

“Not-so-good neighbours. Russian Influence in Belarus”

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U.S. Helsinki Commission

November 20, 2019

Dear Chairman and Members of the Commission,

Thank you for organizing this Belarus-related hearing, particularly in this busy time in Washington DC, and for the opportunity to join this distinguished panel on the threats to Belarusian sovereignty.

Malign Kremlin influence on Belarus pursues a goal of pulling Belarus even deeper into the Kremlin orb, essentially turning it into a part of USSR 2.0. Kremlin sees Belarus as an integral part of the Russian World with Russia’s legitimate right to constrain Belarusian sovereignty.

To achieve its goals regarding Belarus, Kremlin, either directly or through its proxies, applies political, economic and propagandistic pressure on the Belarusian authorities and the Belarusian society. Largely the same mix of governmental, semi-governmental and non-governmental actors stand behind the ‘coercion to integration’ project towards Belarus, which meddles in the affairs of many other countries, including the US, the CEE, Balkan, and Baltic states.

Belarus appears to be the most vulnerable to malign Kremlin influence though, due to deep institutional, economic, social and cultural connections between the two countries’ elites and short-sighted repressive policies of the current ruling regime against Belarusian language, independent media and civil society.

Anti-Belarusian propaganda and disinformation

You all must be aware that Ukraine remains top target of Kremlin propaganda. Unlike Ukraine, Belarus is rather rarely covered by Russian federal TV channels. However, when it comes to online space, Belarus is already not far behind Ukraine in terms of scale and scope of pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation. In the last two years, a dozen of pro-Kremlin websites which previously had Ukraine and / or Syria as their primary targets, added Belarus as additional regular topic. At least three generations of pro-Kremlin propagandistic websites can be discerned, the third being the most aggressive and numerous.

In the last two years, several new active outlets of disinformation and hate speech which are entirely devoted to events in Belarus have appeared online. Their number currently stands at about 15. The number of online resources which regularly publish items related to Belarus and

contain disinformation, propaganda narratives and hate speech has increased several-fold – to about 40 fairly active sites in and around Belarus.

A fully-fledged coordinated network of regional online portals with regular publications containing hate speech against various social, political, religious, and professional groups of the Belarusian population began its activity in 2018. Publications use aggressive, chauvinistic rhetoric, sometimes openly questioning the existence of an independent Belarusian ethnic group and language, discrediting and distorting the history of Belarus, using derogatory claims about national symbols and generally about Belarus-minded people.

Anti-Belarusian propaganda includes such preposterous claims as:

- Belarusian people are a part of Russian people, Belarusians are Russians;
- The Belarusian language was artificially created by the hostile West a hundred years ago;
- The West's objective is to turn Belarusians into cannon fodder by creating an "artificial language" and religion for them.

Furthermore, this range of websites purposefully discredits the West and all Belarus' neighboring countries but Russia. They regularly present Ukraine as a puppet country, which is governed by external actors and / or by fascists / Nazis, Poland as a country with imperialistic dreams of taking over Belarus, and the Baltic countries as pro-Nazi, depopulated, economically devastated countries. On the contrary, Russia is presented as a country morally superior to the West and as the only real Belarus' ally which guarantees Belarus sovereignty and protection from malign Western influences.

Belarus' localization of automatically generated news services

Due to sustainably irresponsible state policies in the media field, a large part of the country population literally lives in the Russian media space. Oddly enough, Western media corporations such as Google and Apple unwillingly make Russian online media presence in Belarus even larger. This happens because of the absence of fully functional geotargeting for Belarus in the automatically generated news services. At present a growing number of news consumers use such services on their mobile phones without visiting any certain websites.

The launch of news aggregators based on recommendation algorithms has had a significant impact on the Belarusian media market. The absence of fully functional geotargeting for the country puts Belarusian journalists in unequal position compared to their colleagues in neighboring countries. By placing Belarusian users into a larger Russian-speaking segment and localizing the news content only partially, internet corporations make the Belarusian media market weaker and hinder its development.

Recently a declaration by the largest Belarus media community members on this very issue was produced. It calls the national and foreign government institutions, representatives of global corporations to make Belarus a fully independent and sovereign country on the global internet map by recognizing the Belarusian segment of the internet as a distinct market. Belarusian media should be prioritized in the ranking of information sources proposed by automatically generated news recommendation systems for users who choose Belarus as their primary region.

