MAPPING BELARUSIAN ONLINE PROPAGANDA

Main Themes, Emphases and Trends in 2024

Marat Lesnov
Alesia Rudnik

December 2024

→ The Belarusian authorities continue to implement creative tools for promoting the regime's agenda.

→ On Telegram, content about the war in Ukraine dominates, while on TikTok and Instagram, the focus is on the achievements of the Belarusian regime.

→ The war in Ukraine and criticism of the West are central themes in pro-government sources. Attention to Belarus's domestic political agenda is significantly lower.

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

MAPPING BELARUSIAN ONLINE PROPAGANDA

MAIN THEMES, EMPHASES AND TRENDS IN 2024

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

Table of Contents

SUMMARY

NOT JUST STATE CHANNELS AND PROPAGANDISTS

Belarusian propaganda on digital platforms continues to evolve, with authorities involving citizens in flash mobs to support the regime, developing a network of new speakers on TikTok and Telegram, and using creative tools to promote the regime's agenda. A study called Mapping Online Propaganda conducted by the Centre for New Ideas analysed nearly 2600 publications on popular platforms such as Telegram, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram (human coding) to see how pro-government sources discuss Western countries, the Belarusian opposition, the achievements of the government, and the war in Ukraine.

THE THEMES OF PRO-GOVERNMENTAL CONTENT VARY BETWEEN PLATFORMS

The study found a connection between platforms and the "thematic preferences" of the channel's authors. For example, pro-government sources on Telegram primarily focus on the war in Ukraine or the situation in Western countries. TikTok and Instagram, on the other hand, emphasise the achievements of the current Belarusian regime, often praising Lukashenka. Meanwhile, YouTube often features criticism of Western countries.

FOCUS ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND THE WEST'S PROBLEMS

The analysis found that Belarusian pro-government online resources are particularly interested in military action in Ukraine, the economy, and the domestic and foreign policies of Western countries. The internal political agenda of Belarus receives much less attention, with little priority given to the achievements of the regime or criticism of opposition democratic forces even early in the year, during the parliamentary campaign.

ANALYSES ON SMALL SAMPLES ARE PROBABLY QUITE OBJECTIVE

The study also compared the results of qualitative manual analysis and quantitative-qualitative analysis using automated MediaIQ monitoring in Telegram (continuous keyword analysis). MediaIQ data on two important topics (the West and the opposition) give a preliminary conclusion that shows that the results of manual analysis of online propaganda on a small sample of publications in Telegram are comparable with the findings of quantitative-qualitative analysis of all posts in these channels. From a methodological standpoint, this means that qualitative content analysis of online propaganda can be done with relatively low resources.

INTRODUCTION

The Belarusian pro-government segment on digital platforms continues to evolve. The political crisis in Belarus and the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine prompted pro-governmental speakers to expand the range of topics and increase presence in social networks and messengers.

At the same time, ahead of the presidential elections of 2025, democratic actors and opinion leaders rely on working with undecided neutral audiences. As voting day approaches, it is all the more important to understand what pro-government sources discuss, the emphasis such content creators place on their communications, to what extent and how they cover the war in Ukraine, events in Western countries, and their opponents.

Mapping Belarusian Online Propaganda is the next step in studying Belarusian propaganda with a focus on the informational role of non-state content producers. It examines content from 2024 on four digital platforms — Telegram, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. The mapping reveals the main themes covered by pro-government sources and the degree to which the war in Ukraine, the situation in Western countries (including protests and the welfare of ordinary citizens), as well as criticism of the Belarusian opposition and promotion of the themes of unity and brotherhood with Russia are represented on these resources.

The findings will be useful not only for researchers of Belarusian online propaganda, but also for stakeholders such as independent media, who are looking for ways to counter pro-governmental narratives. Analysing the tactics employed by pro-government sources and finding the possibilities and formats to compete with them on various platforms remains an key priority when engaging with the Belarusian audience.

Democratic politicians would also benefit from this research. We assume that messages in pro-governmental sources are frequently consumed by the "politically neutral" audience, which, according to Chatham House estimates, comprises about one-third of Belarusian urban residents. While it is difficult to change the minds of those who have already decided on their political position because of polarisation ("rejection of the other side"), which in Belarus is one of the highest in the world (according to the Varieties of Democracy Institute), the struggle for neutral segments of society is still relevant. It is therefore crucial to take the experiences and tactics of opponents into account.

1

METHODOLOGY

The research is based on four broad and complementary research questions. To answer them, we used qualitative-quantitative content analysis of the main resources of Belarusian propaganda on four platforms.

Table 1.
Research questions

RQ1a: To what extent do pro-government online resources in Belarus focus on themes related to the war in Ukraine?
RQ1b: Do these themes, in aggregate, dominate their content?

RQ2a: To what extent are the "collective West" and individual Western countries criticised by pro-government online resources?
RQ2b: What are the main themes on which such attacks and defamation are carried out?

RQ3a: To what extent do pro-government online resources in Belarus criticise the Belarusian opposition and its supporters?
RQ3b: Is such content more prevalent than materials highlighting the achievements and merits of the current government?

RQ4: To what extent do pro-government online resources in Belarus promote narratives of unity, co-operation and brotherhood with Russia?

