



## Policy Brief

# CHANGE IN MEDIA CONSUMPTION DURING THE TIME OF POLITICAL CRISIS IN BELARUS AND WAR IN UKRAINE

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## Contributors:

OST Research Centre: OST Research Centre is a department of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST). The OST is a democratic representative body of the Belarusian people aiming to achieve a national dialogue, ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and hold new democratic elections. The Office promotes and advocates for democratic changes in Belarus. OST Research Centre conducts a range of analytical activities, including expert discussions, research on the Belarusian agenda, and data analysis.

Oxford Belarus Observatory: The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) seeks to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. Most specifically, employing the insights unique to Area Studies, OBO will support and promote evidence-based policymaking, knowledge brokering and stakeholder interaction through:

- the comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the impact of and responses to COVID-19 in Belarus;
- the analysis of social, economic, political, cultural and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus and which can inform external understanding;
- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

GLOBSEC is a global think-tank based in Bratislava, Slovakia committed to enhancing security, prosperity, and sustainability in Europe and throughout the world. This independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organisation helps to provide a better understanding of global trends and their consequences for society, economy, and security. GLOBSEC builds on the successful work done by the Slovak Atlantic Commission and its main goal is to shape the global debate through conducting research activities and connecting key experts on foreign and security policy. GLOBSEC also annually organizes GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum, one of the leading conferences on global security in the world, as well as GLOBSEC Tatra Summit, a conference that provides the opportunity for experts to have fruitful political discussions on the future of Europe.

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# **Change in media consumption during the time of political crisis in Belarus and war in Ukraine**

## **Executive Summary**

This policy brief offers a recap of the discussion held on 16 June 2022, at the webinar jointly organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO), the Research Centre of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST) and GLOBSEC. The discussion focused on the change in media consumption during the time of the political crisis in Belarus and Russia's war in Ukraine. The Lukashenka regime in Belarus increased the pressure over independent media institutions and journalists over time, which forced them to develop new strategies to reach Belarussian people and inform international society about the developments in Belarus. This policy brief, in this context, discusses a set of related questions regarding the changes in the Belarussian media sphere, the Russian influence on the media sphere in Belarus, and the main needs and challenges of Belarussian media and journalists' community.

## **Background**

Belarussian media, like the rest of Belarussian society, are facing a situation of unprecedented repression. May 18 was a year after Tut.By, one of the most popular Belarussian media, was crushed, but all independent media in Belarus faced repression. Many journalists and even entire editorial offices were forced to leave the country and start their activities anew.

All this led to radical changes both in the landscape of the media field in Belarus and in media consumption. At the same time, we have to speak about the growth of Russian influence on the Belarussian media sphere. In addition, after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the consumption of information from the Ukrainian media has increased.

How has the Belarussian media sphere and media consumption changed? What is the Russian influence on the media sphere in Belarus? What Ukrainian media are popular among Belarussians? What are the main needs and challenges of Belarussian media and journalists' community?

These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office](#) (OST Research Centre), the [Oxford Belarus Observatory](#) (OBO) and [GLOBSEC think tank](#). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by **Serge Kharytonau**, Head of iSANS Representation to the United States, iSANS GMF Visiting Fellow and the speakers of the event included **Anastasiya Rahatko**, Head of the Communications Department, Office of Sviatlana

Tsikhanouskaya; **Zmicier Mickievič**, Analyst of Belarus Security Blog, journalist of Belsat TV; **Hanna Liubakova**, Journalist from Belarus, Atlantic Council fellow.

## **Analysis of the issue**

The media environment in Belarus has changed over the last two years. The pressures of the Lukashenka regime over independent media and journalists increased. 18 May 2021 was an important day in this sense, as Tut.By—one of the independent and most popular news portals in Belarus—was banned in Belarus and editors and journalists working for the news portal were detained. Tut.By was definitely the most popular portal which was read by two-thirds of the Belarusian population, and following its' shutdown the audience of independent media in general decreased slightly in Belarus. There is currently an institutional vacuum in the country as independent media institutions are being destroyed and forced out of the country. Their websites are blocked and funding opportunities restricted.

Despite adverse conditions, most independent media preserve their operations though. The majority of the media, like civil society organisations act from abroad. Telegram and other social media (especially YouTube) are important platforms for independent journalists in Belarus. As websites of several media were blocked by the regime, they lost subscribers and tried to compensate losses through alternative strategies through social media and donations via platforms such as Patreon. However, the political crisis and Russia's war in Ukraine exacerbated political polarisation in Belarus, which affected the media consumption habits. Supporters of the regime—that's loyalists, pro-Lukashenka people, get information mainly from television and the Russian state media. The Belarusian state-owned media followed the Russian media, which means that propaganda of the Belarusian state-owned media is like a copycat, a mirror of what Russians are exposed to in their country. On the other hand, supporters of the democratic movement mainly read independent media. According to a Chatham House research, 60 percent of those who watch Russian TV and 44 of those who watch Belarusian state TV, support Russia's actions.<sup>1</sup> The situation is different when people watch Ukrainian media or they have access to non-state independent media in exile. They would condemn Russia's actions actively and expect the withdrawal of Russian troops. At the same time, growth of the TV channels controlled by Lukashenka, in particular on YouTube, has accelerated, as Russia's audience has also been joining these channels. This is becoming a growing problem, because the scale of propaganda and the narratives being used by pro-Lukashenka TV channels are sometimes even more radical than those on the Russian television with direct calls for violence against civilians.

### *How did Belarusian and Ukrainian media perceive each other?*

The way Belarus is presented in Ukrainian media—and vice versa—is important in this context. Russia's war in Ukraine has clearly been a threshold but before the political crisis in Belarus and Russia's war in Ukraine, Belarusians and Ukrainians were treating each other

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<sup>1</sup>See the report: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/01/belarusians-views-political-crisis>

through the prism of Russia's media propaganda, as well as Russia's narratives that were creating the image of both nations toward each other. From the Ukrainian media's point of view, there was no strategy as to how Belarus should be presented before the political crisis in Belarus. There was limited reporting about the political situation in the country, apart from some statements by Lukashenka. It seems fair to suggest comprehensive reporting on what was happening in Belarusian politics was limited. The same was also true for the Belarusian media. That's why in the absence of proper understanding of what political developments were taking place in Belarus and in Ukraine, Russia managed to form the agenda about Ukraine in Belarus and vice versa.

### *News fatigue and further challenges*

There is also news fatigue gradually developing. This comes in different forms. First, most independent media institutions started experiencing a harsh decrease in the views of different news materials both in Belarusian and in Russian languages. Despite summer months also partially playing a role in this decrease, it is arguably the news fatigue that led people to become less interested in written material and/or videos about the war in Ukraine. This is a broader trend not limited to Belarus and Ukraine. One of the speakers, for instance, suggested based on more than 20 media in 10 different countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia that there was a sharp increase in the first two months of the war in Ukraine. After two months people, in general, were not attracted even if news stories are packaged nicely for social media because of the news fatigue. The focus of people in neighbouring countries, accordingly, shifted more on economic and social problems.

## **Conclusions**

This policy brief discussed the change in media consumption in Belarus following the political crisis and Russia's war in Ukraine. Following mass protests in 2020, the Lukashenka regime in Belarus significantly restricted the space available for independent media institutions. These media institutions, in turn, developed new strategies such as operating in different countries and investing in social media. Lukashenka currently controls several TV channels. Yet, in these channels, a lot of Russian products are presented in addition to the Russian channels operating in Belarus. This suggests Lukashenka also loses informational sovereignty of Belarus. This policy brief discussed the changes in the Belarusian media sphere and the Russian influence on the media sphere in Belarus with a view as to how independent journalists and media institutions can reclaim informational sovereignty of Belarus. Based on the analysis, two policy recommendations can be developed.

## **Policy recommendations**

1. As conventional platforms for independent media are highly restricted for journalists, social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok etc. should be used more effectively (including paid promo).
2. To facilitate cross-border cooperation between journalists, new news instruments such as joint video production, social media productions or other types of collaborations could be developed in different media fields including entertaining channels.
3. Media institutions in Belarus and Ukraine could develop closer relations to reach out audiences in both countries. This would help both sides treat each other through a prism that would lessen the impact of Russia's media propaganda in both countries.

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