

NOT-SO-GOOD NEIGHBORS
Russian Influence in Belarus

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak here about increasing Russification of Belarus and a lack of proper response to it.

The last U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing on Belarus took place eight years ago; it was about a brutal crackdown against peaceful protesters on the night of Presidential elections in 2010. That night put an end to the so-called «liberalization,» froze contacts with the West, and paralyzed democratic changes.

The process of Russification is interdependent with the tightening of the anti-democratic regime in Belarus after Alexander Lukashenka was elected president in 1994, more than 25 years ago. Since then, Belarus dependence on Russia increased drastically in economic, energy, military spheres. Under the term “Russification” we understand here the increase of Russian domination in information, education, and cultural sectors, which influences the identity of people and their preferable values.

The Russian dominance in Belarus has its long history since the annexation of our country by Russia at the end of the 18th century. It was resumed in the 1930ies under Stalin’s rule and only regained the independence of Belarus in 1991 had stopped it. But temporarily. After Lukashenka’s coming in power in 1994, the state-run Russification was resumed. This sounds strange, and it is unique for post-Soviet countries — Russification in the independent state of Belarus — nevertheless, under the current regime, it has reached its peak.

It is a key part of the preservation of Homo Sovieticus identity, which prevents restoration or forcibly replaces Belarusian and Western identity. At the same time, the cultural and linguistic policy preferring Russian identity is a loyalty message sent to the Kremlin. It is also part of general “economic and political support in exchange for pro-Russian policy” of Lukashenka’s regime during its rule.

LANGUAGE

Moscow carries out a very consistent and well-financed language policy regarding Russian as one of the key pillars and instruments of “Russian Universe” expansion. The alleged presence of the Russian-speaking population in a certain region serves as a reason for Moscow’s geopolitical revanchism. The step in this direction is the recent decision of Russia’s Government to recognize Belarusians and Ukrainians en masse as Russian-speaking and to propose changes in the law on citizenship.

In Belarus, the Belarusian language has been discriminated against in favor of Russian. Belarusian was eliminated entirely or to a large extent from significant parts

of public life: education, mass media, government, law-enforcement sectors. For example, it is impossible to use it officially in the Army. When I was enlisted in the Army, I was punished by arrest for responding to the commands in Belarusian, not Russian.

Earlier, in 2003, I was among students defending the linguistic rights in education. Our Jakub Kolas National Lyceum with instruction in Belarusian was closed, or «optimized,» as it was explained officially, despite protests of pupils' families and teachers. This lyceum still exists underground and unsuccessfully seeks for official legitimization license, along with Belarusian-taught Nil Hilevič University. Last year, only 291 young people (among the total of 363 thousand) received a university education in the Belarusian language (this is 103 times less than in the 1990s; BISS statistics).

This happens despite the fact that even in 2009, according to the last census, 66,71% of the population declared that they either regarded Belarusian their native language or spoke the language perfectly. The absolute majority of Belarus's citizens have at least a passive knowledge of the language.

In the 1930s, before the first Soviet Russification campaign, more than 90% of pupils were taught at school in Belarusian; in 1994, the percentage was 40,6%, in 2018 — only 12,2% remained, according to official statistics. Smaller linguistic groups in Belarus have even fewer or no opportunities to teach their children at school in their native languages. Two secondary schools with instruction in Polish and one in Lithuanian remain in the West of the country. There are no elementary schools with education in Ukrainian, or Roma.

Democratic developments in Ukraine, as well as digital technology advancement in Belarus, contributed to some positive change. There are several independent news websites in Belarusian; international brands use Belarusian in online advertising. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Belarus Service operating exclusively in Belarusian gained new followers on social media. The viability of the language is demonstrated by its presence in the independent space of the Internet (i. e. approx. 250,000 articles in the two Belarusian chapters of Wikipedia — this is more than in many European languages), by a vibrant alternative music scene in Belarusian, etc. The sympathies to Belarusian language are not because of, but in spite of the official policy of Russification, they are manifestations of the will of authentic civil society.

MEDIA

There is evidence that the Kremlin has launched a long-term strategy in media. Sputnik propaganda network has established its Belarus branch. It reached unprecedented growth in Belarus due to massive support from Russian Yandex and Mail.ru news aggregators. In contrast to neighboring Ukraine, Russian services VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Moi.mir (all belong to Kremlin-tied [Mail.ru](https://mail.ru) group) significantly prevail over Facebook and Instagram. Currently, 2.4 mln users from Belarus use VK, 1.3 million use OK, and 180 000 — Moi.Mir (Gemius Audience, May '19).

On the other hand, Yandex, Russian competitor of Google, has launched a wide range of services in Belarus: Yandex Raion (Neighborhoods), Yandex Taxi, Yandex Plus. In contrast to Google and Facebook, Yandex and Mail.ru have recently localized their products for the Belarusian market. These networks apparently limit critical content about Vladimir Putin's policy and predominantly serve as an extension of Russian "soft power" and disinformation machine.

Belarus authorities endorsed the inclusion of Russian TV-channels into the so-called obligatory social package and major TV-multiplexes. Unfortunately, the expansion of Internet-television did not solve the problem: in the offer of state-run IPTV service ZALA, 35 of 44 channels are Russian, and the state of Belarus owns the rest. The domination of the Russian language in the state-run media of Belarus also contributes to the feeling of common information space.