The mapping covered three stages.

1) In the first stage, the researchers selected the most popular pro-governmental sources (sources of online propaganda) on four platforms — Telegram, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram1. Such sources included accounts and channels that published materials in support of the current Belarusian authorities more than twice a week.

A major contribution of this study, one that distinguishes it from others, is its focus on individual content producers rather than on channels and accounts of state institutions and state media. The researchers refined the sample by including only sources that cannot be unambiguously attributed to the channels of the authorities2, pro-governmental organisations and associations3, or state media. Similarly, the sample excluded accounts and channels of individual journalists directly linked to state media or to government officials, such as governors or mayors.

While it cannot be claimed that journalists from state media or officials have no connections with the sources selected, they position themselves as "grassroots" initiatives or "independent" bloggers.

Therefore, the study focuses on pro-governmental speakers who are not affiliated with state bodies or media, as these content producers are still studied little. Meanwhile, the Belarusian researchers conducted regular monitoring, content analysis and messages of the official pro-government media in Belarus4. This approach to sample formation ensures the novelty of the research results and makes it possible to compare how the same themes are covered by state media on the one hand and speakers and pro-government channels that position themselves as independent on the other.

The full sample includes 15 Telegram channels, 15 TikTok accounts, 7 Instagram accounts, and 4 YouTube channels (see Appendix B for a list of sources).

The underrepresentation of pro-government resources on Instagram and YouTube can be explained by the blocking of content due to complaints from opposition-minded users. In addition, the government and its supporters can focus on more popular platforms in Belarus — Telegram and TikTok. Howev-

---

2 The sample also excluded channels administered by law enforcement agencies, such as individual police and army units.

3 For example, channels like the Belarusian Republican Youth Union were not included in the sample.

4 For example, such monitoring is conducted by MediaIQ (a project of the Belarusian Press Club), while the Centre for New Ideas conducted a study of pro-governmental media, as well as channels of state agencies and institutions in 2023.

---

1 More detailed information on the frequency of use of these and other platforms in Belarus can be found here, here or here.

er, given the time and human resources of the research team, the samples on Telegram and TikTok were narrowed down to the 15 most popular channels and accounts.

2) In the second stage, the researchers selected the main themes for content analysis and specified them using subthemes. In selecting the themes, the team was guided by previous studies (see here, here and here) and the literature on how autocracies use digital platforms to legitimise themselves in the eyes of voters and to consolidate political elites.

To achieve these goals, autocratic regimes use the tactics of discrediting political opponents, focusing on domestic achievements, glorifying the role of the leader, and emphasising the country's participation in international alliances and organisations. Thus, the researchers formulated seven themes and several dozen subthemes for analysis: the West, new world order, integration with Russia, achievements of the Lukashenka regime, Belarusian opposition, war in Ukraine, and Ukraine's internal situation.

3) The third stage involved qualitative-quantitative content analysis (manual collection and categorisation) of the sources selected on specific themes and subthemes. Based on human and time resources, the monitoring period was limited to four even-numbered months in 2024 with two randomly selected dates in each (randomiser of numbers). If the source did not post anything on the selected dates, the analysis included materials for the day closest to the selected date. In total, 2,593 posts were analysed.

Table 2.
Sample of posts for analysis

	6, 9 February	17, 28 April	24, 25 June	6, 18 August
Telegram	606	491	648	566
TikTok	41	31	50	42
Instagram	17	15	23	31
YouTube	9	8	7	8

2

ANALYSIS

2.1. TELEGRAM IS THE MAIN PLATFORM FOR ONLINE PROPAGANDA

The study analysed 2,593 posts[5] in the sample sources over the eight days chosen for the study. One or more themes formulated for content analysis were found in 1,222 (47%) of these posts. This rather high figure indicates that the deductive approach to the study of online propaganda made it possible to reflect the most important trends.

Most of the publications analysed were posted on pro-governmental Telegram platforms. TikTok was a distant second. Even fewer posts were found on the YouTube[6] and Instagram resources analysed. This distribution confirms the widespread belief that pro-governmental narratives are mainly promoted on Telegram, which in 2020 became the key source of information for Belarusians (see, for example, here)[7].

Table 3:
Distribution of posts with the selected themes (n = 1,222) by platform

	n	% of all posts
Telegram	1106	90.5
TikTok	67	5.5
Instagram	33	2.7
YouTube	16	1.3

The analysis below is based on data collected on all four platforms. However, analysing a sample consisting only of posts found on Telegram yields roughly the same results[8].

2.2. FOCUS ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND PROBLEMS OF THE AGGRESSIVE WEST

The content of pro-governmental sources, excluding the February dates (6 and 9 February), was dominated by the events in Ukraine, including the theme of the war itself and its consequences.

In all periods, excluding the August dates (6 and 18 August), at least 50% of all content about hostilities in Ukraine touched on two subthemes. One concerned mobilisation into the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) within the country[9], and the other included posts about supplies of military aid and weapons to Ukraine.

The first of these two "war" themes received particular attention in June (n = 34). This can be explained by the amended Ukrainian law on mobilisation coming into force at the end of May, which, among other things, abolished certain types of deferments from service. Pro-government speakers sought to portray this event as a sign of Ukraine's weakness, which supposedly had to conscript literally everyone in order to continue the war.

