's "imperial thinking" and attempts to gradually gather an empire "using twenty-first century methods". *Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus* columnist Valeriy Karbalevich said he considered further integration with Russia to be "wrong and dangerous for the prospects of Belarusian statehood and Belarusian democracy". Both Khodosovskiy and Zdanyuk indicated that they tried to convey this wary view of Russia and preference for a Europe-oriented foreign policy to their readers.

Yet it is interesting to note that the comments made by the interviewees from *Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus* and *Belorusy i Rynok* were far more negative about Russia than any comments

observed in those papers during the period studied. It seems that neither Zdanyuk nor Khodosovskiy favours a proselytizing approach to news reporting and analysis. The content sample contained no evidence of either publication engaging in verbal attacks against the Russian state or its policies, nor were there explicit editorial calls for any particular course of action in relation to Russia. It is therefore not only the personal policy preferences of the editors which shape the way Russia is discussed in print. Their views about journalism and the objectives they set for their newspapers are also crucial. When asked what role their newspapers had sought to play during the media war with Russia, Khodosovskiy and Zdanyuk said that explaining the causes and consequences of events had been their priority - a pattern observed in the content sample.

### **5. Outcomes of the information war: did anybody win?**

It is evident from the content sample that the picture of Russia painted by the media in Belarus during the 2010 information war was rather contradictory. The bulletins Panorama, Nashi Novosti and (to a lesser extent) 24 Chasa portrayed Russia as a corrupt place with many failings, incompetent leaders and misguided policies. At the same time, they all stressed the positive relationship between “ordinary” Russians and Belarusians and the benefits of bilateral trade. Daily newspaper Sovetskaya Belorussiya conveyed a similar, albeit less aggressive and sensationalist, message. These four state-controlled news providers apparently had similar instructions from the Presidential Administration, described by one interviewee as follows

I would sit and monitor the news. If a piece of news appeared in the Russian media which could be interpreted in various ways - interpreted from a critical point of view - that really suited us back then. Above all we were devoting attention to ways of showing that the Russian state was corrupt, that the [Russian state-controlled] media were not telling the truth, that they were manipulated. It was all necessary to demonstrate that those films [about Lukashenko] were a lie. (Anonymized interviews, 2012)

Meanwhile, Vremya, Vesti and Segodnya were hardly more subtle in emphasizing the competence of the Russian leadership and the wisdom of its policies. These three bulletins were largely prevented from telling Belarusian viewers anything about bilateral ties; only a couple of Segodnya reports escaped the censors to convey the Kremlin's side of the argument. Readers of Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii might have been forgiven for thinking there was no bilateral tension, as the tabloid studiously avoided mentioning it. Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii played down the significance of the dispute and suggested it would all blow over quickly. Among the privately-run newspapers, there was neither condemnation nor approval of Russia's actions towards Belarus; journalists at BelGazeta, Belorusy i Rynok and Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus focused on explaining the causes of events and predicting their consequences.

The information war ended when a bilateral deal on oil supplies was reached on 9 December 2010, just 10 days before the Belarusian presidential election. Russia agreed to drop duties on crude oil exports to Belarus, provided that Minsk would transfer to Moscow all the duties it received from exporting products made from Russian oil (Dyomkin and Kelly, 2010).

Lukashenko went on to secure a fourth presidential term in a vote marred by falsifications and violence, yet endorsed by Commonwealth of Independent States election observers. What, then, did Moscow achieve from its six-month media offensive? Can either side be declared the winner?

We do not know the precise motives behind the Kremlin's campaign against Lukashenko, which makes it hard to judge whether it succeeded or failed from the perspective of Russian foreign policy. If the aim was to sway the opinion of Belarusian citizens about their president, it was to some degree effective. Even though the Krestnyy Batka documentaries were not shown on NTV-Belarus, roughly half the Belarusian population were at least aware of the series by September 2010. By October (when it ended) around 40 per cent of respondents said they had personally watched one or more of the films (IISEPS, 2010a,b). A September poll found that nearly half the people who had seen the films considered their content to be “the truth” or “mainly the truth” against roughly a quarter who considered it “untrue” or “mainly untrue”; some 10 per cent of respondents said their opinion of Lukashenko had fallen as a result of the films (IISEPS, 2010b).

However, the reality in authoritarian Belarus is that public opinion has a limited impact on political outcomes. If Medvedev and Putin were hoping to dislodge Lukashenko from the presidency after weakening him through the media, that clearly failed to happen. Wilson (2011) describes Russia's policy as "relatively flexible", with the option of backing post-election protest if Lukashenko "suddenly looked vulnerable". Yet Russia's mudslinging during the election campaign had no discernible impact on the position of the Belarusian president. Five years down the line, Lukashenko appears just as entrenched in power as he ever has been. It seems it will take considerably more than negative media reports to dislodge him from the office. It is possible that Russian information attacks against Lukashenko were not aimed at a Belarusian audience at all. Russian state television is not capable of precision strikes; the Russian authorities cannot isolate one target audience (the domestic one) from another (in neighbouring post-Soviet states). One theory put forward to explain the *Krestnyy Batka* films is that the Kremlin wanted to discredit Lukashenko in the eyes of Russian citizens (Sharyy, 2010). It does, however, seem likely that there was an element of personal revenge in the Kremlin's actions. Korosteleva suggests that Russia unleashed the power of its media "to punish Lukashenko for his political disloyalty" (Korosteleva, 2011). If this interpretation is accurate, the Russian information attacks were more reactive than strategic; an expression of dissatisfaction without any greater purpose.

Whether Russia derived any lasting advantage from the 2010 information war with Belarus is highly questionable. Its own public image in Belarus may have been tarnished by the vitriolic response which *Krestnyy Batka* prompted. Meanwhile, Lukashenko remains, as ever, amenable to Moscow's demands only insofar as they suit his personal interests. He is a well-practised master at making promises and verbal concessions, only to backtrack later or find new ways of extracting rents, evading obligations and minimizing his losses. Thus, Belarus did start transferring duties to the Russian budget on the oil and oil products which it re-exported to third countries in line with the December 2010 agreement. However, its duty-free exports of oil and oil products continued in 2011-2012 under the guise of solvents and thinners e a scheme which may have cost the Russian budget over 1 billion dollars (Balmforth and Makhovsky, 2012).

## **6. Conclusion. Russian media influence and the power to provoke**

Whatever the objectives and outcomes of Russia's information attacks, they do not fit comfortably within the conceptual framework of soft power developed by Joseph Nye. In one recent book Nye (2011) defines soft power as: "the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes." Soft power tends to be closely associated with the mass media, which are sometimes described as a "soft power resource" (Nye, 2004). Observers have recently claimed that Russian mass media help Moscow to project or exert soft power over neighbouring states (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko, 2012). Yet during the 2010 information war, the influence of Russian media exports came predominantly from their ability to elicit aggravation in the Belarusian leadership rather than attraction among the Belarusian public. Critical reports about Lukashenko were far more politically salient than sympathetic reports about Russia; the former prompted a furore that was disproportionately large in relation to the number Belarusians who actually saw the offending content. It is possible, if not provable, that favourable portrayals of Russia conveyed by *Vremya*, *Vesti* and *Segodnya* may be exerting a subtle long-term effect on audience attitudes in Belarus. However, the association between the mass media and soft power is based on the premise that public sentiments sway political decision-making (after the media have shaped public sentiments). This premise is problematic in authoritarian Belarus, where there are few mechanisms through which public attitudes can affect Lukashenko's choices. Consequently, the notion that Russian news exports might contribute to Russian foreign policy success in Belarus in the manner envisaged by the literature on soft power is problematic. Constraints on the Russian media operating in Belarus also need to be taken into account. This article has shown that political pressure on the reporting of Russian-owned tabloids in Belarus

comes more from the local context than from Moscow, while Russian-made TV bulletins are subject to direct censorship.

To conclude, using the prism of soft power to interpret Russian involvement in the Belarusian media landscape may be inappropriate. It diverts attention from the Russian media's power to provoke; it also obscures the Belarusian authorities' own role in shaping the messages conveyed by Russian newspapers and TV programmes.

## **7. Postscript**

This article was completed in August 2013, several months before the start of the “Euromaidan” protests in Ukraine and ensuing crisis in relations between Moscow and Kyiv. The conflict in Ukraine has raised the problem of post-Soviet “information wars” to unprecedented prominence. Highly tendentious news reports on Russian federal television (widely accessible in Ukraine for years via satellite and cable) have been blamed for stoking separatist sentiment in Crimea and the Donbas. A relatively liberal media environment arguably rendered Ukraine less able than Belarus to defend itself against criticism emanating from Russia. Whereas Lukashenko has carefully managed the Russian media presence in his country to facilitate direct censorship and encourage self-censorship at times of conflict, the Ukrainian authorities lacked an equivalent toolkit to stem the spread of unwanted messages. Belatedly, the Ukrainian government has attempted to “counter Russia's media aggression” by establishing a Ministry of Information for that purpose (Interfax-Ukraine, 2015), banning the cable transmission of certain Russian channels, expelling or barring certain Russian journalists and various other measures. Yet Russian broadcasts reportedly continue to attract sizeable audiences in rebel-held Donbas, where Kyiv no longer controls broadcasting infrastructure.

As in Belarus 2010, the Russian media during the Ukraine crisis have demonstrated their incontrovertible power to provoke and “elicit aggravation”. Indeed, the aggravation elicited in Ukraine can be witnessed not only among elite targets of Russian media attacks, but among ordinary citizens too, who have fought online to expose disinformation disseminated from Moscow (RFE/RL, 2015; DW, 2014). As in Belarus 2010, one should not automatically assume that residents of the state subjected to Russian vitriol constitute the target audience of Russian “media attacks”. For news editors serving the Kremlin, priority number one is to shape domestic public opinion within Russia and the impact of their work on Ukrainian public opinion is a secondary concern. Nor should one assume that their impact in Ukraine is beneficial to Russia's long-term foreign policy interests. The cases of Belarus 2010 and Ukraine since 2013 both reveal the double-edged consequences of aggressively propagandistic messages employed by Russia in its “information wars”. Such messages may persuade (or disorient) some viewers beyond Russian borders, but they risk alienating and offending many others (including current and future elites) - and thus fundamentally undermining Moscow's longstanding goal of closer integration with its “fraternal” Slavic neighbours.

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## **Appendix. List of news sources included in the study**

*Vremya news bulletin on TV channel ONT*

Vremya is a news bulletin produced by the Russian state-owned broadcaster Pervyy Kanal. In Belarus it is transmitted each night by Belarusian state-owned channel ONT (Obshchenatsionalnoye televideniye).

*Vesti news bulletin on TV channel RTR-Belarus*

Vesti is a news bulletin produced by the Russian state-owned broadcaster VGTRK (Vserossiyskaya gosudarstvennaya televizionnaya i radioveshchatelnaya kompaniya). In Belarus it is transmitted each night by the Belarusian state-controlled channel RTR-Belarus.

*Segodnya news bulletin on TV channel NTV-Belarus*

Segodnya is a news bulletin produced by the Russian state-controlled broadcaster NTV. In Belarus it is transmitted each night by the Belarusian state-owned channel NTV-Belarus.

*Panorama news bulletin on TV channel Belarus 1*

Panorama is a news bulletin produced and broadcast by the Belarusian state-owned channel Belarus 1.

*Nashi Novosti news bulletin on TV channel ONT*

Nashi Novosti is a news bulletin produced and broadcast by the Belarusian state-owned channel ONT.

*24 Chasa news bulletin on TV channel STV*

24 Chasa is a news bulletin produced and broadcast by the Belarusian state-controlled channel STV.

*Sovetskaya Belorussiya daily newspaper*

Sovetskaya Belorussiya is owned by the Belarusian state.

*Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii daily newspaper*

Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii belongs to the Russian privately-owned publishing company Komsomolskaya Pravda.

*Obozrevatel weekly newspaper*

Obozrevatel belongs to Belarusian businessman Sergey Atroshchenko

*BelGazeta weekly newspaper*

BelGazeta's ownership structure is not in the public domain but sources interviewed for this study said it

belonged to the same group of Russian shareholders as Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii

*Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus weekly newspaper*

Svobodnyye Novosti Plyus belongs to its Belarusian editor-in-chief Vladimir Zdanyuk

*Belorusy i Rynok weekly newspaper*

Belorusy i Rynok belongs to its Belarusian editor-in-chief Vyacheslav Khodosovskiy

*Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii weekly newspaper*

In the period under study Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii belonged to the PromSvyazCapital group controlled by Russian businessmen brothers Dmitriy and Aleksey Ananyev



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