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Foreign Media Influence on Belarusians

This article, based on the results of public opinion polls conducted in Belarus by IISEPS in 2006-2007, analyses scales and dynamics of usage of electronic media (radio, TV, Internet), as well as a character of influence of Western and Russian media on Belarusians. Conclusions and probable scenarios argued different ways of Belarus media and political development.

Background

In the contemporary world the attitudes of the public, the ruling elite and government to other countries are, as a rule, reflected not only in traditional political, economic, military, diplomatic and other strategies, but also in broadcast content.

Sometimes a picture of the world offered by media to external audiences significantly differs from the picture offered to domestic ones. For example, such a picture could be much more idealistic or aggressive. Its main aim is to promote national interests and exert influence (of the government, ruling elite or general public) on the other country and by this way to pursue political, economic and other goals. By the way, there need be nothing negative, or "expansionist" about such a policy (as it is interpreted by supporters of the world conspiracy theory). It was exactly information and cultural influence that helped to bring together hostile nations in post-WWII Europe and other regions of the world.

From the point of view of mass communication theory and methodology, media influence is one of the most complicated phenomena. ² In general and reductive form, influence is interpreted as proximity (complete coincidence in the extreme case) of "the world picture" offered by media with "the world picture" expected by audience. In reductive form "the world picture" is a system of some social values, norms, and roles. The more these "pictures" coincide, the more the media are able to exert influence, and ultimately the more

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² For example: Klapper, J. *The Effects of Mass Communication*. New York: Free Press, 1961.

one country's interests are promoted in another. Therefore governments and ruling elites of most of contemporary countries pay growing attention to their media influence abroad, and use more and more financial, technological, intellectual and other resources for this purpose. Thus, limitations or even total liquidation of information influence from outside was one of the most important strategic aims of Soviet rulers, pursued simultaneously with their own information expansion to the outside world.

After the collapse of the USSR, leaders of the most post-Soviet countries considerably restricted the presence of Russian mass media on their territories, while at the same time developing their own media and expanding the local presence of the Western media. That led to intense competition for influence over population on those territories. Thus, starting from November 1996, when Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko engaged in a long-term political conflict with the West after the national referendum, and following June 2002, when relations with Russia became tense, Belarussian authorities began an aggressive struggle against external informational influence on the country's population.

It is well known that Russia makes every effort and is even prepared to grant certain concessions in order to preserve its media presence in Belarus. After long discussions, also the West began to increase its information presence in Belarus. In recent years, the European Union, the US, and some Western governments allocated special resources for this purpose. Thus, the Russian Service of Radio Deutsche Welle (broadcasting from Bonn) started a special daily program "Belarusian Chronicles" for Belarus on October 1, 2005. The Russian Service of Euronews TV (broadcasting from Lion) began to cover Belarusian developments in its news programs in January 2006. A new European Radio started its broadcasting for Belarus from Warsaw in February 2006. At the same time US-Israel RTVi (broadcasting in Russian from New York and Moscow) started a special weekly program for Belarus. An independent TV Channel went on the air with broadcasts for Belarus from Warsaw in October 2007. Two independent Belarusian Radio stations Radio Racia and Baltic Wave re-started their broadcasting to Belarus from Bialystok (Poland) and Vilnius (Lithuania) in 2006 as well.

Both Russian and Western media (to a different degree) try to offer alternative information to Belarusians. That is what Lukashenko meant when he said uneasily in summer of 2005 that "our country has fallen into a disinformation circle."³

³ *Belarusians and Market*, N 27, 2005.

Usage of electronic media

There is voluminous literature about how information influence is organized in the contemporary world,⁴ but the knowledge about foreign media influence on Belarusians is very limited.

Let us start with analysis of how Belarusians use electronic media today. Because dissemination of foreign print media in Belarus is very limited (first of all for reasons of language), resulting in equally limited influence, we will focus in our analysis on electronic media (Tabs 1 – 2).

Table 1. Distribution of answers to the question: "What TV channels do you watch?" %*

TV channels	Watch	Don't watch
Belarusian TV	88.7	8.1
Russian TV	83.7	14.0
Local TV	41.7	51.9
Cable TV	41.3	56.5
Satellite TV	16.0	81.3
Polish TV	8.3	89.2
Russian Service of Euro News	17.0	80.2
Special RTVi program for Belarus	7.0	90.3

* Here and after according to the results of nationwide public opinion polls conducted by IISEPS quarterly in 2006-2007 (in all cases 1.500 respondents of age 18+ were interviewed face-to-face, the margin of error did not exceed 0.03). Tabs 1 and 2 read by lines, the others by columns. DA/NA is eliminated for easy perception.