In August, posts (n = 20) about the Ukrainian army's military failures[10] came to the forefront. This was probably the online propaganda's "response" to the AFU operation in the

---

5   The raw data (xlsx, R) can be accessed on request at info@newideas.center.

6   Almost 40% of the posts (n = 424) on Telegram that had at least one of the themes selected for analysis contained videos.

7   Low figures for TikTok, Instagram and YouTube do not mean that pro-government content is absent on these platforms. It may be distributed here from time to time by certain users. This study covers accounts and channels where such content appears regularly.

8   The exception is the number of posts about the achievements of the current government: on pro-government Telegram resources there are about 4% fewer of them than on average on all the platforms analysed.

9   Accordingly, the analysis separately considered claims about "internal" mobilisation and posts about actions that would encourage Ukrainians who had left the country to enlist in the AFU. This distinction seems necessary due to ongoing discussions in some EU countries and Ukraine about how to incentivise the return of Ukrainian men. However, contrary to expectations, these discussions were not sufficiently covered in the content selected for analysis.

10   7 posts were found on the June dates selected for analysis, while the average number of such posts for the selected dates in February, April and August was 12.
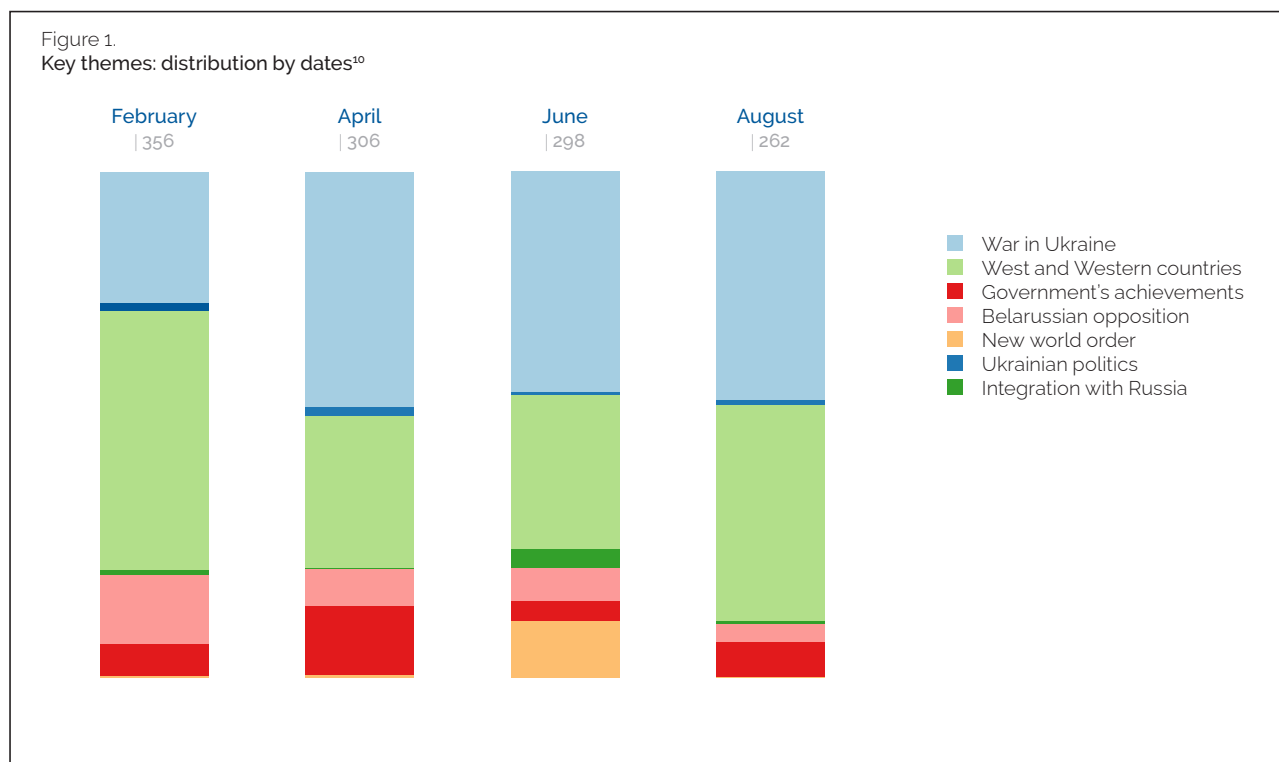
Figure 1.
Key themes: distribution by dates[10]

| | February
\| 356 | April
\| 306 | June
\| 298 | August
\| 262 |

Legend:
- War in Ukraine
- West and Western countries
- Government's achievements
- Belarussian opposition
- New world order
- Ukrainian politics
- Integration with Russia

Table 4:
Key themes: distribution by relevant posts with at least one theme

	n	% of all posts
War in Ukraine	501	41
West and Western countries	500	41
Government's achievements	217	17.8
Belarussian opposition	215	17.6
New world order	84	6.9
Ukrainian politics	82	6.7
Integration with Russia	81	3.3

Note: the sum of percentages does not equal 100, as posts could contain multiple themes.

Kursk region of Russia, which began in the same month. In the totality of posts about the Ukraine war (n = 501 for all dates), these three subthemes were the most significant, featuring in about 50% of such publications.