Russia has backed the establishment and supports the functioning of local news websites networks like Vitbich, Mohilew.by, Nash Gomel. Some of them are registered on the name of the same person, tied to pro-Kremlin organizations. Besides websites, recently, hundreds of pro-Russian communities, groups, and channels simultaneously popped up on VKontakte, Telegram, and even Facebook networks. Their anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-Belarusian bias is clear; actually, they are not openly pro-Russian all the time; however, their mission is revealed during, for example, Russian propaganda campaigns on the V-Day.

Besides the network of pro-Russian pages, they buy existing media outlets and accounts, place paid ads, seed ideas that polarize Belarusian society. For instance, recently, multiple groups began asking their members if they would support Belarus unification with Russia in one state. These pages keep themselves visible thanks to leaks and insights from the Kremlin and create additional pressure on elites and society.

There is no resilience to Russian disinformation in the society of Belarus. It targets multiple social groups, but some of them are more vulnerable than others. In particular, I mean young people under 25 years old, born under the current regime and raised in Russia's media space, as well as seniors, nostalgic about the Soviet past. They have low levels of media literacy and critical thinking, are often targets of weaponized information, including entertainment TV show or explicit anti-western content on VKontakte and Odnoklassniki.

Another group, which seems to be especially dangerous, are pro-Russian far-right activists. These organizations usually follow neo-Nazi, pan-Slavic, or ultra-Orthodox ideology tied to Russian Orthodox church and so-called cossacks. They use to be toxic and aggressive, so some call them "orthodox taliban." They explicitly oppose Belarusian liberal and pro-Western aspirations, organize provocations, harass pro-democracy activists on social media, and in real life. No practical efforts are made by the state to neutralize them; moreover, these people enjoy state protection and some of them and their curators even receive state awards.

EDUCATION

After the nomination of the Belarus Communist Party leader to the position of Minister of Education, the Soviet — Russian imperial approach in teaching humanities is incarnated. The concept of a “strong leader” (Stalin, Lukashenka, Putin) is part of teaching modern history and social science. The historical narrative tends not to regard Belarus as part of the pan-European historical process and a historical part of the democratic world, but rather as a bearer of Russian-Soviet “exclusiveness.”

The Russian presence in Belarusian education in a direct sense is backed by Rossotrudnichestvo Federal Agency offices in Minsk and several other big cities. They sponsor school books on history, various competitions for pupils, and conferences on the methodology for teachers with the participation of guests from Russia and even from the regions of Ukraine occupied by Russia. Schoolchildren and educators for Belarus are invited to Russia for participation in competitions, training, and meetings, including contacts of Belarusian children with their Russian contemporaries — members of “patriotic” (in fact paramilitary) organizations.

HOW THE UNITED STATES CAN HELP TO PROMOTE THE SOVEREIGNTY OF BELARUS

It is necessary to overcome the monopoly of Russian and local non-democratic narratives in the information space. This should be achieved by ensuring the sustainable presence of all kinds of Western surrogate media in the digital space, including Radio Free Europe, as well as by the support of Belsat TV, European Radio for Belarus, and Radio Racyja broadcasting from Poland. This is the right moment to re-launch Voice of America Service in Belarusian language, discontinued in 1954. However, traditional journalism can not win alone. Building strong cross-sector coalitions with grass-roots digital initiatives and influencers is crucial.

For sure, building resilience cannot be done from outside only. Nevertheless, supporting independent cultural initiatives and programs is especially important against the background of omnipresent Russian mass-culture. There is a lack of content and materials in the native language, ensuring translation and distribution of films and TV-shows in Belarusian language, for example, Netflix content, would be crucial for change of its status. ^{[1][1][1]}_{[SEP][SEP]}The intersectoral programs of raising media literacy and critical thinking should be of foreground support in institutional and informal education. It is also important to back educational initiatives introducing new effective and person-oriented methods with instruction in Belarusian.

The announcement about reopening the U.S. Embassy raised a great enthusiasm among civil society and fury on the Russian side. The active presence of U.S. Public diplomacy can serve for building direct dialogue with Belarusian people not authorities. As one of the U.S. Exchange alumni, Digital Communication Network, I reaffirm the importance of Educational and Cultural Exchanges funded by U.S. State Department, especially for digital innovators, business, educators. Cross-sector

nature of Digital Communication Network can be the model how programs can be efficiently organized.

In contrast to its neighbors, Belarus is not recognized as a separate region in various global services, such as Google news. Belarusians who search or read news on Google, for example, are primarily exposed to Russian media content (not Belarus media news). Youtube doesn't allow promotion on the content in Belarusian language, instead, recommends to create content in Russian. Localization of these services is critical and urgent.

So too should efforts at building bridges with Belarus' neighbors be supported. Russia effectively plays on difference of interests and historical views between these states. This makes cultural exchanges, round tables of historians, presence of media between Belarus and Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic-very important. Belarusians as a society should not be excluded from the regional integration and dialog on historical values, including heritage of such symbolic personalities like Tadeusz Kosciuszko.

It is important to have Belarus included in programs coordinated by USAID and Global Engagement Center, on countering Russian disinformation and strengthening media freedom.

It is crucial to research and monitor the Kremlin's activity in Belarus through its mass media and public organizations. Establishing some kind of alert-system about extraordinary and unusual activity would be helpful and prevent us from a situation threatening Belarusian sovereignty, as happened with other states in the region.

While trying to intensify relationship with the West and playing the geopolitical seesaw, Belarus authorities do not take any visible measures to prevent Russian dominance in media, cultural, and educational space.

Russian influence imposes a threat to Belarus' independence, but -- hopefully -- not immediate at the moment. In any case, it facilitates long-term goals — to Russify national identity of Belarusians step by step and to prevent any potential pro-Western and pro-democracy aspirations.