September 21, 2021
Helsinki Commission Hearing, Hate speech, promotion of torture, and endorsement to violence against civilians in Belarus public funded media.

Testimony of Mr. Siarhei “Serge” Kharytonau, LL.M., Media Expert at International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSANS).
Chairman Cardin, Chairman Cohen, members of the commission, good afternoon. My name is Serge Kharytonau and I am providing this testimony to the U.S. Helsinki Commission as a media expert of the International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSANS). iSANS is a transatlantic expert initiative established in 2018 with the purpose of detecting, analyzing and countering hybrid threats in Eurasia.

Before I proceed to my testimony, I would like to make an important contextual disclaimer that my team finds necessary when considering the situation in Belarus.

This testimony is based on monitoring and documentation of activity conducted by the system of the so-called Belarus “state-owned media” that include TV, radio, print, web, and social media outlets controlled by Belarus citizen Aliaksandr Lukashenka who claims presidency in this country. Despite using the term “state-owned media” in this testimony, I would like to highlight that de-facto status of these media is different from general understanding of this term here in the Unites States.

With rise of authoritarian rule in mid-1990s, all state-owned and public-funded media in Belarus were de-facto puppetized by Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Today, all of them are entirely controlled by this individual, directly or indirectly, and are being used as public outreach extension of his personal PR service. For this purpose, the so-called “state media” or “public media” mentioned in this testimony are functionally closer to privately-owned media of individual oligarchs in Ukraine, rather than state-owned media in common meaning of this term. However, in case of Belarus, there is ultimately a single de-facto beneficiary.

With this in mind, I would like to introduce the findings of iSANS team that has identified the following trends that define current media landscape in the Republic of Belarus:

1. **IN 2020, THE INFORMATION SOVEREIGNTY OF BELARUS WAS GIVEN UP TO THE KREMLIN.**
   Through a combination of joint actions with the Kremlin and mass arrests at a rates comparable to Stalin’s “great purge” of the 1930s, Aliaksandr Lukashenka has de-facto given up the information sovereignty of Belarus¹ in exchange to the support of his personal ambitions. Local independent journalism is de-facto criminalized (with a few limited exclusions for multinational media outlets). The profession of journalist is being wiped off national media landscape, while the Kremlin’s propaganda enjoys its green light. This move severely jeopardizes the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Belarus as well as peace and security in Central and Eastern Europe.

2. **STATE PROPAGANDA WAS SYNCHRONIZED WITH THE KREMLIN’S NARRATIVES.** Following the Kremlin’s interference in internal affairs of Belarus in August 2020, Russia’s propagandists

managed to synchronize the messages of Belarus-based pro-Lukashenka media with ideas of the so-called “Russian World” (a.k.a. “Russki Mir”) promoted by Russia’s authorities in the aftermath of illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion to Donbas area of Ukraine. Russia is now using its soft power to promote own interests inside Belarus through exports of propagandistic technologies and narratives to Belarus state media. This process was welcomed by chauvinistic pro-Russian forces inside Belarus state-funded media, especially the broadcast television, and is being supported by civil administration of Lukashenka regime as well as pro-Russian groups.

3. **SYSTEMATIC USE OF HATE SPEECH AND INCITEMENT TO VIOLENCE.** In 2020, publicly-funded media were transformed into hate speech platforms that systematically dehumanize civilians and call for violence against individuals who did not explicitly and publicly expressed support to Lukashenka during the ongoing crisis. This activity is extremely dangerous as it is being used to endorse punitive operations targeting civilians both inside and outside Belarus, and it has essentially transformed “state media” into European analogy of the notorious “Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM)” that played key role in incitement to genocide in Rwanda.