The foreign and internal policy of Western countries is another regular theme in pro-governmental sources. However, relevant posts had no subthemes that were repeated from month to month. The most widespread themes in the aggregate content about Western countries (n = 500 for all dates) included military build-up directed against Belarus, primarily by Poland and the Baltic states (n = 56, 11.2%); the deteriorating welfare of ordinary citizens (8.2%); and degradation of the economy (7.8%).

In addition, in February, online propaganda actively focused on EU-wide protests by disgruntled farmers (n = 32, 6.4%), from Spain to Poland.

2.3. ATTACKS ON THE OPPOSITION DURING THE ELECTIONS AND EMPHASIS ON THE REGIME'S ACHIEVEMENTS BEFORE THE ALL-BELARUSSIAN PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY (ABPA)

Pro-government sources frequently addressed the theme of the Belarusian opposition and its supporters, and also highlighted the government's achievements. As can be seen from Figure 1, online propaganda particularly targeted the opponents of Lukashenka's regime in February, probably because of the parliamentary elections held in Belarus in late February.

On the one hand, the authorities might have feared protests in the country. On the other, they could seek to increase

---

11 Figure 1 shows how often the posts touched on one of the themes selected for analysis, depending on the time period.

the legitimacy of the voting by channelling negative rhetoric towards the opposition forces that did not recognise the elections. Meanwhile, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was mentioned only 27 times in all opposition-related posts (12.6% of 215 such posts).

Instead, the online propaganda focused on the following issues: the 2020 protests and their consequences (n = 56, 24% of opposition-related 215 posts), the bias of independent media (14%) and coverage of repressive measures against opponents of Lukashenka's regime inside Belarus. As one can see, the incumbent authorities still "spin" the theme of 2020, presenting those protests as an attempted coup and external interference in Belarus's internal affairs[12].

In April, the sources analysed actively posted about the government's achievements (see Figure 1). This probably coincided with the seventh All-Belarusian People's Assembly at the end of April. The current regime presents the ABPA as the highest body of "people's power" in the country, allegedly determining the key priorities for national development.

Such posts typically emphasised the allegedly high rates of Belarus's economic development (n = 47 / 217, or 21.7%), the development of new economic ties with the "far arc" countries (11.5%) and the army's high defence capability in the face of the threat from the West (10.6%). Lukashenka was mentioned in about 50% of all posts about the regime's achievements.

2.4. POOR ATTENTION TO INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION, INCLUDING WITH RUSSIA

Finally, the platforms being studied devoted the least attention to foreign policy themes — integration with Russia and formation of a new world order in opposition to the "collective West"[13]. The increased attention to the latter theme in June (see Figure 1) was probably linked to the visit to Belarus by a representative delegation from Chinese universities, and the country's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in early July[14].

Summing up the analysis of the main themes in online propaganda, one can state the following. The pro-government online resources primarily talk about hostilities in Ukraine and the economy, as well as domestic and foreign policy of Western countries. On the other hand, the regime's achievements and criticism of opposition democratic forc-

es — that is, the domestic political agenda — did not become a priority for pro-government sources even in early 2024, during the parliamentary campaign.

This conclusion is further supported by the list of the top ten subthemes covered in online propaganda. The data presented in Table 5 shows that eight of these key subthemes were related to the events in Ukraine, and the economy or politics of Western countries (including in relation to Belarus and Russia).

Table 5:
Top 10 subthemes in posts with at least one key theme (n = 1,222)

	n	% of all posts
Mobilisation into the AFU in Ukraine	112	9.2
Military aid to Ukraine	88	7.2
The AFU's military failures	56	4.6
Military build-up of Western countries directed against Belarus	56	4.6
2020 protests and their consequences	52	4.3
Belarus's progress in economic development	47	3.8
Economic degradation of Western economies	41	3.4
Low welfare of people in Western countries	39	3.2
Military build-up of Western countries directed against Russia	39	3.2
Repression, suppression of dissent in the West	38	3.1