In the interest of full analysis, we should also take into consideration "old" Western broadcasting to Belarus (like VOA, BBC, Radio Liberty, Radio Polonia, etc.).

⁴ For example: Seymour-Ure, C. *The Political Impact of Mass Media*. Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage, 1974; Jowett, G. and V. O'Donnell. *Propaganda and Persuasion*. Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage, 1986.

Table 2. Distribution of answers to the question: "Nowadays over a dozen of Western radio stations broadcast to Belarus (in Russian and Belarusian). Do you listen to their programs?" %

Radio stations	Listen	Don't listen
European Radio for Belarus (Warsaw)	4.9	94.3
Belarusian Service of Radio Liberty (Prague)	4.8	94.7
Belarusian Service of Radio Polonia (Warsaw)	4.5	94.8
Russian Service of Radio Liberty (Prague)	4.2	95.1
VOA (Washington, D.C.)	3.7	95.6
Radio Racia (Belostok)	3.4	95.8
Belarusian Chronicles at Deutsche Welle (Bonn)	3.2	96.0
Baltic Wave (Vilnius)	2.8	96.5
BBC (London)	2.8	96.6
Radio Sweden (Stockholm)	1.4	97.8

Cross correlation analysis shows that overall half of Belarusians in different combination watch foreign TV channels (i.e. Cable, Satellite, Polish, Euro News, RTVi) containing alternative (i.e. not controlled by the state) information, including 19% of those who watch special new programs offered by Euronews or RTVi. Also, overall about 15% of Belarusians listen to at least one of the above Western radio stations. Comparative analysis shows that these audiences have increased by approximately a third over the last two years.

Since more and more independent Belarusian and foreign media begin to use the Internet (first of all to overcome the new barriers built by the Belarusian authorities), the Belarusian Internet audience should also be taken into account to complete the picture, especially since a quarter of Belarusians today know foreign languages (i.e. could read, write and communicate). Nowadays 30% of respondents use the Internet and a half of them on a regular basis (Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of answers to the question: "Do you use the Internet?"

Variant of answer	%
Yes, daily	5.2
Yes, some times a week	9.9
Yes, some times a month	10.9
Yes, some times a year	4.0
No	58.3
Don't know what it is	10.5

However, they use Russian Internet resources more often than Belarusian ones, and a number of users of Western Internet resources is getting closer to that (Table 4):

Table 4. Distribution of answers to the question: "If you use Internet, what resources do you visit more often?"

Variant of answer	%
Russian	19.7
Belarusian	17.2
European	9.2
US	3.4
Other	2.4

In addition, more and more often mobile phones are used to get alternative information (for example, announcements about time and place of protest actions) – two thirds of respondents are using them today.

Separate research conducted by a special methodology of computer content-analysis through Internet search systems (like Google) shows that the situation in Belarus does not get constant and serious coverage in the world media because it seems to be “stable.”⁵ Relations between Belarus and the EU are covered mainly within “active political discourse”, and are not particularly prominent. As for interpretation of Belarusians realities by Russian media, they do not cover opposition activities. As the opposition is one of the important public actors in Belarus, Russian media coverage is not representative either.

⁵ Bykovski, P. Presentation of Europe in Belarusian Media, and Presentation of Belarus in World Media. In O. Manaev (Ed.), *Belarus and “Wider Europe”*: Quest for Geopolitical Self-identification. Novosibirsk: Vodoley, 2007, pp. 343-371.

At the same time, as shown by the above data, Belarusians quite actively use both Russian and Western media, and therefore come under their influence. Analysis shows that this inevitably increases their inclusion into an alternative information flow (in that it offers a “world picture” that is different from, or even opposite to, that available from state-run media, Table 5):

Table 5. Distribution of answers to the question: "If you watch Euronews, did you see stories about Alexander Milinkevich, the alternative candidate of the united democratic forces in the 2006 Presidential election?"

Variant of answer	%
Yes, several times	38.7
Yes, once	31.7
No	27.1

If we compare the current media audiences in Belarus with what they looked like a decade ago, we see the greatest and the most important differences as concerns FM radio stations (their number exceeds thirty, and total audience – half of the population), cable and satellite TV, as well as the Internet. Their audiences have increased minimum twofold over this period. However, television remains the most important and the most accessible mass media for the absolute majority of the population. As IISEPS data show, in the scale of media reach, i.e. their audience, they can be grouped into three clusters:

Scale of media reach: BTV/RTV ($\approx 85\%$) \rightarrow FM/CSTV/BR ($\approx 51\%$) \rightarrow I/RR/WR ($\approx 22\%$)

(where BTV means Belarusian state-run TV, RTV – Russian TV, BR – Belarusian state-run radios, RR – Russian radios, CSTV – Cable and Satellite TV, WR – Western radios, FM – FM radios, I – Internet).