4. **“STATE MEDIA” PERFORM THE ROLE OF PSY-OPS INFRASTRUCTURE.** State-funded media have been transformed into integral part of punitive system and are being used to sustain psychological operations and supporting punitive missions including enforced abductions, attacks on civilians, and other forms of repression. Video recordings of political hostages and victims of torture are being widely broadcasted via state-funded television (and disseminated through a network of online media) to prevent the exercise of civil, political, cultural, and other basic rights guaranteed to citizens of Belarus by international and national legislation. The critics of Aliaksandr Lukashenka are denied any access to publicly-funded or state-owned media platforms to express their opinions although these audiences clearly form the majority of the population of Belarus, while “state media”, in turn, clearly do not operate in public good.

5. **U.S. TECH IS USED TO PROMOTE MISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH.** The regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka has created a media ecosystem which combines traditional media with digital platforms and mobile messengers and largely relies on foreign equipment and technologies. Digital products and platforms of American companies, such as Google-owned YouTube, or U.S.-based servers, are being widely used to disseminate hate speech programs, video records of hostage interviews, as well as intended misinformation. For that reason, the U.S. government should treat the so-called “state media” of Belarus as hostile infrastructure of malign psy-ops and act accordingly. Since Lukashenka regime is using its psy-ops infrastructure to target the civil population of Belarus and Russian-speaking civilians in neighboring countries – including three NATO members: Poland, Lithuania, and (to a less extent) Latvia, immediate steps must be taken to contain informational operations of Belarus state security in CEE region.

**LUKASHENKA GAVE UP INFORMATION SOVEREIGNTY OF BELARUS TO THE KREMLIN.**
In August 2020, the Kremlin has directly interfered into internal affairs of Belarus\(^2\) when Vladimir Putin sent a group of military and civil advisors to support Lukashenka\(^3\) and sustain his psy-ops as a part of a full-fledged punitive operation against Belarus civilians.

The position of Belarus “state media” towards the civil movement in this country was synchronized with Russia’s Kremlin-affiliated channels within three weeks after Lukashenka’s armed seizure of power in August 2020. By September 2020, national information infrastructure of Belarus was reshaped to ensure Lukashenka’s immediate political survival in exchange for Russia’s domination in Belarusian media landscape.

After a large group Belarusian “state media” employees announced going on a strike, the Kremlin sent a team of Russia Today (RT) workers to Minsk to sustain propagandistic efforts of Lukashenka-controlled television stations. RT crew included media technologists, correspondents, cameramen, and equipment belonging to Russia Today.

iSANS investigative unit has identified at least 53 Russian citizens who served as fill-in of Belarus state television personnel and resided in Minsk as an organized group between August and December 2020. All of them were delivered to Minsk with the same flights and resided in the same location. Most of them were technical workers who were sent to ensure uninterrupted work of Lukashenka-controlled television stations and were formally affiliated with mediagroup MIA Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today / RT), as well as RIA Novosti & Sputnik.

The presence of RT personnel was used by the Kremlin to synchronize the messages of local “state-owned” media with Kremlin-controlled media in exchange to Putin’s support of Lukashenka after the fraudulent elections. Although chief editor of “Russia Today” Margarita Simonyan initially denied\(^4\) any engagement of “Russia Today”, Lukashenka publicly acknowledged\(^5\) that RT personnel was operating in the territory of Belarus in official capacity as a substitution to BTRC workers.

---

\(^2\) Recommended further readings on this matter:
https://isans.org/articles-en/belarus-as-a-testing-ground-for-kremlin-anti-western-propaganda.html;

\(^3\) https://isans.org/columns/kak-belarus-poteryala-informaczionnyj-immunitet.html

\(^4\) https://govoritmoskva.ru/news/243621/

Immediately after the arrival of Russian media technologists, the narratives of Belarus state TV became almost indistinguishable from Russian state television. iSANS monitoring unit has identified twenty-five basic narratives of pro-Kremlin propaganda targeting Belarus that became the foundations of Lukashenka’s current media policy.

After the departure of RT advisors in late 2020, Lukashenka’s propagandists adopted the messages used by their Russian colleagues. Almost a year later, Lukashenka’s “unity doctrine” is now using formerly marginal figures and ideas associated with pro-Russian structures and paramilitary groups, to build up rationale behind Lukashenka’s behavior that would be anything except for his hunger for unlimited totalitarian authority.

Formerly marginal pro-Russian activists (including, but not limited to, Piotr Shapko, Mikhail Malash, Yauheni Aleksiyuk, Dzmitry Beliakou) share growing recognition of the acting regime, while recently marginal pro-Russian groups engage in wide range of political engagements with Lukashenka regime: from “patriotic education” of young people and work with Belarus security officials to hate-driven public ceremonies, such as the burning of Belarus national flags (not to be confused with currently used state flags that origin from the Soviet period of history, and were slightly transformed by Lukashenka at early stage of his rise to power).

Overall, a great deal of promotion of the regime is conducted by state media employees, TV hosts, and bloggers with explicitly pro-Russian views who openly humiliate Belarusian language, history, traditions, culture, national symbols and other elements of non-material heritage.

For instance, pro-Russian activist Andrei Sych (formerly one of the leaders of pro-Russian nationalist group Rumol and a person behind pro-Russian network of regional propaganda websites), is now enjoying his role at BTRC. Another example is Ekaterina Tikhomirova, who worked for propaganda radio “Russkiy Kray” in Kaliningrad, Russia, but joined BTRC in 2020 as TV host who smashes the West and Belarusian movement for democracy.

SYNCHRONIZATION OF PROPAGANDA

7 Full list is available here: https://isans.org/columns-en/twenty-five-whales-of-pro-kremlin-propaganda-in-belarus.html
9 https://www.sb.by/articles/voyskovaya-zakalka44.html?
12 https://www.tvr.by/news/v_mire/chtoby_ofitsialno_zapretit_dostup_k_migrantam_na_granitse_polskie_vlasti_vveli_rezhim_chregovchaynog/
13 https://www.tvr.by/news/v_mire/kak_zelenskiy_v_amerike_vdrug_stal_miss_levinski_i_pochemu_imenno_estoniya_ukazala_mesto_ukrainskim/
Along with transformation of Lukashenka’s regime into personalistic military junta\(^\text{14}\), its media underwent a change of editorial policy following the influence of RT.

State television in Belarus has entirely replicated the matrix of Russia’s criticism of the West for the benefit of the Kremlin and its broader strategic goals in the region. Certain projects (such as Minsk-based CTV TV channel\(^\text{15}\)) were synchronized with pro-Kremlin media and picked language used by pro-Russian propaganda across Eastern Europe.\(^\text{16}\)

Lukashenka-controlled media now widely promote an artificial division of population into “enemies of the nation” and those who support Lukashenka\(^\text{17}\) (although the letter are clearly a minority). Such tactics were widely used by the Kremlin in Ukraine prior to 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, and are being used intentionally to spark a civil conflict by further manipulating the public opinion and deepening internal confrontation in Belarus.

Since 26 August 2020 (the time of the arrival of RT personnel to Minsk), there is an influx of pro-Russian “experts” from Ukraine on Belarus state TV (including former comrades of Yanukovich)\(^\text{18}\). As a rule, they promote strong anti-Western and anti-democratic agenda. In August-October 2020, a Minsk-based fact-checking group MedialQ has identified\(^\text{19}\) at least 15 individuals who were presented by Belarus state TV as “experts from Ukraine”, “Ukrainian political scientists”, etc.\(^\text{20}\)

But according to "Media Detector" («Детектор медиа»), a media watchdog that monitors Ukrainian media space, some of the people who were introduced as “Ukrainian experts” have never appeared in Ukraine’s media before appearing on Lukashenka-controlled channels. Other “experts” represented strong anti-Ukrainian positions on Russian state TV. Some of so-called “experts” had no proven expertise or expert knowledge on topics of discussion or were widely acknowledged as pro-Russian activists and bloggers (such as Anatoli Sharij). Finally, many

\(^{15}\) [http://www.ctv.by/avtorskaya-zhurnalistika-na-stv](http://www.ctv.by/avtorskaya-zhurnalistika-na-stv)
\(^{20}\) The list includes the following individuals (as spelled in Russian): Юрий Кот, Глеб Ляшенко, Кирилл Вышинский, Юрий Атаманюк, Дмитрий Василен, Анатолий Шарий, Александр Качный, Кирилл Молчанов, Андрей Золотарев, Антон Савичев, Александр Лазарев, Юрий Подоляк, Руслан Бизяев, Даниил Богатырев, Валентин Якушин.
figures were related to a media empire of Viktor Medvedchuk\textsuperscript{21}, a pro-Russian oligarch and politician from Ukraine who is now under investigation for treason in favor of Russia.

**HATE SPEECH**

The most notable change on Belarus television (that is long monopolized by the regime) is systematic use of hate speech to target and abuse large groups of Belarus population as well as individual civilians. Three national TV broadcasters (ONT, and, especially, CTV and Belarus-1) have turned their political programs into Europe’s first equivalents of the Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), a notorious station that played key role in sparking the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Similarly, print press (foremost – SB.Belarus Segodnya and Minskaya Prauda) as well as Telegram channels controlled by the Minsk regime are, without exaggeration, print and digital analogies of RTLM in pre-genocide months.

Beyond any doubt, Minsk-based CTV channel is a true hate speech champion of today Europe. This state-funded TV channel produces a series of deliberately aggressive “monologue” projects that can be compared to Orwell’s “Two Minutes Hate” sessions. Each program targets the critics of Lukashenka and is integrated into evening prime time news on a daily basis. CTV positions these pieces as ‘interpretational’ or ‘editorial’ journalism (“авторская журналистика”)\textsuperscript{22}, although none of these programs tries to apply even basic standards of journalism. These programs are created with clear agenda – to suppress all forms of resistance and sustain the morale of Lukashenka’s supporters (foremost – the troops engaged in punitive operations and repressions).

In addition to daily “evening hours of hate”, CTV features weekly “Order of Judas” program that singles out and targets a particular “enemy of the state” every Sunday. Each program features a photo of certain dissident individual who is labelled a “traitor” and is accompanied with an image of massive noose (hanger’s knot) displayed next to their face. The program is ran by Ryhor Azaryonak, a Belarus national with radical Russian chauvinist views, openly antisemitic positions, and passion for ultra-Orthodox religious views (although Azaryonak is not widely known as a hard-line practicing observant of Christian traditions). A similar program ran by Azaryonak on CTV, Panopticum, is based on even more deliberate forms of hate speech and even more explicit forms of dehumanization of individuals.\textsuperscript{23} There, Azaryonak compares critics of Lukashenka with insects and spends time cursing his targets.

A particular role in media support of political violence and justification of crimes against civilians belongs to the Television News Agency (ATN) – a subdivision of BTRC counting around

\textsuperscript{21} https://mediaiq.by/article/eksperty-po-vyzovu-chto-za-ukrainskie-politologi-zapolonili-belarusskoe-gostv
\textsuperscript{22} www.ctv.by/avtorskaya-zhurnalista-ka-na-stv
\textsuperscript{23} http://www.ctv.by/azaryonok-o-motolko-emu-vazhno-tolko-teshit-sobstvennoe-samolyubie-i-gresti-bablo-lopatoy
250 individuals. This unit holds direct responsibility for day-to-day promotion and justification of political violence. Telegram channels used to disseminate TV propaganda online, openly threaten activists (such as iSANS member Anton Matolka) with assassinations, violent death from firearms, and other forms of politically-motivated hate crimes.

National TV broadcasters and newspapers threaten dissidents with inevitable violent death, announce punitive operations inside and outside Belarus, bully individual protesters (Aliaksandra Herasimenia, Volha Hizhynkova), and use dehumanization as major form of argumentation. For instance, critics of Lukashenka are labelled as “vile reptiles”, “abominations of the human race”, “inhuman”, “parasites”, “idlers”, “macaques”, “rats”, “jellyfish”, “corpse-looking witches”, “human abominations”, “scum”, and a lot more.

State media deliberately demand political repressions against civilians, call for politically-motivated violence, target ethnolinguistic and religious minorities, promote psychiatric isolation of political opponents and extrajudicial reprisals against them (including such eccentric forms of political competition as public hanging of pro-democratic activists). They demand the establishment of formal dictatorial rule and are obsessed with search for “traitors” and “enemies of the nation”. None of the above is journalism.
No surprise, similar narratives are promoted through Lukashenka-controlled print press. For instance, in September, the largest state-funded newspaper of Minsk region, Minskaya Pravda, promoted a message that equaled Catholics to Nazis. This narrative was actively supported by pro-Lukashenka ecosystem on the Telegram along with the push of Orthodox education in non-religious public schools under the joint aegis of the ministry of education and the Moscow Patriarchate.

**THE USE OF HOSTAGE VIDEOS AND RECORDINGS OF TORTURE VICTIMS**

With monopoly on television, radio and print media, the propagandists aim to expand their coverage on social media: YouTube, Telegram, Instagram, Tik Tok, and others.

For that purpose, traditional media controlled by Lukashenka’s team work in nexus with digital media outlets and social media accounts that they directly control or curate. In response to growing popularity of Telegram as a source of non-censored information prior to 2020 elections, the regime has established a network of toxic Telegram-channels.

Two largest propagandistic Telegram channels, Pool of the First Man («Пул Первого») and Yellow Plums («Жёлтые сливы») form the core of pro-Lukashenka ecosystem on Telegram. The “Pool of the First Man” is curated by Lukashenka’s press-secretary Natallia Eismant. “Yellow Plums” are managed by state-funded propagandist Aliaksandr Bianko who is officially employed by “Belarus Today”, the newspaper of the Presidential Administration entirely funded through public taxes. The channel is directly curated by the so-called “presidential administration”.

“Yellow Plums” are used by state security and Lukashenka’s press service to publish illegal leaks (such as sensitive personal data) and “legalize” them in public realm for further use of mainstream pro-Lukashenka media (although state television has no problem with the use of illegal surveillance or publication of private data).

Another important focus of channels in pro-Lukashenka system is demotivation of protesters by publications featuring destruction of private property by state security units during attacks on housing of civil activists or post-violence footage featuring the victims of violent abductions.

42 [https://www.sb.by/articles/tryndets-kotenku-bibliotechka-patriota-.html](https://www.sb.by/articles/tryndets-kotenku-bibliotechka-patriota-.html)
44 [https://t.me/jeltyeslivy/24086](https://t.me/jeltyeslivy/24086)
Such videos are usually filmed in detention centers or police stations, sometimes with the use of hidden cameras, but most often immediately after abduction or the application of torture.47

Civilians are often filmed in disgraceful positions or following the use of tear gas – so that they appear in intentionally humiliating way with body liquids dripping heavily from their eyes, mouth, and nose. Such videos are widely distributed and promoted by Lukashenka’s “ministry of interior” (foremost – GUBOPiK units), however legal status of the “ministry of interior” as a state agency of the Republic of Belarus is widely questioned due to its failure to perform charter functions after August 9-13, 2020 and direct affiliation with Lukashenka as a private individual, and not state official.49 State television, state-funded bloggers and TV hosts often accompany video records of hostage monologues with humiliating comments50 and victorious statements51.

Such videos are often staged as “public confessions” with green-red flag (state banner used by supporters of Aliaksandr Lukashenka) applied as a background to underline the position of captured civilians as “military trophies”. The legality of such footage at the pre-trial stage is more than uncertain, and the victims of politically-motivated pursue have no legal remedies to protect their rights since they face inhuman treatment by default.53 Such practice violates basic international standards applicable to civilians in times of war and peace, including the presumption of innocence, and falls under the definition of torture.

According to the victims of political repressions and findings of the National Anti-Crisis Management (a political organization led by Pavel Latushka, a member of the Presidium of the Coordination Council), state TV channels and workers of state television are the main consumers of video recordings of torture filmed in detention centers. Certain state media workers including top management of BTRC (ATN), ONT, and CTV channels, as well as their “correspondents” (foremost – Lyudmila Hladkaya, Kseniya Lebiedzeva (Lebedeva), and

---

47 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMtUaHWt4d4&list=PLlRf1t5TILzuymuOOkxvg-s177fPmx04Q&index=12
48 https://youtu.be/uNOBTsz98so?t=84
50 https://t.me/ATN_BTRC/10571
51 https://t.me/ATN_BTRC/10568
52 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TEiFUeJ7R4
53 https://www.facebook.com/hr8438support/posts/269517741686521
54 https://belarus-nau.org/?post/4v2t1gah91-the-nam-asks-to-study-the-materials-of-b
55 https://mediazona.by/article/2021/03/29/gladkaya
56 Lebiadzeva’s Telegram publications: https://t.me/lebedevalive
Ryhor (Grigori) Azaryonak\textsuperscript{57} are directly involved in commissioning of torture-related video content (including violent and illegal interrogations of political prisoners)\textsuperscript{58}.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this testimony, iSANS would like to suggest the following recommendations for kind consideration of the U.S. Helsinki Commission and relevant U.S. Government agencies:

1. The Untied Stated should consider sanctioning all enablers and participants (both individuals, media companies, and other entities) of Russia’s operation to interfere in internal affairs of the Republic of Belarus in August-December 2020 (and later on if such facts will become available) in support of armed seizure of power by Aliaksandr Lukashenka. This is particularly the case of the Kremlin controlled media, including RT.

2. The government of the Russian Federation and the government of Belarus (operating in the territory of the Republic of Belarus in the aftermath of August 9, 2020 armed seizure of power by Aliaksandr Lukashenka) and all related entities with state ownership or interest must be banned from importing and exporting any kind of equipment, technologies, and services that can be used to sustain propagandistic operations in both jurisdictions (and outside of them). These measures should target supplies of television and radio broadcasting equipment as well as related technologies and supplies.

3. In order to prevent further dissemination of hate speech materials and misinformation, we recommend the U.S. government to request that relevant technology providers and social media operators impose lifelong bans and suspend all accounts related to the system of propaganda of the government of Russia or the Republic of Belarus (so-called “state media”). This should include, but is not be limited to, social media accounts of state-controlled TV broadcasters, radio stations, print media, web media outlets, state agencies and institutions, as well as individuals involved in systemic promotion of misinformation and /or hate speech. Ensure complete lifelong ban of Russian media involved in the Kremlin’s 2020 malign influence operation in Belarus from all U.S.-controlled digital platforms (including, but not limited to YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, etc.).

4. Consider – wherever possible – the criminal prosecution and judicial pursue of individuals employed by the “state media” operated, owned, or co-owned by the Republic of Belarus and

\textsuperscript{57} State TV appearances: http://www.ctv.by/grigoriy-azarenok-1
Azaryonak also runs a Telegram channel used for propaganda purposes: https://t.me/Azarenok_TV

\textsuperscript{58} https://news.tut.by/society/728675.html?utm_campaign=recirculation_mail&utm_medium=right_news&utm_source=news.tut.by
involved in creation, promotion, unethical use, or commission of hate speech materials, misinformation broadcasts, hostage videos, recordings of torture victims, or the so-called “public confessions” in politically-charged cases against civilians in Belarus, or similar materials.

5. Acknowledge the use of hate speech by Belarus state TV as a threat to international peace and security, as well as incitement to genocide and crimes against humanity. Begin international criminal pursuit of hosts, editors, and officers of Belarus “state media” responsible for creation, unethical use, promotion, or commission of these materials as a part of psy-ops intended to sustain violent political repressions against civilians and support the armed seizure of power in the Republic of Belarus by Mr. Lukashenka following the fraudulent elections of August 9, 2020.

6. Ensure geographical localization of internet services and the recognition of the Belarusian segment of the internet as a separate market to avoid further moderation by Russia-based personnel and secure information sovereignty of Belarus.59