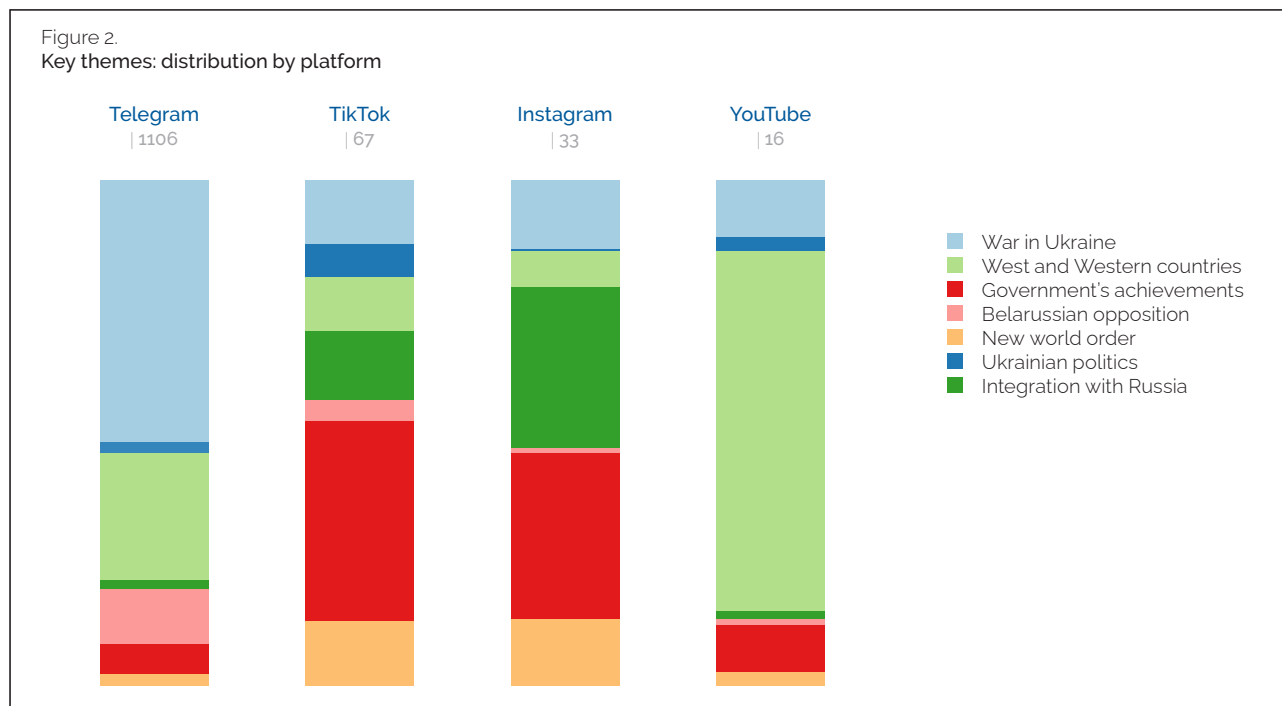## 2.5. PLATFORMS AND INDIVIDUAL SOURCES ARE THEMATICALLY SPECIFIC

The above results are general and do not reflect the situation for individual platforms and sources. Figure 2 shows that that themes related to war and Western countries are typical of the content on Telegram. As for TikTok and Instagram, they are more likely to emphasise the achievements of Lukashenka regime, "ignoring" the opposition actors.

It is difficult to explain this variation. One can assume that pro-governmental resources on Telegram are more connected in organisational terms to state media and therefore tend to follow their agenda in a more centralised manner. In addition, these sources are more likely to function as media outlets and even employ professional staff, as they have tens of thousands of subscribers and content posted with high frequency. On the other hand, pro-gov-

---

12 It was the events of 2020 that were the focus of posts about the opposition in February, during the parliamentary campaign.

13 This theme includes Belarus's interaction with the countries of the former Soviet Union and the Global South, including China.

14 This organisation's main areas of activity include security and economic cooperation. With the exception of India, there are no democratic states among the members of the SCO.

Figure 2.
Key themes: distribution by platform

Legend:
- War in Ukraine
- West and Western countries
- Government's achievements
- Belarussian opposition
- New world order
- Ukrainian politics
- Integration with Russia

Platforms: Telegram | 1106, TikTok | 67, Instagram | 33, YouTube | 16

ernment accounts on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube may be run by genuine "fans" of the regime who, lacking resources and time, prefer to simply post content praising the authorities and reposting state media publications.

Finally, Figure 3 shows that the themes of online propaganda also vary from one source to another. The figure presents an analysis of this variability for the six most popular sources (according to the number of subscribers) on Telegram. The increased attention "Yellow plums" give to the Belarusian opposition, as well as posts praising the authorities that were published by the odious "opposition" MP Aleh Haidukevich during the parliamentary campaign in February, deserve special attention.

To sum up, pro-government sources on Telegram mainly focus on the Ukraine war or the situation in Western countries. TikTok and Instagram are more likely to discuss the achievements of the ruling regime, including attributing Lukashenka with particular merit. YouTube channels also often criticise Western countries.

2.6. RELATIVELY HIGH "ORIGINALITY" IN CONTENT

More than 30% of the analyzed posts were direct reposts (i.e., identical copies) or to some extent included previously published content. Nearly half of these posts referenced Belarusian state media[15].

———

15 We considered the "Pul Pervogo" (Pul 1) Telegram channel, which is run by Lukashenka's press service to cover his activities, as a state media.

The highest percentages of reposts were recorded in pro-government sources on Instagram (over 50%) and Telegram (about 33%). As for TikTok resources, which, as mentioned earlier, actively highlighted the achievements of the current Belarusian authorities, reposts accounted for approximately 25% of all analyzed content on the platform. However, all of them referenced state media. Finally, about 5% of all reposts linked to Russian sources, most commonly related to content about the war in Ukraine (10% of all posts on this topic).

In other words, the content of pro-government online sources should not be viewed as merely borrowing from state television propaganda. The analyzed resources often prefer to cover events independently or rely on other online sources rather than Belarusian state media.

2.7. CHECKING THE OBJECTIVITY OF THE FINDINGS

Given that this study used data from a small sample, this could give rise to justified doubts regarding the objectivity of the findings. To confirm this, an additional check was carried out using data from the MediaIQ project. Among other things, the aim of this project is to collect relevant content in Belarusian information spaces using keywords with automated search. For this study, MediaIQ provided data from 15 previously selected Telegram channels on keywords for "The West" (one of the two most popular themes) and "Belarusian opposition" (a less popular theme).