Of course, all media audiences overlap to a degree. There are almost no Belarusians who would use the Internet but not watch TV or not listen to the radio. However, this overlapping is not equal and has its peculiarity in each case:

- All media audiences without exception (from Internet audience to FM and CST audience) watch BTV and RTV (84% to 95%). This reveals that whatever democratic, national or

pro-European the attitudes of the Belarusians are, absolute majority of them stays constantly in the “BTV-RTV zone.” Only an insignificant minority lives outside this zone.

- Over a half of all media audiences watch CSTV (53% to 70%).
- CSTV audience watches most often RTV and BTV (96% and 91% respectively), then listens to FM (62%), BR (49%), uses I (37%) and listens to RR and WR (25%).
- Internet audience watches most of all RTV and BTV (90% and 83% respectively), then listens to FM and watches CSTV (73% and 70% respectively), and listens to BR, RR and WR (41%, 30%, and 28% respectively).
- WR audience watches most often RTV and BTV (94% and 92% respectively), then listens to FM and BR (77% and 73% respectively), watches CSTV and listens to RR (66% and 54% respectively) and uses I (39%).

What is the conclusion from this? First of all, that most Belarusians are at the same time under the influence of very different and sometimes opposed (in aesthetic, political, and other sense) discourses. As a result, the subject matter and style of the TV channels like Animal Planet, Discovery, Explorer, National Geographic or Euronews and RTVi (followed by hundreds of thousands and even millions of Belarusians on cable and satellite networks), does not only radically differ from what the same people watch on BTV channels, but often also neutralizes their discourse. The same is true of infinite Internet resources. This means that “the world picture” inevitably changes for most Belarusians: it turns more complicated and more divergent. It is impossible to control or block this process, although this is what the Belarusian authorities would dearly love to do. On the other hand, the hope of opposition leaders and of some experts, that these new media, independent of Belarusian authorities, will “open the eyes” of millions of their fellow citizens fed up with the “propaganda of the state-run media” and that “freedom will joyfully meet them at the entrance,” is also very far from reality. Of course, alternative information and analysis are crucial, but alone they are not able to vitiate the influence of state-run mass media. After all, as shown by the above data, nearly 92% of the listeners to Western radio stations continue to watch BTV programs and about 73% keep listening to BR programs.

And there is something more important than information. From the viewpoint of a sociologist, we need to look at the people and the system of social relations they are part of. Who, then, are the audience of Belarusian and foreign media and Internet users? Do they differ from one another? If they do, what are the differences?

Let us start from basic socio-demographic characteristics. Comparative analysis of

media audiences allows drawing their socio-demographic portrait:

- In gender, there are significant differences as regards the audience of WR, RR and I (there are considerably more men than women among them) and there are more women among BR audience. Thus, 53.2% of Western radio listeners are men and 46.8% – women while 41% of the Belarusian national radio audience are men and 59% – women.
- In age, there are more young people among FM and Internet audience and there are more elderly people among BR and BTV audiences. Thus, 40.4% of the Internet users are under 30 years old and 8.2% – over 50 but, when it comes to the Belarusian national radio, only 17% of the former and 48.9% of the latter are its listeners.
- In education, there are more of well-educated respondents among WR, RR and Internet audiences and less – among BR audience. For example, 32.8% of BR listeners have elementary or incomplete secondary education, and 35.4% - secondary vocational or higher education, while among Internet users the first group makes 6.3% and the second – 59.1%.
- In social status, there are more of private sector employees and students among FM, WR, CSTV and Internet audiences, and more of pensioners among BR audience. Thus, 23.4% of FM listeners are private sector employees, 9.5% – students and 14.8% – pensioners while among BR listeners the first group makes 14.8%, second – 4.8% and third – 36.8%.
- In the place of residence, there are more of Minsk residents among FM and I-net audiences, and residents of small towns and villagers make the audience of WR, BR and RR mainly. For instance, 19.8% of FM listeners are Minsk residents and 45.4% – small town or village residents while the first group makes 10.9% and second – 55.4% among Russian radio listeners.
- In geographical terms, a great part of WR audience are in the Brest (i.e. Western) region residents, WR and BR audience – in the Grodno (i.e. Western) region, WR and RR audience – in the Vitebsk (i.e. Eastern) region, RR audience – in the Mogilev (i.e. Eastern) region and BR audience – in the Gomel (i.e. Eastern) region. Thus, 20.9% of the Western radio audience are residents of the Brest region and 13.6% – of the Gomel region. At the same time, the first group makes 15.9% and the second – 18.9% among Belarusian state-run radio audience.
- As for income, there is no substantial difference between media audiences (only incomes of CSTV and Internet audiences go slightly above average).
- In the language of everyday communication, there are many more of those who speak