Energy deals with Russia and economic pressure

Over the last two decades Belarus traded geopolitical loyalty and military cooperation for Russia's generosity. Low prices for Russian gas, beneficial schemes for Russian oil processing, an open market for Belarusian goods, and other forms of Russian financial assistance allowed Alexander Lukashenko to keep the largely unreformed economy afloat. The terms of oil supplies to Belarus was the most important bargaining issue for Lukashenko in exchange to deepening Eurasian integration in 2010-2011 and 2014.

Due to Russian reform in the oil sphere, export duties on oil and oil products will be reduced to zero by 2024 and excise taxes for the oil industry are gradually increased starting from 2019. Belarus expects to lose around \$300 million in 2019 and the total cost in the next five years is estimated at USD 10 billion from Russia's new tax policy.

Whereas oil-processing industry is one of the most profitable sectors of Belarusian economy, the main energy source for Belarusian enterprises and residents is Russian natural gas. Belarus' national strategy of energy sector development, which was adopted in 2010, set an objective to reduce gas consumption by 6 million cubic meters and to lower the Russia's share in Belarus' energy consumption to 57% by 2020. These objectives largely remained on paper. Belarus consumed around 20 billion cubic meters of Russian gas in 2018, which places Belarus in the top Russian gas importers.

The Belarus' energy security concept adopted in 2015 aims to reduce the share of Russian energy in the total energy import from 90% to 70% by 2035. Thanks to the launch of Belarusian nuclear power plant (NPP) and a wider use of renewable energy Minsk plans to decrease the share of gas in the total energy consumption from 90% to less than 50% by that time.

The Belarusian NPP is being built with Russian technology and money. Belarus will be dependent on the Russian import of nuclear fuel. Hence, Belarus will hardly become less energy dependent on Russia thanks to the launch of the NPP. Export of electricity produced by the NPP given the current Lithuania and Poland's positions and the lack of sufficient domestic infrastructure to consume that big surplus of electricity will be a serious challenge for Belarus.

Minsk has already asked Moscow to ease the payment terms of Russian loan for NPP. However, this and many other loan items in Belarus-Russia relations are conditioned with a deeper

integration by Kremlin. Without political will and coherent practical steps the objectives defined by the Belarus' energy security concept will largely remain on paper, just as it earlier happened to previous national energy strategy.

The risks of the Union State between Belarus and Russia

Belarus expects to get Russian compensations for the losses associated with Russia's new tax policy in oil sphere. However, Kremlin conditions this with deepened integration within the so called Union State. Other economic issues that Kremlin explicitly made dependent on Belarus' further integration with Russia include the terms for loans and gas prices for the years to come.

In early September 2019 a bilateral action plan on deepening integration was initialed by the two countries' prime ministers. The plan has not been made public despite its great importance for the country, high public interest, and requests by parliamentarians. The whole negotiating process between the two countries' working groups on integration is secretive. Nevertheless it is obvious that the action plan and 31 roadmaps to accompany it are based on the 1999 Treaty on the Union State between Belarus and Russia. The action plan on deeper integration likely envisages the creation of common Tax and Civil Codes, a largely unified banking supervision, legal approximation in virtually all spheres, etc.

Kremlin's aim is to tightly tie Belarus to Russia in various spheres and to extract additional chunks of Belarusian sovereignty in exchange of further economic and political support of Lukashenka. The threat is that, in case Belarusian authorities follow this road, Belarus can end up preserving only nominal sovereignty, in reality finding itself completely dependent on Moscow in virtually any Belarusian domestic or foreign policy.

A loss of Belarusian sovereignty would be a catastrophe not only for the people of Belarus who dreamed of a sovereign and independent country for many generations. This tragic turn would also encourage further Russia's aggressive behavior towards its immediate neighbors and global democratic community and instigate further attempts to destabilize regional security.

Conclusions

Greater attention of the international community to developments in Belarus and urgent efforts are needed to preserve Belarusian sovereignty, despite very complicated relationship with its non-democratic government. We need the international community to promote positive changes in Belarus, including political, social, and economic reforms in the country, broadening of civic space and empowerment of Belarusian civic actors, and enhancing Belarusian society's resilience to external threats.

Important areas of actions to preserve Belarusian sovereignty include:

- Uncovering, countering, and deterring Russian malign influence towards Belarus;

- Support to the new generation of civil society actors and independent media;
- Strengthening Belarusian identity by supporting initiatives aimed at promotion of Belarusian language, culture, and history.
- Smart assistance and engagement with the Belarusian authorities. Belarus needs to undertake economic reforms with international assistance clearly conditioned on policy change, including liberalization in the media and civil society's spheres.

I want to thank the U.S. Helsinki Commission once again for holding this hearing and placing your focus on Belarus and threats to its sovereignty. I look forward to answering your questions.