This data collection covered all relevant posts published in four even-numbered months of 2024 — February, April,

Figure 3.
Key themes: distribution by main pro-government Telegram channels

Белорусский силовик

February April June August

Объективный Евген

February April June August

ЖС Premium

February April June August

Западные зайчики

February April June August

ЭТО ДРУГОЕ

February April June August

Олег Гайдукевич

February April June August

Legend:
- War in Ukraine
- West and Western countries
- Government's achievements
- Belarussian opposition
- New world order
- Ukrainian politics
- Integration with Russia

June, and August. The resulting posts were further processed using repeated manual analysis (human coding) to exclude possible errors in the automatic categorisation. In total, 4,232 posts initially found by the MediaIQ were analysed, including 2,919 on "The West", and 1,313 on "Belarusian opposition".

The data presented in Tables 6 and 7 show that some sub-themes may indeed have been under- or over-represented in the sample for this study. However, analysing the indicators in their globality, there are reasons to assume that the results of manual analysis of online propaganda on a small sample of publications in Telegram are comparable with the findings of the quantitative-qualitative analysis of all posts on these channels. From a methodological standpoint, this means that qualitative content analysis of online propaganda can be done with relatively few resources. Of course, these assumptions need further confirmation in future research.

Table 6:
Comparison of results of quantitative-qualitative and qualitative analyses: theme "The West"

	(1)	(2)
Military build-up of Western countries directed against Belarus	11.2	13.3
Economic degradation of Western economies	8.2	5.1
Low welfare of people in Western countries	7.8	4.2
Military build-up of Western countries directed against Russia	7.8	9.1
Repression, suppression of dissent in the West	7.6	7.7
People's dissatisfaction with domestic policy (decisions) of their countries	7.2	6
Nazi legacy, neo-Nazism	5	11
Western sanctions against Belarus	4.6	3
LGBT propagation, LGBT ideology	4.6	5.4
West's interference in other countries' internal affairs	4.2	0.4

Notes:
(1) — percentage of posts with the listed themes in the content analysis results for 8 dates (qualitative).
(2) — percentage of posts with the listed themes in the content analysis results for 4 months (quantitative-qualitative).
Subthemes that ranked top 10 in both analyses are highlighted in grey. The subtheme "Economic degradation of Western economies" was ranked 11th, and the subtheme "Low welfare of people in Western countries" was ranked 13th in the quantitative-qualitative analysis.

Table 7:
Comparison of the results of quantitative-qualitative and qualitative analyses: theme "Belarusian opposition"

	(1)	(2)
The 2020 protests and/or their consequences	24.2	34
Bias / lies in independent media	14.9	5.2
Persecution and arrests of opposition supporters in Belarus	14	11.5
Problems with legalisation of Belarusians who have left (such as refusals of residence permits or visas)	9.3	6.6
Problems with the work and financing of the opposition, initiatives, independent media	9.3	12.3
The West's control of the actions of the opposition	5.6	7.6
Conflicts within the opposition and between structures	5.6	10
Leaks / sale of personal information	4.2	4
Persecution and arrests of opposition supporters abroad	3.3	6.2
Preparation of armed seizure of power by the opposition	3.3	7.3

Notes:
(1) — percentage of posts with the listed themes in the content analysis results for 8 dates (qualitative).
(2) — percentage of posts with the listed themes in the content analysis results for 4 months (quantitative-qualitative).
Subthemes that ranked top 10 in both analyses are highlighted in grey. The subtheme "Leaks / sale of personal information" was ranked 11th in the quantitative-qualitative analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

The Mapping Belarusian Online Propaganda study revealed that in 2024, the war in Ukraine, the achievements of Western countries and the government were the central themes of propaganda. In the context of the war in Ukraine, more than half of the pro-governmental sources touched on the issues of mobilisation into the AFU, and military aid supplies to Ukraine. When covering Western countries, pro-government content producers were most interested in the alleged military build-up by Poland and the Baltic states in preparation for an attack on Belarus, the "degradation" of Western economies, and the alleged deterioration of the welfare of ordinary citizens in the West.

Portraying the situation in other countries negatively compared to Belarusian "well-being" is one of way of legitimising the existing regime. This decision to discredit Western countries and Ukraine, rather than the opposition, suggests that the current Belarusian authorities and their supporters view external actors as the main threat.

The war in Ukraine and the Belarusian opposition were frequently linked to significant events, such as the mobilisation law taking effect in Ukraine, military actions by the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the Kursk region, the All-Belarussian People's Assembly, and parliamentary elections. In other words, pro-government speakers not only aim to promote regime narratives but also to connect them to current events.

Interestingly, while pro-governmental sources mentioned Lukashenka in at least 50% of the posts about the regime's achievements, the name of Tsikhanouskaya was rarely mentioned when covering the Belarusian opposition. this probably means that the authorities do not see Tsikhanouskaya as either a leader of the opposition or a direct threat. On the other hand, the main opponent's name may simply be silenced: for example, in their speeches, Putin or Trump avoided directly mentioning Navalny and Harris, respectively.