Russian among FM and Internet audience and more of those who speak Belarusian – among WR and BR audience. For example, 65.2% of FM listeners use Russian for everyday communication and 34.4% - Belarusian, both Russian and Belarusian or *trasyanka* (a crude mixture of Russian and Belarusian, like *pidgin English*). Among BR listeners, the first group makes 45.6% and the second group – 54%.

Thus, differences between media audiences are substantial in socio-demographic terms. However, they are not so pronounced as to be predictors of which media different parts of the audience will tune to. Nearly 30% of the ‘honest’ (Lukashenko’s notorious definition) BTV audience is under 30 years old, 16.3% of them live in the capital, while almost a third of ‘dishonest’ Western radios listeners are over 50 years old, over a half of them living in small towns and villages. Nearly two thirds listeners of mainly private FM stations prefer to communicate in Russian, and over a half of listeners of national radio speak Belarusian. All this means that these very different media find their audiences among the same groups of the Belarusian society.

Character of influence of foreign media

Now, do foreign media influence the Belarusians? If so, how and to what extent? Socio-demographic characteristics of media users describe first of all their “external appearance” – the way we see them, as we meet. Their “internal appearance” is described in values or attitudes. For instance, is there any correlation between their media use and public attitudes to key issues of home and foreign policy? In other words, how sound is the concern of President Lukashenko about “the country’s fall into a disinformation circle”?

To answer this fundamental question let us conduct a comparative analysis of “sociological portraits” of audiences of Belarusian state-run, Russian (semi alternative to Belarusian ones), and Western (fully alternative) media.

Table 6. Comparative analysis of “sociological portraits” of audiences of Belarusian, Russian, and Western media, %

Public attitudes	Belarusian TV	Russian TV	Western Radio	Western TV
<i>Attitudes to home policy</i>				
<i>In general, is the situation in our country developing in the right or wrong direction?</i>				

In the right direction	61.6	58.3	45.3	32.8
In the wrong direction	26.8	30.2	42.7	54.3
<i>After the Chernobyl accident, almost one million Belarusian children went abroad for health reasons.</i>				
<i>In your view, who contributed to this most of all?</i>				
Belarusian authorities	26.9	24.9	19.6	14.5
Belarusian NGOs	30.4	31.3	37.2	30.1
Foreign countries	33.8	35.4	34.4	49.0
<i>Do you think the opposition should exist in Belarus?</i>				
Yes	55.0	57.6	65.5	75.9
No	30.6	29.5	28.1	16.6
<i>Do you identify with the opposition to the authorities?</i>				
Yes	13.8	16.7	30.8	30.8
No	75.7	73.1	56.6	59.3
<i>Who did you vote for at Presidential elections in 2006?</i>				
For A. Lukashenko	53.7	49.1	39.6	27.2
For A. Kozulin	5.9	6.8	8.0	11.1
For A. Milinkevich	15.3	16.9	26.2	35.5
<i>Who would you vote for during the next Presidential elections?</i>				
For A. Lukashenko	53.4	48.8	38.1	27.9
For A. Kozulin	4.0	4.7	8.1	7.7
For A. Milinkevich	11.0	12.9	24.2	24.2
<i>What is your opinion on the imprisonment of former presidential candidate A. Kozulin?</i>				
He was sentenced fairly and should be punished	26.4	26.3	18.3	13.0
He was sentenced unfairly and should be released	32.5	35.7	48.0	57.7
Attitudes to foreign policy				
<i>Should Belarus activate a process of integration with the EU?</i>				
Yes	44.1	46.9	58.2	66.7
No	40.9	39.5	31.6	24.2
<i>Should Belarus become a member of the EU?</i>				
Yes	31.2	33.8	35.2	50.5

No	52.3	50.4	56.0	36.7
<i>If you have to make a choice between integration with Russia or EU, what would you prefer?</i>				
Integration with Russia	49.3	47.5	41.8	31.3
Integration with the EU	31.3	34.9	42.5	58.8
<i>What variant of Belarus-Russia integration would you prefer?</i>				
Relations between Belarus and Russia should be the same as with other countries	40.7	42.3	43.2	56.5
Belarus and Russia should create a Union of independent states with close political and economic relations	44.7	44.0	36.3	29.7
Belarus and Russia should integrate into one state	8.4	7.9	14.1	8.4
<i>If the consequences of Russian control over gas and oil hurt you and your family, would you accept the incorporation Belarus into Russia?</i>				
Yes	33.4	31.4	33.7	23.5
No	55.6	57.5	56.8	71.1
<i>What definitions Europe is associated with for you?</i>				
Democracy	40.4	42.6	33.0	59.1
Degradation	10.4	10.3	12.3	6.9
<i>On May 1, 2004 Poland, Lithuania and Latvia joined the EU. On your opinion, how has the life of their citizens changed since then?</i>				
Improved	25.1	27.9	43.8	39.7
Remains the same	35.1	33.2	32.0	32.7
Deteriorated	18.2	18.8	12.4	10.2
<i>Do you support the OCSE demands vis-a-vis Belarusian authorities (four demands, June 1999)?</i>				
Yes	45.0	48.1	57.9	66.5
No	55.0	51.9	42.1	33.5
<i>Do you support the EU demands vis-a-vis Belarusian authorities (twelve demands, November 2006)?</i>				
Yes	29.5	31.5	34.1	44.3
No	70.5	68.5	65.9	55.7

The table above shows that the difference between media audiences in their internal characteristics is very substantial as well.

This analysis of the nature and dynamics of influence exerted by alternative sources of information on the Belarusians leads us to the following important conclusions:

- The audience of Western media (TV more than radio) is in general much more dynamic and progressive, i.e. characterized by pro-democratic, pro-market and pro-European attitudes, than the audience of Russian media.
- State-run media exert the most conservative, i.e. regressive influence on Belarusians. On a relative scale of their audiences progress, the above media can be grouped into four clusters:

Scale of audience's progress: I (max) → WR/FM/CSTV → RR/RTV → BTV/BR (min)

- However, the scale of progress almost mirrors the scale of media reach. With certain reservations, it is possible to assume that in general the state-run media exert greater influence on Belarusians than foreign ones (this conclusion will become even more apparent if we add up print to electronic media: the ratio of state-run and independent sources among them is at least 10:1.) However, the range of this influence is explained not that much by attractive discourse of the state-run media but by their mass character.
- However, it would be a mistake to ascribe the current state of mind of the majority primarily to these media influences. First, because one of the mentioned reservations is interrelation (even though not linear) of external and internal characteristics of the audience. For example, there are by definition more supporters of democratic and European development path among the youth audience or among private sector employees than among pensioners or those who receive wages from state budget.
- Secondly, because the attitudes of the public cannot be considered a direct result of media influence. Many people turn to different media only because the ideas and the values within their messages comply with their own ideas and values. This means that “the world picture” offered by the state-run media appears as close for many of Belarusians as “the world picture” offered by independent media for other Belarusians. In other words, millions of people take life in the way they do not because they fall under the influence (progressive or conservative) of some mass media but on the contrary – they choose the mass media whose “world picture” complies with their own. However, it is obvious even taking this reservation into

account, that media support, consolidate and express the ideas and values, i.e. “the world pictures”, of these audiences via information and communication, and unique possibility of self-actualization and formation of communities based on common ideas and values.

- Belarusians just like the other nations in the post-Soviet space, are on the receiving end of more and more powerful information flows originating both inside and outside the country. These flows inevitably change their “world pictures” approximating it to that of the other nations. Clearly, efforts of the Belarusian authorities to control these flows do contain and impede this process, but it still goes on. It is possible to say that Belarus truly stays in a global information flow which cannot be stopped in the contemporary world, especially in the center of Europe.
- Taking into account growing discord (not that much political or economic but rather axiological) between the West and Russia, it is possible to expect that their competition for influence in the post-Soviet space including Belarus will increase. Perhaps, Western media, first of all Internet, will become a key instrument of this struggle, and play a unique role of “contributor to the revival of democracy in this region” again, as they played two decades ago during Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika era.⁶
- Two basic scenarios are possible in this regard. If the current political and economic system in Belarus remains, isolationism from Western and Russian influence will most likely increase, also in the cultural and informational spheres. If the system changes in the direction of democracy, both pro-Russian or pro-European paths may be chosen, or Belarus could play a role of a bridge between these two powerful geopolitical actors.

⁶ Manaev, O. The Influence of Western Radio on the Democratization of Soviet Youth. *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 41, No 2, pp. 72-91.