The study also found that the thematic focus of pro-government content producers is similar to the main narratives of the state media. This conclusion follows on from the comparison in other studies (see here, here and here) of the most popular themes on the channels being studied with the leading themes of state agencies and the media identified.

On the one hand, this similarity can suggest the existence of formalised but non-public connections between the Belarusian regime and pro-government bloggers, channels and communities in social media. On the other, this can testify to the (ideological) unity among government supporters.

Speaking of various platforms, the data suggests that Telegram is the most popular platform for online propaganda. As noted, pro-government speakers may prefer this platform because of its structure and interface, which determine the format of content. Longer and more analytical texts, to which online propaganda creators tend to gravitate, look more "organic" on Telegram.

The choice in favour of Telegram can also be explained by an infrastructural factor: state media are primarily present on this platform, making it easier for pro-government content creators to re-post their messages without extensive content processing. However, our study for the first time found a connection between the platform chosen by pro-government authors and the themes of their posts. Although the central themes on Telegram are the war in Ukraine, and the politics and economy of Western countries, then the TikTok and Instagram platforms are much more likely to showcase the Belarusian regime's achievements.

As this study has shown, pro-governmental resources, formally not affiliated with the authorities, mirror the state's agenda: from economic crises in Western countries to praising Lukashenka's role in national development. However, unlike the well-known propagandists on state TV, these anonymous social media channels and accounts are more likely to attract neutral audiences and to change their political views.

With their digital skills rising, the authorities can try to expand their narratives on social networks and messaging platforms, relying on individual content creators, including during the current election campaign. This trend is already evident in the initiatives such as the "Nado!" flash mob. By studying the network of actors in pro-government information segments, researchers aim to predict the main narratives and platforms chosen by pro-government speakers.

The analysis also indicates that TikTok, the most popular platform among Belarusians, is still relatively "free" from

pro-governmental content creators. This presents an opportunity for independent media and stakeholders to engage with neutral audiences through individual content creators on TikTok.

The research findings will also provide Western and Ukrainian stakeholders with insight into the pro-government narratives shaping the Belarusian information field, particularly concerning politics and events in Ukraine and the West. In the long run, some consumers of such content can contribute to deteriorating attitudes in Belarusian society to Western countries and Ukraine. Therefore, if the West is still interested in preserving the friendly attitude of Belarusians to Western countries, our study will help develop strategies for counteracting damaging pro-governmental narratives.

ANNEXES

A. LIST OF THEMES AND SUBTHEMES FOR ANALYSIS

1. **The WEST, including the EU and NATO or individual countries**
1.1. Paedophilia
1.2. LGBT propagation, LGBT ideology
1.3. Breakdown of family traditions and gender roles
1.4. Deterioration of people's welfare (wages, prices)
1.5. Problems in the countries' socio-economic development (industry, infrastructure, energy, GDP level, etc.)
1.6. Dissatisfaction of (a significant group of) the population, including protests: a) welfare, economy; b) politics; c) non-Ukrainian migrants; d) Ukrainian migrants; e) support for Ukraine; f) other
1.7. Repression and suppression of dissent (including police violence)
1.8. Problems related to migrants (crime, overfunding, other values): a) non-Ukrainian migrants; b) Ukrainian migrants
1.9. Nazi legacy of the West, neo-Nazism
1.10. Corruption in ruling circles (elites)
1.11. Dissatisfaction of individual countries with EU and/or NATO policies
1.12. Militarisation, military build-up (weapons, exercises, etc.): a) for war with Belarus; b) for war with Russia; c) without reference to any country
1.13. Decay, immorality, military weakness (including unwillingness of citizens to serve in the army)
1.14. The West's interference in other countries' internal affairs (politics)
1.15. The West uses sanctions against other countries: a) against Belarus; b) against Russia; c) against another country or countries
1.16. Migrant crisis on the border between Belarus and EU countries

2. NEW WORLD ORDER
2.1. Eurasian political-economic integration in the post-Soviet space (CIS, EAEU): a) Belarus mentioned; b) Belarus not mentioned
2.2. Eurasian military integration in the post-Soviet space: a) Belarus mentioned; b) Belarus not mentioned
2.3. Condemnation of countries that refuse (against) Eurasian integration (e.g. Armenia)
2.4. Integration of non-Western countries (Global South) — BRICS, SCO, etc.
2.5. Co-operation (any) between Belarus and China

3. INTEGRATION WITH RUSSIA
3.1. Economic co-operation and arrangements: a) in general; b) visits of Russian governors; b) joint handling of sanctions / import substitution
3.2. Political co-operation and arrangements
3.3. Military co-operation and arrangements
3.4. Emphasising historical brotherhood and unity

4. LUKASHENKA REGIME'S ACHIEVEMENTS
4.1. Socio-economic development (industry, infrastructure, energy, GDP level, etc.)
4.2. Welfare of the population (high salaries, low prices, etc.)
4.3. Development of healthcare
4.4. Development of education
4.5. Development of science and technology: a) civil technology; b) military technology
4.6. New export routes to the "far arc" countries
4.7. Popular support for the regime / Lukashenka
4.8. High defence capability / readiness to repel attack: a) by Western countries; b) by Ukraine; c) by the Kalinousky Regiment; d) in general
4.9. Willingness to use nuclear weapons
4.10. Immigration to Belarus: a) the West — Europeans, Americans; b) other countries

5. BELARUSSIAN OPPOSITION
5.1. 2020 protests and / or their consequences
5.2. Preparation of new protests in Belarus by the opposition
5.3. Preparation of an armed seizure of power by the opposition

5.4. Control of the West / Western structures over the opposition's actions

5.5. Corruption / embezzlement of funds and grants

5.6. Leaks and / or selling of information

5.7. Conflicts within the opposition and between structures / initiatives

5.8. Distortion of information by opposition media

5.9. Problems with the functioning and funding of the opposition, initiatives and media

5.10. Low level of popular support of the opposition and its structures

5.11. Persecution of opposition supporters and leaders: a) in Belarus; b) outside Belarus

5.12. Pardon of political prisoners

5.13. Problems with legalisation of Belarusians who have left Belarus, refusals of residence permits (visas)

5.14. The opposition has no influence inside or outside Belarus

6. WAR IN UKRAINE

6.1. Ukrainian failures on the front / advance of the Russian army

6.2. Casualties in the war

6.3. Mobilisation: a) in Ukraine; b) Ukrainians abroad

6.4. Ukraine's war crimes against civilians or POWs

6.5. Ukraine's use of prohibited weapons (chemical, biological)

6.6. Attempts by Ukraine to commit nuclear sabotage or use a "dirty bomb"

6.7. Denial of Russian war crimes

6.8. Ineffectiveness of Western military aid / weapons

6.9. Issues of supplying military aid / weapons

6.10. Plundering of military aid / weapons

6.11. Issues related to the use of military aid / weapons

6.12. West's control over Ukraine's actions in the war

6.13. Neo-Nazis in the AFU, neo-Nazi ideology of the AFU

6.14. Ukrainians' war fatigue, desire for peace at any cost

6.15. Belarus's peacekeeping statements / initiatives

6.16. Denial of Belarus's participation in the war

6.17. Casualties, unprofessionalism of Belarusian units fighting for the AFU

6.18. Statements / allegations about the presence of troops from Western countries in Ukraine

6.19. The issue of sending troops from Western countries, in particular instructors, to Ukraine

6.20. Financial assistance to Ukraine from Western countries (non-military assistance)

7. UKRAINE'S INTERNAL SITUATION

7.1. Corruption

7.2. Trafficking of children, sale of children abroad

7.3. Sale of human organs

7.4. Illegitimacy of President Zelenskyy

7.5. Illegitimacy of the Verkhovna Rada

7.6. Dissatisfaction with the authorities, their actions

7.7. Manifestations of neo-Nazism, extreme nationalism in the actions of the authorities

7.8. Conflicts within the government, elites

7.9. Dominance of Western companies / capital

B. LIST OF SOURCES FOR ANALYSIS

	Telegram	TikTok	YouTube	Instagram
Manual data collection	X	X	X	X
Analysis period	6, 9 February; 17, 28 April; 24, 25 June; 6, 18 August 2024			
Themes	The West; new world order; integration with Russia; achievements of the Lukashenka regime; Belarusian opposition; war in Ukraine; Ukraine's internal situation			
Automated data collection	X			
Analysis period	February, April, June, August 2024			
Themes	The West; Belarusian opposition			
List of sources	Белорусский силовик; Объективный Евген; ЖС Premium; Западные зайчики; ЭТО ДРУГОЕ; Гайдукевич Олег; БелВПО; Невольфович; Земля наша; -Живёт же Беларусь!; Шпаковский. По существу; Шкварка 2.0; ДОСТОВЕРНО; Дзермант; Говорит Гомель | Гомельщина	prostoalik74; belarusseychas; uggla2001; prostopervy; nostalliak; evgenbelorus; novostibelorusa; newsinbelarus; political.channel.live; belarusnews.by; lukashenko_top; ostro.news; caretakerofwaterways; alena..74; userjucyig3iz5	Системная правозащита; Виталий Баковец — Полесский партизан; БЕЛРУСИНФО; Слыхали Новость?	gaidukevich77; moladz.by; talai_fond; a.lebedev.official; za_mirnuiu_belarus; zhivet.zhe.belarus; by_nv_volovichofficial

AUTHORS:

CONTACTS

Authors:
Marat Lesnov
Alesia Rudnik

Design: Roman Marchishin

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine /
Project Belarus

Christopher Forst | FES Representative for Belarus
St. Borysohlibska 15A, Kyiv, 04070, Ukraine

Tel.: + 38–044–234–10–38 | Fax: + 38–044–234–10–39

All texts are available on the website:
https://belarus.fes.de

Orders / contacts:
belarus@fes-dee.org

MAPPING BELARUSIAN ONLINE PROPAGANDA: MAIN THEMES, EMPHASES AND TRENDS IN 2024

→

The Belarusian authorities continue to implement creative tools for promoting the regime's agenda.

→

On Telegram, content about the war in Ukraine dominates, while on TikTok and Instagram, the focus is on the achievements of the Belarusian regime.

→

The war in Ukraine and criticism of the West are central themes in pro-government sources. Attention to Belarus's domestic political agenda is significantly lower.

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG