



THE END OF THE MYTH OF A BROTHERLY BELARUS?

**RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN BELARUS AFTER 2014:
THE BACKGROUND AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS**

Kamil Kłysiński, Piotr Żochowski

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OSW |

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES

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Tumar / Shutterstock.com

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PUBLISHER

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osw.waw.pl

ISBN 978-83-62936-88-5

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this text is to attempt identifying the signs that Russian soft power – which serves as the main instrument for promoting the ‘Russian World’ idea – is present in Belarus. The starting point was the change in the rhetoric of most Russian expert circles concerning Belarus which was observed from 2014 (in the context of the developments in Ukraine), when Belarus began to be viewed almost exclusively as an ally. Furthermore, this text contains an analysis of both the institutions and organisations which officially play the role of propagators of Russian culture, as well as entities which will not admit in public that they make efforts to strengthen Russian influence in Belarus. This paper also presents an evaluation of the Belarusian government’s reaction to the increasing presence of the ‘Russian World’.

This report begins with a description of the critical narrative of Russian experts concerning Belarus and its government. It goes on to describe the presence and the operation of the propagators of the ‘Russian World’ in Belarus and the unclear policy adopted by Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s regime towards these threats. The last part of this text contains an attempt at a conclusion and an outline of possible ways in which the situation may develop.

This report is the first to present Russian soft power in Belarus in such a comprehensive manner. This problem remains unnoticed by a majority of Western experts. Their perception is based on the well-established if not quite correct assumption that Belarus’s complete dependence on Russia is already definitively prejudged foregone conclusion, and therefore that Russia does not even consider the risk that this country might break free of its zone of influence in the post-Soviet area.

THESES

1. The Russian narrative on Belarus changed in 2014 when the Russian government elite essentially redefined its perception of its Belarusian ally, given the context of the conflict in Ukraine and the escalation of tensions between Moscow and the West. Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who was distancing himself from Russia's aggressive Ukraine policy, finally stopped being viewed as the only and sufficient guarantor of keeping Belarus within the sphere of Russian influence. The decision-makers in Moscow came to the conclusion that Belarus, which had been perceived for many years as a 'brother republic', was gradually transforming into a national state, emphasising its distinctness from Russia in many ways.
2. Russia's more critical approach to Belarus is based on the evaluation of real moves made by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has for many years been manoeuvring between the East and the West in an attempt to maintain as much autonomy as possible. At the same time, the highly critical, and sometimes even emotional, argumentation of Russian experts betrays the tendency to exaggerate what are in fact cautious moves made by Belarus and which are incorrectly interpreted as an attempt to definitively leave the Russian zone of influence. The change in the Russian perspective was strongly affected by the developments in Ukraine, which made Moscow more distrustful of any signs of self-reliance demonstrated by the governments of those post-Soviet republics which maintain friendly relations with Russia and which additionally are dependent on it in economic and energy terms. Until that moment, Belarus was presented as a model example of this kind of close relations.
3. The conclusions of Russian experts and the symptoms of Belarus's emancipation were accompanied by a growing conviction among the Russian elite that Moscow has insufficient control over Minsk; the instruments of control being the energy sector (oil and gas supplies), trade (preferential access to the Russian market) and the military sector (close co-operation between the armies of the two countries). As a result, actions to create a genuine socio-cultural soft power promoting 'Russian World' values, which had previously been undertaken on a very limited scale, were intensified. The first symptom of this process was the change in the narrative of Russian experts, including centres affiliated to the Russian government. Since 2014, an unprecedentedly large number of papers concerning Belarusian issues have been published which suggest that Belarus, given its nationalism and anti-Russian

approach, is gradually embarking on the Ukrainian way, which may lead to confrontation with Russia in the future. The responsibility for this state of affairs is placed unequivocally on Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who for many years was presented as Russia's closest ally in the post-Soviet area. Hence the conclusion that the image of the Belarusian president has clearly changed in the narrative of Russian experts.

4. It needs to be emphasised that the Russian experts' narrative, which is increasingly critical of Belarus and its government, is not identical with the official stance adopted by the Kremlin, which is continuing its rhetoric of the co-operation of two allies and the 'brotherhood of nations'. However, the Russian papers presented in this text are comprehensive enough to become at any moment part of the government's propaganda justifying Russia taking strong measures with regard to Belarus. The fact that radical opinions evaluating the situation in Belarus are unrelated to the government's official policy is thus only seemingly of marginal significance.
5. The operation of Russian and pro-Russian organisations is another symptom of the increasing activity of Russian soft power in Belarus. The attempt to classify them presented in this text predominantly covers those entities which have been active for many years, which were established at the beginning of this century and some in the 1990s. Few of them were established recently, including already at the time of the Ukrainian crisis. However, given the context of the developments in Ukraine and the escalation of tensions in the region in general, their operation takes on a completely new character which is much more dangerous to Belarusian sovereignty and social stability. Most of these entities have significantly intensified their activity over the past two years; this is a result of the stronger financial support offered using Russia's public money via various channels which are often difficult to trace. And even though these are framework structures at present, it seems that, if needed, they would be able to increase the number of their members in a relatively short time and take action to support the Kremlin's current interest in Belarus.
6. The most important instruments for promoting the 'Russian World' include the Belarusian Orthodox Church (which is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate) and the Russian media. According to the Belarusian government's estimates, Russian production currently occupies as much as 65% of Belarusian media space, and this means that the Russian media has huge possibilities of influencing the mindset of ordinary citizens of Belarus.

7. Russia intends above all to bolster and then expand its influence in the Belarusian politico-social space. Furthermore, its well-developed soft power is expected to pose a potential threat to the stability of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime and thus serve as a guarantor of his loyalty to the Kremlin. At the same time, if Moscow becomes distrustful of Lukashenka, it may utilise the prepared 'Russian World' infrastructure for a more or less radical interference in the internal situation in Belarus, including the replacement of the country's leaders.
8. The Belarusian repression apparatus, so experienced and effective in dealing with the pro-democratic opposition financed by the West, is surprisingly passive with regard to the organisations propagating the 'Russian World'. No event held by any of these entities has been banned or obstructed by the government. Members of these organisations, unlike activists of Belarusian democratic forces and the third sector, have not met with violence or arrests, let alone court trials.
9. There are three reasons for the cautious policy adopted by the regime towards the pro-Russian circles. Firstly, even though the Belarusian government understands the threat posed by the increasing presence of the 'Russian World', it fears that a wave of repressions against pro-Russian organisations could drastically worsen relations with Russia, leading to aggressive moves. Secondly, the mechanisms, procedures and operational habits of the Belarusian security apparatus, which have been developed for years, fundamentally cover only the structures which are pro-European and pro-democratically oriented and financed by the West. Furthermore, the Belarusian government does not want and furthermore is objectively unable to strengthen the natural counterbalance to Russian soft power, i.e. the Belarusian right-wing and national organisations. This move in the regime's domestic policy would be too radical and difficult to control. Thirdly, the government in Minsk is uncertain about the loyalty of the elites. It seems that there are many factors which make it extremely difficult to separate 'us' from 'them': the long tradition of being part of a common state governed by Russia (the Russian Empire and then the USSR); the integration process of the two countries ongoing since the mid-1990s; strong bonds as political allies (in the economic and military sense); and the cultural proximity (which is, however, far from indistinguishability). All this means that the Belarusian government does not yet have a complete strategy for counteracting the threat of the 'Russian World' expansion. Minsk still hopes that Russia's official co-operation-oriented policy will remain unchanged, and at the same time downplays the risk that relations might deteriorate.

10. The Belarusian public is not a serious barrier to Russian soft power, either. Most Belarusians do not perceive Russia or Russians as a threat. In turn, the fears of the consequences of a conflict between 'great powers' which are typical of the Belarusian mentality, may only strengthen pro-Russian sentiments, since Russia is still viewed as the only power capable of influencing the situation in the post-Soviet area.

I. THE BACKGROUND OF RUSSIAN-BELARUSIAN CO-OPERATION BEFORE THE ESCALATION OF THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

Due to its strategic location, Belarus has been one of the key objects in the Russian policy of rebuilding its influence in the post-Soviet area. One of the theses, which has been entrenched in Russian geopolitical thought for years, provides that control over Belarus is one of the top priority factors contributing to building Russia's imperial status and that there is no other issue more important, except for maintaining influence in Ukraine¹. This is why the (re)integration of independent Belarus (it gained independence on 25 August 1991) with the Russian Federation began just years after the collapse of the USSR. The signing of the Treaty on the Commonwealth of Belarus and Russia marked the beginning of the process. The commonwealth was later transformed into the Union of Belarus and Russia to take the form of the Union State of Belarus and Russia in 1999. Russia viewed this as a paradigm of how to regain its assets in the post-Soviet area which had been lost after the collapse of the USSR, and it was ready to use it also with regard to other states. In terms of defence, integration with Belarus offered Russia a natural shield on the so-called 'western flank', i.e. on the frontier with a few NATO member states: Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Furthermore, for Moscow co-operation with Minsk means the only way to keep close² to Kaliningrad Oblast, an area of strategic military significance. In addition to this, the Yamal gas pipeline and the Druzhba oil pipeline, which are essential parts of the Russian system of oil and gas supplies to European customers, run through Belarus. Considering these factors, the Kremlin has since the mid-1990s been determined to maintain and at the same time expand its influence in Belarus, even at the expense of very costly economic and energy subsidies. According to estimates from Belarusian and Russian experts, **the total value of Russian support (in the form of both loans and reduced oil and gas prices) at times even exceeded US\$10 billion annually.**

In turn, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has ruled Belarus uninterruptedly since 1994, viewed close political and economic co-operation with Russia as a guarantee for him to remain in power since, in exchange for participation in integration, he could expect economic and financial preferences, including

¹ See: Konrad Świder, *Rosyjska świadomość geopolityczna a Ukraina i Białoruś*, Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw 2015, pp. 121, 159-161, 180.

² However, Belarus does not border directly on the oblast, so the transit route from Russia to Kaliningrad runs through Lithuania.

facilitated access for Belarusian producers to the Russian market, stabilisation loans and a number of other economic subsidies. Minsk also saw Moscow's political support on the international arena as being very important, especially when the West imposed visa and economic sanctions on Belarus, accusing the Belarusian government of violating human rights and democratic rules. Minsk and Moscow would occasionally enter into dispute due to different interpretations of their obligations as allies³, and this was accompanied by mutual accusations, and sometimes even critical information campaigns. However, such crises have been short-lived. Importantly, the basic paradigm that both parties strive for integration and closer co-operation in the areas of politics and defence was not undermined at any time. What is also essential for the issue under discussion is the fact that the thesis that Alyaksandr Lukashenka is loyal to Russia as the sole strategic ally was not explicitly questioned even once. Criticism from the Kremlin and the expert and journalist circles closely co-operating with it was moderate even in the case of the most prestigious issues, when it turned out that Minsk did not intend to unconditionally support the Kremlin's expansive policy in the post-Soviet area⁴.

The Russian narrative with regard to Belarus changed in 2014, when **the Russian government elite essentially redefined their perception of their Belarusian ally** in the context of the conflict in Ukraine and the escalation of tensions between Moscow and the West. Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who distanced himself from Moscow's aggressive policy towards Kyiv, ultimately ceased to be considered the sole and sufficient guarantor of Belarus remaining within the sphere of Russian influence. The intensification of actions aimed at building genuine soft power, promoting 'Russian World' values in the neighbouring republic, which had previously been conducted on a very limited scale, was a logical consequence of this conclusion.

³ Over the past two decades, Russian-Belarusian relations have been characterised by numerous disputes, above all over the sale of key Belarusian industrial assets to Russian investors. Other problematic issues included the reduced prices of oil and gas supplied from Russia and access to the Russian market for Belarusian food and machine industry production. Minsk's dialogue with the West has also been a trouble spot in bilateral relations, as in 2010, when Russia attempted to block what it saw as an overly advanced process of building closer relations with the EU by launching an information campaign against President Lukashenka. The attacks in the media softened after the Belarusian government joined in the deal on the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union in December 2010.

⁴ In 2008, Belarus did not follow Russia in its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia. Despite pressure from Russia, Minsk did not change its stance and at the same time was consistently developing co-operation with Georgia, regardless of the periodical tension between Moscow and Tbilisi.

II. THE CHANGE OF THE RUSSIAN EXPERT NARRATIVE ON BELARUS

1. Russian experts are increasingly concerned about the possible emancipation of Belarus

As the conflict in Ukraine began, Russian policy in Eastern Europe for the first time took on a genuinely expansive and aggressive dimension. Such a clear interference with Ukraine's territorial integrity (although no declaration of war was ever made), has given rise to serious concern in Belarus, where a government elite has been formed who are used to functioning within their own independent state. Alyaksandr Lukashenka began to feel threatened regardless of the great cultural proximity between Russia and Belarus, the long tradition of functioning as part of a single state and, above all, the well-developed political and economic co-operation on many levels. A precedence has been set that theoretically opens up the possibility for questioning the borders of all other post-Soviet republics. Therefore, the Belarusian president, wanting to maintain independence and the prerogatives of power, did not clearly back the Russian moves in Ukraine and refrained from using strong rhetoric with regard to the new government in Kyiv⁵. At the same time, he offered mediation services in order to add legitimacy to himself in the eyes of the West, which is looking for a peaceful solution.

In the context of the confrontation with Ukraine and the Western support given to the Ukrainian government, the annexation of Crimea and the military engagement in the Donbas, the Kremlin expected unequivocal support from its allies in the post-Soviet area, above all from Belarus, its immediate neighbour. In a situation of increased tension in the region and the mobilisation of forces, even the cautious and very ambiguous stance adopted by Minsk⁶ could provoke

⁵ Alyaksandr Lukashenka has made numerous statements concerning the situation in Ukraine, emphasising Belarus's friendly and peaceful attitude to its southern neighbour. It is worth noting the statement he made on 7 June 2014 (soon after Petro Poroshenko was sworn in as the Ukrainian president) in which he clearly said "we do not intend to amass any NATO, Polish, Russian or Belarusian troops on our frontier. We do not fight against Ukraine, our border with them is a strip of good neighbourhood"; http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2014/06/07/ic_news_112_437211/

⁶ While maintaining good relations with Kyiv, Lukashenka was trying to avoid open criticism of Russian moves. The statement he made on 23 March 2014 in which he on the one hand announced that "Ukraine should be an integral and indivisible state" and on the other said that Crimea was in fact part of Russian territory, is a typical example of such rhetorical acrobatics; http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2014/03/23/ic_articles_112_184995/

serious concern in Moscow that Belarus could emancipate itself which, in the best-case scenario would mean a significant weakening of Russian influence in the country and, in the worst case, another military conflict on Russia's western frontier. It needs to be emphasised that these concerns have not yet been resulted in a change of the Russian government's official rhetoric or in a noticeable reduction of meetings as part of the various formats of inter-state co-operation. If the analysis of Russian-Belarusian relations were limited only to the formal aspect of co-operation, one could even claim that Russia still views Belarus as a model ally which is loyally fulfilling its obligations as an ally in the areas of defence and politics⁷.

However, **a clear intensification of criticism aimed at Alyaksandr Lukashenka** and independent national circles who are in opposition to him has been observed since 2014 on the level of the Russian expert narrative (among both so-called independent analysts and commentators and those employed by governmental analytical centres or those linked to the government). **Both the quantity and the content of critical publications are unprecedented in the more than 25 years of relations between Russia and independent Belarus. Some of the issues raised in the publications have never before been present in the discourse concerning Belarus, or at least have not been presented as explicitly as now.** However, most importantly, even though these materials have been developed by mutually unrelated individuals or institutions, given the significant similarity of their subject matter and style, it may be assumed that most of them have been inspired and/or coordinated by a single decision-making centre linked to the Russian government. It is worth noting that the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI), a think tank working for the Russian Presidential Administration⁸, plays a major role in criticising

⁷ Close Russian-Belarusian co-operation includes regular meetings by representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries (these are usually meetings of senior officials) intended at coordinating action on the international arena and developing a common stance on current regional and global issues. These meetings are often held on the level of ministers, for example, on 16 May 2016 in Minsk, when Sergei Lavrov and Uladzimir Makei issued a joint statement concerning such issues as Syria and the NATO presence in Central Europe. In addition to the real dimension of diplomatic consultations, these meetings are intended to demonstrate that the two countries conduct a common foreign policy.

⁸ RISI was established in 1992 and has the status of a national academic institution, currently affiliated to the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation. Since 2009 it has been led by General Leonid Reshetnikov, who had long served for the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (Russian SVR), and previously for the Soviet KGB. The institute has the reputation of being one of the Russian government's key advisory and analytical centres. According to a former academic worker of this institution, Aleksandr Sytin, RISI for many years was subordinate to the SVR and carried out tasks for the intel-

Minsk. Theses suggesting Russian disappointment with Belarus have been put forward on numerous occasions during the conferences held by this institution in Moscow. One example is the *Belarusian dialogue* debate that took place on 26 January 2016 with the participation of Russian and Belarusian experts. Oleg Nemensky, an RISI expert who was the moderator of the debate (he deals with the Belarusian topic, among other issues) stated clearly that, **“in the end, we have been unable to find a proper model of integration with Belarus, and we are unable to move any further with what we have now (...) this is mainly an effect of the lack of interest from the Belarusian government”**. Then he admitted that **“the Belarusian government long ago lost the Belarusian youth’s support. The West has been successfully working with them for years, unlike Russia, which has regretted neglecting this issue.”** However, he concluded that the main problem was **“the war waged by Alyaksandr Lukashenka on the ‘Russian World’, which has become one of the main tasks of the Belarusian state apparatus.”**⁹

Similar statements suggesting that Minsk has allegedly swapped the policy of ‘brotherly integration’ for ‘Belarusian, anti-Russian nationalism’ can also be heard in official materials of RISI TV, i.e. the TV interviews with Oleg Nemensky available on the institute’s website¹⁰. The catalogue of accusations against the Belarusian government was further expanded by another think tank associated with the Kremlin, the Institute for CIS Countries Studies, led by a Russian politician and a member of the State Duma, Konstantin Zatulin¹¹. The statements of Aleksandr Fadeyev (who has headed the Belarusian Department for many years) published in an article on 29 January 2015 are an excellent illustration of the institute’s stance on Belarus. Fadeyev openly expressed his concern with the

ligence, and began serving the presidential administration only after 2009. According to Sytin, the structure then underwent a major staff reshuffle, and supporters of rebuilding Russia’s imperial power gained major influence on the directions of its work. For more, see: <http://www.dal.by/news/1/15-01-15-6/>

⁹ See: <http://euroradio.by/ru/rossiyskiy-ekspert-belarus-ne-zainteresovana-v-dalneyshey-integracii-s-rossiey>

¹⁰ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=foBdaJFm6HY>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwKAUnafwh4>

¹¹ The Institute for CIS Countries Studies was established in 1996 formally as an ‘autonomous non-commercial institution’ (this is quoted from the official website www.materik.ru). However, its founders include such institutions as: the government of Moscow, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO, linked to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Moscow State University, and the Russian Academy of Sciences. The institute specialises in analysing the situation of Russian diasporas living in former Soviet republics. The institute has on many occasions resorted in its rhetoric to arguments for reconstructing Russian influence on the post-Soviet area.

fact that **“Belarusians are persuaded by Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s regime (and this is supported by ‘pro-Western organisations’) to accept the national idea which puts the Belarusian language, culture and literature in the first place.”** In his opinion, this leads to, **“discriminating against the Russian language and culture in the country’s everyday life, and this is already a serious breach of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, which the Belarusian government intentionally turns a blind eye to.”** Then he accused the Belarusian national media of “intentionally omitting or misrepresenting part of the news concerning the developments in eastern Ukraine”, which was coupled with “Lukashenka’s playing the role of a friend of the Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, supporting Ukrainian independence and his intentional refusal to accept the annexation of Crimea.” **This policy, along with tolerating radical anti-Russian groups in Belarus, may, in Fadeyev’s opinion, lead to the Ukrainian scenario being repeated in Belarus**¹². It needs to be recognised that, when compared to RISI, the Institute for CIS Countries Studies goes much further in its critical evaluations of Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s policy and the forecasts formulated on the basis of these evaluations—this may be an effect of the fact that it is formally less directly affiliated to the Russian government. The team in charge of analysing the situation in Belarus do not restrict themselves to presenting expert opinions—they also publish materials which have the character of political statements, such as the text published on the institute’s website on 12 May 2016 in which the Belarusian government was severely criticised for using a ribbon in the Belarusian national colours (green and red) instead of the ‘ribbon of Saint George’ (which in Russia is a manifestation of support for the government and its version of history) during the celebrations of Victory Day on 9 May. In the opinion of the authors of the text this was an expression of “solidarity with the present regime in Kyiv”¹³.

The views of the experts from the two think tanks linked to the Kremlin presented above have an influence on its foreign policy and are not the experts’ private beliefs but rather an expression of the redefined perception of Belarus and, above all, of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, among the Russian government elite. **The publication of an extensive paper titled *Belarusian nationalism against the Russian World* (Russian: *Belorusskiy natsionalizm protiv russkogo mira*)**¹⁴

¹² For more information see: <http://www.materik.ru/rubric/detail.php?ID=19384>

¹³ For more information see: http://ross-bel.ru/about/news_post/vlasti-respubliki-belarus-protiv-georgiyevskoy-lenty-i-bessmertnogo-polka

¹⁴ The complete text in PDF format is available, for example, at this address: http://www.publicdiplomacy.su/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Belorussia_obrez_123_200.pdf

last autumn was an important addition to the picture of Moscow's present views on its Belarusian ally. The book was published under the auspices of CIS-EMO (a Russian organisation known for watching elections in CIS countries) as part of a research project entitled *Monitoring radical nationalism in the post-Soviet area*. The publication was financed with a grant offered by a governmental fund via the National Charity Fund (www.nbfond.ru) as part of a competition held by decree of the president of the Russian Federation no. 243 of 25 July 2014. It is worth emphasising that a number of publications concerning Ukraine have been financed in the same manner, such as: *The influence of the Ukrainian crisis on extremist movements in Russia*; *Extremism in Ukrainian politics, society, media and law enforcement structures*; *Extremist movements in Russia versus the Ukrainian crisis*, etc.¹⁵

The book was written by Kirill Averyanov-Minsky, a Belarusian publicist and political analyst, and Vladislav Maltsev, a Russian journalist from *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*¹⁶. **There has not previously been such an extensive publication which describes real and imagined nationalism in Belarus in both the country's government's policy and the operation of selected social groups and non-governmental organisations. Given the in-depth analysis and the vast scope of the topics raised, the book needs to be viewed as a comprehensive attempt to present Russian analytical thought with the attitude Belarus takes to the Russian civilisational offer popularly labelled as the 'Russian World'.** The work is also – and this is essential – an attempt to identify those groups which obstruct or might obstruct the final inclusion of Belarus into the sphere of Russian political and cultural influence.

Key theses of the Russian publication *Belarusian nationalism against the Russian World*

- The crisis in Ukraine marked an essential change in the perception of Belarus in Russia. The fact that Minsk did not unequivocally support the

¹⁵ These publications are available at the website of CIS-EMO: www.cis-emo.net

¹⁶ Averyanov was born in Belarus (most likely in Minsk; hence the penname Minsky added as the second part of his surname). He graduated from law school. At the end of 2014, his Belarusian citizenship was revoked, and a ban on entering Belarus was imposed on him. At present, he lives in Moscow and publishes numerous articles criticising Alyaksandr Lukashenka's policy towards Russia. Considering the incomparably larger number of publications on portals promoting the 'Russian World' idea and his better knowledge of Belarus, it seems to be that Averyanov was the main author of this book, while Maltsev played an auxiliary role.

annexation of Crimea and the proclamation of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, as along with Alyaksandr Lukashenka's clearly pro-Ukrainian rhetoric came as a serious alarm signal to the Russian elite and public. **This was because it became ultimately clear that Belarus, which had been viewed for many years as a 'brother republic', was gradually transforming into what was increasingly reminiscent of a national state emphasising its distinctness from Russia in many ways. Most importantly, the Belarusian government has not merely granted its consent to these processes but has actively participated in them.**

- Belarusian independence which has for years been consistently built up by Alyaksandr Lukashenka presumes the weakening of its bonds with Russia. The idea of Belarusian independence includes the confrontation of two opposing notions: the 'free European Belarus' and the 'Asian imperial Russia'. **As a result, only a full implementation of the Union State project tantamount to the 'incorporation' of Belarus into the Russian political space may reverse the increasing intensification of sentiments among the Belarusian elite and public, and thus will prevent the catastrophe of a loss of influence in this country.**
- Provincial nationalism¹⁷, which was activated especially strongly in 2014, and thus in the context of the developments in Ukraine, is an important element of the idea of Belarusian independence. **The government is so determined to strengthen the 'anti-Russian' vector that a kind of (unwritten) alliance of the authoritarian regime and the nationalist-right-wing section of the opposition forces (e.g. the Belarusian People's Front) and media (the nationalist-oriented weekly *Nasha Niva*) has been forged.** What unites the two camps is the 'common enemy', i.e. Russia and any entities representing its interests and point of view.
- One consequence of this reorientation of the Belarusian government towards anti-Russian sovereignty has been the reconstruction of the official Belarusian historiography which now draws upon the traditions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, presented as the main origin of the

¹⁷ The literal translation of the Russian term *mestechkovy natsionalizm* is 'small-town nationalism', which has an even more pejorative meaning and suggests that Belarusians are unable to develop their own comprehensive and mature national idea.

Belarusian statehood, distinct from the Russian legal-political culture. Furthermore, the government more or less officially supports the promotion of new Belarusian national heroes, who were engaged in evidently anti-Russian activity, such as Konstanty Kalinowski, a leader of the January Uprising in the territories now located in Belarus¹⁸. The Battle of Orsha in 1514, which ended in the victory of the troops of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania over the army of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, has become a symbol of Belarusian military triumph. More and more attention is being paid in academic publications and school and university textbooks to the Belarusian People's Republic set up in 1918, which has also become one of the symbols of Belarusian independence. Furthermore, the post-war period, when Belarus was part of the USSR as one of the Soviet republics, is presented in more critical terms. **Generally, the goal of most Belarusian historians is to create and entrench a negative image of Russia as the source of all evil and catastrophes in Belarusian history.**

- As a result of the increasingly negative perception of Russia presented in the Belarusian historical narrative, problems with monuments referring to the shared past of the two nations within one state have been observed over the past few years – something which had not previously been an issue in Belarus. One example of this phenomenon is the fact that the government of Minsk have twice rejected a motion brought by pro-Russian intelligentsia circles to return the monument to Tsar Alexander II which had been in the centre of the Belarusian capital and which was removed after the Bolshevik revolution. Meanwhile, the government of Vitebsk in 2014 put up a monument to Algirdas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania known for his dislike of Orthodox Christianity and for his violent raids on Moscow. **Furthermore, cases of the desecration of monuments and plaques commemorating Russian heroes (for example, General Alexander Suvorov) have been seen in various parts of the country since 2014. It is worth noting that Belarusian law enforcement agencies, which usually react very firmly to any signs of public protest, have taken a relatively passive approach to this.**

¹⁸ However, it should be kept in mind that Konstanty Kalinowski was also employed by propaganda in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic as a representative of a peasant revolt (since he was from the right social class) against the Tsarist oppression. However, at present this figure is in fact presented in Belarusian historiography more in the context of the struggle for the nation's sovereignty, and this approach is most likely the subject of criticism of the authors of the publication in question.

- Education is one of the most essential spheres of building a sense of distinctness and national identity in Belarus. Both governmental institutions and numerous non-governmental organisations function very successfully in these two areas; and they often co-operate as part of individual projects. In most cases, the regime unofficially tolerates NGOs' educational projects. This tolerance is sufficient to equate to serious support, given the hard authoritarian conditions in Belarus. The most Russophobic and at the same time most active Belarusian organisations include: the Francysk Skaryna Belarusian Language Society, the social campaign *Budzma Belarusami* (Let's be Belarusians), and Minsk-based: Art Syadziba non-profit organisation, the Ź Gallery of Contemporary Art and the state Institute of Belarusian History and Culture. This group also includes: the nationwide Belarusian language course campaign *Mova ci kava* (Language or coffee) and its continuation *Mova na nova* (Language anew). More respect for the Belarusian language can also be noticed in the government's narrative. Elements of Belarusian folklore, such as the famous *vyshyvanka* shirts, which are promoted – including among young people – as fashionable attributes of national distinctness, are also an important instrument of building the Belarusian national identity.
- The activity of nationalist-leaning Belarusian political parties and social organisations poses a serious threat to the expansion of the 'Russian World' idea. Independence, as they understand it, is only possible in separation from Russia and also means negating such forms of co-operation as the Union State of Russia and Belarus. **Over the past two years, the nationalist-oriented section of the political opposition has noticed the government camp's increased interest in strengthening the country's independence, and has made attempts to gain approval for its operation in this area. Alyaksandr Lukashenka, fearing Russia's policy, is and will in the near future be interested in supporting (most often unofficially) the operation of those circles which, guided by ideological motives, will work for Belarusian independence in any, even the most difficult, circumstances.** The field of reinforcing Belarusian nationalism is dangerous to the implementation of Russian interests in Belarus. The Belarusian opposition structures which are especially active in this field include: the Belarusian People's Front, the Conservative Christian Party – BPF and the Young Front. These circles are the main organisers of mass events which mobilise, bring together and consolidate those citizens of Belarus who have nationalist (and thus anti-Russian) views. Events of this type

doubtlessly include the annual marches commemorating key points in the history of resisting Russian expansion or harm inflicted by Russia. These are above all: *Dzen Voli* (Freedom Day) celebrated on 25 March on the anniversary of the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic; the Chernobyl Route commemorating the Chernobyl catastrophe on 26 April; and *Dziady*, i.e. the march held at the end of October to commemorate the mass executions of Belarusian elites by the NKVD in the late 1930s. Even though examples of these have not been especially numerous over the past few years, if tension between Minsk and Moscow increases, they can be used (with at least tacit consent from the government) to ignite anti-Russian sentiments in Belarus on a much larger scale than now.

- Attempts to emancipate the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) from the supremacy of Moscow Patriarchate have also been observed over the past few years. Since 2013, the Belarusian president, in the context of increasing tension between Russia and Ukraine, has ever more frequently emphasised the need to accelerate the Belarusisation of the Church in Belarus, for example, through limiting the use of the Russian language in the liturgy and other manifestations of spiritual practices. At the same time, despite the lack of binding decisions and public declarations from the Belarusian government, everything seems to indicate that the idea of the autocephaly of the BOC is still being considered and that this idea is supported by a significant section of the Belarusian Orthodox clergy. **Alyaksandr Lukashenka wants to totally subordinate the Orthodox Church in Belarus to himself. Moscow views this as a very dangerous move because it adversely affects one of the most successful elements of its soft power in Belarus (and also other former Soviet republics), i.e. the Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate.**
- Another major threat to Russian interests in Belarus has thus far been underestimated—the activity of Belarusian football fans. Most of them belong to radical nationalist circles and, what is important in this case, are aggressively anti-Russian. It took very little time for these groups to back the demonstrations in Ukraine, and some of their members personally travelled to Ukraine to participate in events. Furthermore, the fans of FC Dinamo Minsk and FC Volna Pinsk demonstrated their ‘pro-Bandera’ views in an open and very aggressive manner during their clubs’ matches. **These are (predominantly) young men with radical**

views and are seasoned fighters, their numbers are estimated to be in the thousands, and they demonstrate a bitter hostility towards both Russia and any manifestations of Russian culture. Special concern is raised by the rhetoric used by these circles and it cannot be ruled out that they may play an essential role in riots linked to any possible ‘Belarusian Maidan’.

- The last serious problem from the point of view of the expansion of the ‘Russian World’ is the fact that Belarusian citizens have been engaged in the fights in Ukraine on the side of the Ukrainian government. Belarusian volunteers are recruited via the aforementioned Belarusian nationalist organisations, above all the Young Front. Belarusian structures have also collected money on numerous occasions to support the Ukrainian units fighting in the Donbas, and some Belarusian independent media, such as Charter 97, have been used to promote the actions and general idea of the fight against the ‘Russian invader’. **Even though the number of Belarusians fighting in Ukraine did not exceed a few dozen at any one time, there is no doubt that the most nationalist-oriented opposition activists have gained valuable combat experience for the first time in history. Should public unrest be provoked in Belarus, these people may become very successful and thus dangerous field commanders/coordinators of a ‘Belarusian Maidan’ and other forms of street protest.**

At the conclusion, Averyanov-Minsky and Maltsev warn of the consequences of the Kremlin’s further tolerating the intensifying nationalist sentiments in Belarus. At the same time, they recommend that the Russian media become more active in promoting the ‘Russian World’ idea, and this might be the starting point for the ‘ideological struggle’ for Belarus **in which Poland is one of Moscow’s main opponents.**

The theses presented above form a rather coherent concept which on the one hand indicates that the authors have an extensive knowledge of Belarus’s history, mentality and the socio-political situation in contemporary Belarus. On the other hand, it can be noticed that they manipulate the facts to prove a theory they assumed to be right in advance. For example, the influence of the opposition and the third sector on the passive Belarusian public has definitely been overrated. The autonomous tendencies in the Belarusian Orthodox Church as well as the anti-Russian profile of Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s domestic and foreign policy have also been presented in a strongly exaggerated manner. It is thus

possible to have the impression that such texts have been commissioned by the Russian government and that their authors are tasked with proving (on the basis of a seemingly cool and reliable analysis) that Belarus, with its nationalism and anti-Russian sentiments, is gradually starting out on Ukraine's path Ukraine, which may in the future lead to confrontation with Russia. The responsibility for this situation is unequivocally placed on Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who previously used to be presented for many years as Moscow's closest ally in the post-Soviet area. It can thus be said that the image of the Belarusian president has changed fairly radically in the Russian experts' narrative. **Summing up, it needs to be admitted that the publication *Belarusian nationalism against the Russian World* is a cynical, skilfully written and intellectually corrupt concept that provides grounds for intensifying the presence of Russian soft power in Belarus. However, in an extreme case, the theses presented in this manner can also be employed as the ideological basis for Russia's more assertive moves to ultimately and durably subordinate Belarus.**

An important addition to the publication under discussion is a separate, much shorter article by Kirill Averyanov-Minsky entitled *How Soviet Belarus was enlarged*, which was published a few months earlier. The article describes the process of forming the territory of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic in the inter-war period and, more precisely, enlarging it (on the grounds of the Soviet government's decision) by adding the territories which at present correspond more or less to its three oblasts: Vitebsk, Mogilev and Gomel. In the author's opinion, 'shifting' these lands in 1924–1926 to become part of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was nothing other than an administrative decision taken by Moscow which was not backed by any arguments of a historical or ethnic nature. For this reason, Averyanov notices a striking similarity to the changes in the jurisdiction of Crimea or Donbas which were also made as part of the USSR. **The text also contains a directly formulated suggestion that on this basis independent republics might be proclaimed in the future in eastern Belarus, since they are the least Belarusian part of the country**¹⁹.

Numerous articles published by various mutually unrelated authors on so-called independent portals promoting the idea of a commonwealth of post-Soviet countries as part of the 'Russian World' are of secondary importance, as they in a way reproduce the reasoning presented by the aforementioned experts. The most radical portals which raise the Belarusian issue in the neo-imperial

¹⁹ See: <http://sputnikipogrom.com/history/32029/bssr/#.V2kHt7Mkqid>

context include: www.sputnikipogrom.com²⁰ (Averyanov is the author of most publications concerning Belarus), www.bditelnost.info, www.svpressa.ru, www.politconservatizm.ru and www.14vn.com. Analytical-publicist materials criticising Belarus are also published from time to time in popular news portals, such as: Regnum (www.regnum.ru), Lenta.ru (www.lenta.ru) and Vzglad.ru (www.vz.ru). It appears that these publications are also coordinated and have the intention of making the message stronger in the new Russian interpretation, criticising Belarus and the policy of its government.

The publications and statements from Russian experts referred to above have not as yet translated to Russian government policy towards Belarus. However, such an unprecedentedly massive scale of extremely negative opinions and the fact that some of their authors are affiliated to the government certainly justifies the claim that this is part of the Kremlin's strategy. Moscow is thus suggesting to the Belarusian government that it is dissatisfied with Alyaksandr Lukashenka's insufficient support for its policy in the post-Soviet area and with his policy (as Moscow views it) of strengthening Belarusian culture and the national awareness of Belarusians. Furthermore, although the radical evaluations and proposals of actions to be taken for the time being remain only on the level of expert discourse, they also have to be understood as a warning that if Minsk continues strengthening its independence, Moscow may adopt a much tougher official policy. Hence, such a modified narrative of the Russian expert circles is the first, preliminary form of pressure on the Belarusian government, intended to hold back Belarus's emancipation from the Russian political and cultural influence.

2. The (seemingly) new concept of Belarus belonging to the 'Russian World'

In parallel to the massive criticism (outside the official inter-governmental channels) of the Belarusian government's moves, some Russian experts have reformulated the old concept which provides grounds for Belarus belonging to the Russian sphere of political and cultural influence. The starting point in their argumentation is negating the maturity of the Belarusian ethnos due to both

²⁰ This Russian portal (registered in the USA) is one of the most controversial. It is quite strongly inclined towards neo-imperialism. Numerous publications present the radical views of authors repudiating any signs of the separateness of former Soviet republics, including Belarus, from Russia. The portal stands out for its great dynamism and the high quality of the graphical layout of the published materials.

the lack of real premises for the nation-building process and the dominance of other much stronger cultures, above all Russian culture and secondly Polish culture. **One consequence of negating the process of the Belarusian national revival in the late 19th/early 20th centuries is a theory which has been gaining popularity over the past few years that Joseph Stalin played a key role in the emergence of the modern Belarusian nation. Russian authors argue that in late 1920s/early 1930s the then Soviet leadership was conducting a self-interested policy which involved supporting the development of local languages and cultures in individual republics, and these actions also covered what was then the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Consequently, this means that the Belarusian nation is in a way an artificial product, formed top-down by the Soviet administration apparatus²¹.** Propagators of the 'Russian World' idea are also attacking the main foundation of the idea of Belarusian sovereignty, namely the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which is referred to as a kind of founding myth by Belarusian nationalist circles and also, to an increasing extent, in the present governmental narrative. Their argument against the idea of the 'European' roots of Belarusian statehood originating from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is that there was a strong Asian element in the Duchy, which was inhabited by a numerous group of Tatars²². **These deliberations are crowned with the thesis that Belarusians belong to the so-called triune nation, along with Russians and Ukrainians. This is a direct reference to the theory coined in the 19th century by Mikhail Koyalovich²³ presenting the Russian nation as a grand ethnos consisting of three components: Great Russians (Russians), Little Russians (Ukrainians) and Western Russians (Belarusians). This approach meant unquestionable primacy of the Russian part over the two weaker components.** Orthodox Christianity was an important bonding factor in this community, making it anti-Catholic and anti-Western (in practice, above all anti-Polish)²⁴. It is precisely this, in no way new, concept that is currently used by the Russian side as the historical grounds for Belarus belonging to the 'Russian World' in the broad meaning of the term and as a source of argumentation for the existence of cultural, mental, linguistic and civilisational bonds between Belarus

²¹ For more information see: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1863137.html>

²² For more information see: <http://sputnikipogrom.com/history/52636/grand-asian-duchy-of-lithuania/#.V1bXEzFf3IU>

²³ A 19th-century Russian historian and publicist of Belarusian descent. A supporter and the main theoretician of the ideology, based on Slavophilia and Orthodoxy, promoting the unity of Belarusians with Russia (and Ukraine), known as 'Western Russism'.

²⁴ Eugeniusz Mironowicz, *Białoruś*, Wydawnictwo Trio, Warszawa 1999, pp. 12–13.

and Russia. This is also a tool used to justify the process of integration of the two countries (and in particular, the need to continue it) as part of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. In addition to the aforementioned theses, Russian propagators of the 'Russian World' present its content as a conservative 'moral order' based on such values as: the primacy of the community over the interests of the individuals, the superiority of the idea and the sense of justice over logic and economic calculations, serving the superior idea and the Orthodox ethic. The 'Russian World', as its supporters view it, is the only chance (also for Belarus) of being protected from the 'decayed' and 'decadent' culture of the consumerist West²⁵.

²⁵ See: <http://www.russkiymir.ru/fund/projects/1150th/roboty/esse/116885/>

III. MANIFESTATIONS OF THE PRESENCE OF RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN BELARUS – AN ATTEMPT AT IDENTIFICATION²⁶

The post-Crimea narrative of Russian experts is critical of Alyaksandr Lukashenka and suggests that the presence of Russian soft power in the Belarusian cultural space should be intensified. The consequences of this include the activation and development of Russian and pro-Russian non-governmental organisations in Belarus. The attempt to classify them below predominantly covers those entities which have already been operating for some years, since they were established in the early 21st century and some in the 1990s. Few of them emerged fairly recently, i.e. at the time of the Ukrainian crisis. **However, given the context of the situation in Ukraine and the general increase in tensions in the region, their operation gains a completely new character, which is much more dangerous to Belarusian sovereignty and social stability. Most of these entities have become much more active over the past two years as a consequence of intensified financial support from the public budget of the Russian Federation offered via various, often difficult to trace channels.** The potential of pro-Russian organisations has been visibly developed and strengthened. Even though a clear-cut classification of the structures which contribute to Russian soft power in Belarus is not entirely possible, it seems that the breakdown presented below will be optimal for understanding the special characteristics of this complex conglomerate of various organisations.

1. Educational, cultural and youth associations

1.1. Associations which have the formal non-governmental organisation status

A number of officially registered organisations which have been in operation in Belarus already since the 1990s are engaged in the promotion of Russian culture, the Russian language and in educational activity in the broad meaning of

²⁶ The identification of these organisations is partly based on the list developed by the Belarusian right-wing opposition organisation Young Front known as the *Black Hundred List* – for more information see: <http://mfront.net/bielarus-na-parozie-vajny.html>. However, this report takes into account only those organisations which are engaged in real activity and have any real impact. The remaining structures (which are not on the list developed by the opposition) have been identified on the basis of our own analysis of publications available on the Internet.

the term. It is worth noting that some of their initiatives do not refer directly to the Russian neo-imperial idea, but nevertheless fit in with the general message as a whole pointing to the numerous links existing between Belarus and Russia's culture and historical tradition. Some organisations from this group are tasked with working with the Russian diaspora in Belarus. **The central body which coordinates the operation of these entities is the Coordination Council of the Heads of Russian Organisations, established 2007, officially seated at the Russian embassy in Minsk²⁷ (www.ross-bel.ru). The council is chaired by Viktor Gerashchenko, a writer, editor-in-chief of *Nashe Pravoslavie* newspaper and director of the 'Russian House' in Vitebsk²⁸.** As can be concluded from the website, which is updated on a daily basis, the council is not a virtual body and carries out its tasks, such as holding sessions, consultative meetings, conferences and regular conventions of representatives of Russian social organisations from all regions of Belarus. **The resolution of its tenth convention held on 28–29 May 2016 contains firm demands indicating that this structure demonstrates a high level of assertiveness in the area of promoting the 'Russian World' idea. The numerous high-priority tasks of the Russian structures in Belarus include: the popularisation of actions commemorating the Great Patriotic War, i.e. the 'ribbon of Saint George' and 'The Immortal Regiment'; an intensification of work with young people, in particular, military-patriotic education²⁹, organising sport classes and mass cultural events, youth camps, etc.; making efforts to open Russian academic and cultural centres in Mogilev, Vitebsk and Grodno; and counteracting those discrediting pro-Russian organisations in the 'Belarusian opposition and nationalist media'³⁰. At present, as stated on the website, the council consists of fifteen organisations³¹, the most active being: the Belarusian section of the**

²⁷ This is official affiliation aimed at guaranteeing protection to these organisations should potential measures be taken by the Belarusian government. The council's office is located in the stately building of the agency of the capital city of Moscow in the centre of Minsk (the role played by Moscow House will be discussed in more detail further in this text).

²⁸ In 2011, Gerashchenko lost his position at Vitebsk city hall for his openly pro-Russian, neo-imperial statements.

²⁹ This gives rise to the impression that the council officially supports training camps held in Belarus and Russia by pro-Russian (e.g. Cossack) military associations – this issue will be discussed in more detail in the next part of this chapter.

³⁰ All these entities are officially registered at the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Belarus and operate legally. For more information see: http://ross-bel.ru/about/news_post/rezolyutsiya-kh-belorusskoy-respublikanskoy-konferentsii-obshchestvennykh-obyedineniy-rossiyskikh-sootchestvennikov

³¹ See: <http://ross-bel.ru/sostav-koordinacionnogo-soveta-soot>. The association of Belarusian alumni of Russian universities 'Inkorvuz-Almamater' is at the organisation stage.

youth movement 'Young Russia' (www.rumol.org), the Culture and Education Social Association 'Our Rus', the Nationwide Social Association 'Russian Community', The Belarusian Social Association 'Rus' and two regional associations in Vitebsk (www.vitrusdom.narod.ru) and Mogilev named 'Russian Home', and the Mogilev-based Russian Culture and Education Association (www.rkpo.ucoz.ru). Special attention needs to be paid to 'Young Russia' which is tasked with working with young Belarusian people and holding sports and educational events promoting the 'Russian World' values. This structure is led by Sergey Lushch, who has the reputation of being one of the most charismatic and efficient coordinators active in pro-Russian organisations. The organisation's website is graphically appealing and is administered with great dynamism.

1.2. The Russian government's agendas

The Belarusian branch of Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russian governmental Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States (it reports to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Co-operation is a structure which is financed directly from the budget of the Russian Federation. Its Minsk office, the Russian Science and Culture Centre (www.blr.rs.gov.ru) is engaged in extensive activity aimed at promoting Russian culture and the Russian language. A Russian Science and Culture Centre has also been in operation in Brest since 2014. The profile of its activity is similar to that of the Minsk office (www.blr.rs.gov.ru/projects/rcnk-v-breste). Viktor Malashenko, a retired KGB staff officer, has directed the Belarusian branch of Rossotrudnichestvo since 2012³².

'Moscow House', i.e. the Minsk agency of the Russian capital city (and, more precisely, of the Russian state-owned firm the Moscow Centre of International Co-operation) warrants a separate description. The agency was opened in July 2009 and is located in a purpose-built office located in the centre of Minsk, constructed using money from the Moscow government. According to information which can be found on 'Moscow House's' website (www.mkdc.by), the goals of its operation include: supporting the development of the Moscow government's co-operation with its Belarusian partners, actions for the development of trade and investing capital originating from Moscow in Belarus, attracting Belarusian

³² Viktor Michurin, an employee of the Minsk office, has recently been performing the duties of the office's director for unknown reasons. Since there is no information whatsoever, it is difficult to conclude whether this has been caused by Malashenko's temporary absence or if it signals a long-term change in this position.

investment capital in Moscow, and cultural and educational actions, including support for the Russian diaspora in Belarus. **It appears that the latter aspect of its operation has gained special significance over the past two years. 'Moscow House' has become an informal Russian soft power 'coordination centre' in Belarus. The offices of the Coordination Council of the Heads of Russian Organisations and Rossotrudnichestvo are located there, and it is also the venue of most events held by Russian organisations operating in Minsk.** Furthermore, since 2016 'Moscow House' has been home to the modern multi-media Press Centre of the Russian branch of the Sputnik portal, i.e. the only Russian media outlet specialising in Belarusian issues operating in Belarus.

1.3. Social networking groups

Initiatives of a more virtual and informal nature form a separate sub-group. This concerns above all any kinds of themed groups established on the most popular social networking portals in the post-Soviet area, such as vkontakte.ru. Using this tool, propagators of the 'Russian World' reach tens of thousands of (predominantly young) Belarusians who are members of such groups. One example of such activity is 'Antimaidan Belarus', a resilient group which very clearly demonstrates its neo-imperial views (http://vk.com/antimaidan_by). This group currently has around 2,700 members from various regions of Belarus. Another group of this kind (albeit with a more expert-oriented profile) is 'Zapadnorusskoye Vozrozhdeniye' (<http://vk.com.zapadnorusizm>). This group has over 1,000 members.

2. Organisations with a military-sports profile

- Several Cossack organisations are active in Belarus, even though the country has no historical Cossack traditions that could be compared to the Ukrainian or Russian military culture. Although they do not have as many members as their counterparts from other post-Soviet countries, their activity profile and ideological foundations are very similar. Belarusian Cossack associations are focused on working with young people, placing particular emphasis on organising martial art courses, firearm use training, horse riding lessons, etc. For this reason representatives of Belarusian Cossack circles are actively engaged in educational work at schools across the country as part of various educational programmes (for example, the 'Drug-free City' action held by the Kazachiy Spas organisation). **Their real goal is the recruitment and selection of young boys for participation**

in military and sports classes taught in the spirit of the ‘Russian World’ values. Cossacks are also trying to establish close co-operation the military-profile classes at Belarusian secondary schools or cadet schools operating in some cities (for example, in Vitebsk) with the aim of taking control of them. Their message also appeals to young activists of the regime-linked youth organisations, such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM). Children with abusive parents are an important target group for them since, in exchange for food and the sense of community, they can be taught total loyalty, which translates as a readiness to take up even the most difficult tasks³³. **Young people recruited using various methods have been sent to camps organised in Russia on a regular basis for a few years by Cossacks and other organisations (these will be mentioned in the next parts of this text).** These camps are usually presented as fashionable ‘survival schools’. In reality, in addition to the official programme, they are trained how to handle and use various weapons, including firearms, and are taught martial arts. Their instructors include volunteers seasoned in battle from the troops fighting on the side of the Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics³⁴. According to a tradition dating back to the times of the Russian Empire, all Cossack organisations co-operate closely with the Belarusian Orthodox Church, thus increasing the range of influence and respect among the Orthodox section of Belarusian society. Characteristically, a part of these circles also make political demands directly concerning the Belarusian government. Mikalai Ulakhovich, one of the leaders of the Cossack movement in Belarus, the ataman of the ‘Belarusian Cossacks’ organisation (he ran for president in 2015), announced directly at the convention he had convened in Minsk in early February 2016 that his organisation would put up candidates in parliamentary elections this year. At the same time, he declared he was prepared to form a regular Cossack army to “protect Belarus from NATO”³⁵. **Regardless of the scope of operation, the number of members**

³³ See: <https://informnapalm.org/15874-voiny-russkogo-myra-v-belarusy/>

³⁴ The weekly *Nasha Niva* has published as part of a journalist investigation extensive materials on several occasions over the past few months concerning summer camps organised for Belarusian young people in Russia, as well as current work of Belarusian Cossacks in Belarus. The publications include many reliable details and are backed by rich photographic and video documentation. The publication of 16 May 2016 concerned such events held in Vitebsk Oblast. See: <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=170171&lang=ru>

³⁵ Much seems to suggest that Ulakhovich’s activity is one of the Belarusian security apparatus’s (so far not numerous) attempts to take control of the pro-Russian movements (this issue is outlined in more detail in chapter IV).

and affiliation, the thing all Belarusian Cossack organisations have in common is the affirmation of the conservative Russian imperial order based on Orthodoxy and bitter criticism of the ‘decayed West’³⁶. The most active Cossack organisations in Belarus at present include: the ‘Belarusian Cossacks’ (www.belkazak.by) and ‘Kazachiy Spas’ (www.kazak.by) referred to above. Furthermore, the following smaller organisations, operating on the regional level can be distinguished: the Cossack Unit at Saint Elisabeth Monastery in Minsk, the Club of Cossacks of Babruysk ‘Yermak’, the Grodno-based association ‘Cossacks of the Neman’, the military-patriotic club ‘Fatherland’ also based in Grodno, Cossacks from the 7th Y. Baklanov Minsk Half-Hundred, the Cossack military-patriotic club in Orsha, the Cossack Guard of Peacekeeping Forces, and a branch of Kuban-based Cossacks ‘The Gate of the Lake Region’. It is difficult to estimate the number of their actual members and the real scope of their operation in the case of most of these structures. It is suspected that the activity of some of them is limited to sporadic events held mainly on the occasion of the most important anniversaries, e.g. on 9 May. Nevertheless, some of them operate on a constant basis, although their operation is not of a large-scale character. According to rough estimates, the number of Belarusian Cossacks is not higher than 1,000 to 2,000 operating activists. It also needs to be emphasised that ‘Belarusian Cossacks’, theoretically the largest of these organisations, is not a uniform and compact structure. Local atamans have a high degree of independence, and some of the regional groups do not accept the supremacy of the central command in Minsk, and instead the contact the Cossack circles in Russia directly.

- **The Afghanistan war veterans, who are still numerous and active in Belarus and who operate as part of the Social Association of the Belarusian Union of Afghanistan War Veterans, occupy an important position in the group of paramilitary organisations.** It needs to be emphasised that there are no evident grounds to claim that this organisation as a whole is engaged in promoting the ‘Russian World’ in Belarus. It is highly likely that the local Vitebsk-based organisation named ‘Brotherhood’(www.afgan.by) led by Valery Ananchenko is pro-Russian. Activists from this organisation do not hide their support for the Kremlin’s

³⁶ The favourite fact which is most frequently referred to in order to discredit the West in the opinion of these circles and other groups which share a similar ideology is the right to enter into same-sex marriages applicable in some EU member states. This argument is usually sufficient to brand the whole of European culture as debauched.

neo-imperial narrative and are among those organising the paramilitary summer camps in Russia for Belarusian schoolchildren³⁷. Everything suggests that they have close contacts with the Cossack movement.

- In addition to the semi-military Cossack organisations and associations of Afghanistan war veterans which draw upon military traditions, other structures tasked with improving the physical education of young people combined with promoting the idea of Russian dominance are also in operation in Belarus. One example of such separate, difficult-to-qualify entities is the Belarusian Federation of Russian Martial Arts (www.ross.by).
- Political organisations which have the nature of paramilitary fighting squads form a separate group. This above all concerns the Belarusian branch of the Russian National Bolshevik movement, who are present above all on the social networking portal [vkontakte.ru](http://vk.com/belnb) (<http://vk.com/belnb>), where they are engaged in propaganda and information activity, including tracking the anti-Russian moves of the Belarusian government and watching the activity of Belarusian nationalist organisations. The group has around 1,000 members. Another organisation, known already in the 1990s for its extremist activity in Belarus, the Russian National Unity movement (Russian abbreviation RNE; http://vk.com/rne_belarus), is also present on this portal. This group has only 200 members, but its activity is much more serious since it is aimed (or at least was in 2014–2015) at recruiting young Belarusians to units which fight on the side of eastern Ukrainian separatists³⁸.

3. Initiatives under the patronage of the Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate

- Structures affiliated to some Orthodox temples or monasteries, many of which are even co-managed by the clergy from the Belarusian Orthodox Church, hold an important position among the pro-Russian organisations operating in Belarus. Their activity shows that **the Church is one of the essential instruments employed for promoting the ‘Russian World’ in Belarus. The best proof of this is the long-lasting operation**

³⁷ This was meticulously documented in the above mentioned journalist investigation conducted by *Nasha Niva* newspaper. See: <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=170171&lang=ru>

³⁸ See: http://by24.org/2014/05/11/russian_neo_nazis_recruit_mercenaries_for_ukraine_in_belarus

of so-called Orthodox military-patriotic clubs. Over twenty of these clubs are currently active in Belarus, including eight in Grodno Oblast. These organisations have both an Orthodox and a paramilitary profile. Their offer is targeted at young people aged between 12 and 18 years. Sports classes, with a special emphasis placed on close combat, are the main, albeit not the only, form of their operation. Another important component are educational classes during which pro-Russian and anti-Western religious and political contents are inculcated into the young participants. The teachers are usually former military officers and officers of the security apparatus, and the management duties are also shared by Orthodox clergymen many of whom collaborated with the law enforcement agencies or the army in the past. Dependent on the local background, the clubs' activity is supported by Cossacks and/or Afghanistan war veterans. **Furthermore, in many cases such organisations are supported (officially or in most cases unofficially) by the local administration and, most importantly, by active police officers and high-ranking officers from the State Committee of Border Troops³⁹.** It is worth adding in this context that the clubs are an important link in the system of recruiting participants for the above-mentioned military camps and of organising the camps.

- The Belarusian Orthodox Church is also engaged in the evangelisation of young people, which *per se* is a politically neutral, important and completely understandable area of activity of any church. However, some of these initiatives are exercised in an overtly pro-Russian context, precisely copying the narrative of the propagators of the 'Russian World'. The annual Orthodox Youth Festival (which takes place in the summer) held under the slogan 'Procession to the Stalin Line' is a model example of this phenomenon. This event gives rise to so much controversy because it is held at a place symbolising the period of Stalinist repressions which were also targeted against the church. This pro-Russian festival is organised by Maksim Loginov, the protodeacon of the Minsk diocese, who is in charge of the pastoral ministry of young people. He also directs another pro-Russian organisation, the Brotherhood of Saint Dvymont of Pskov.

³⁹ Abundant and convincing documentation concerning the clubs' activity and their connections was collected and published in February 2016 by the portal InformNapalm, see: <https://informnapalm.org/20464-taliban-v-belarusi/> This issue was also investigated a little earlier by *Nasha Niva* journalists, see: <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=158906&lang=ru>

4. The Russian and pro-Russian media

- The media is used in the Kremlin's policy as one of the key instruments for propagating the 'Russian World' idea in the entire post-Soviet area, including Belarus. There is no language barrier in Belarus nor is there the approach negating the information message from Russia seen in the Baltic and South Caucasus countries (in extreme cases also manifestations of Russian culture are opposed there). This offers the Russian media almost unlimited room for manoeuvre in the Belarusian media space. Their effectiveness has been proven by the latest research conducted by independent Belarusian sociologists revealing a high level of support for integration with Russia among the citizens of Belarus⁴⁰. **Russian television (above all due to cable TV providers) is widely available and has a rich offer which is appealing to averagely and poorly educated Belarusian citizens, especially its long criminal series and soap operas. It successfully promotes such pathologies as: excessive drinking, corruption, violence and aggression in human relations.** Russian publicist talk-shows to which radical Russian politicians are more frequently invited than moderate ones are slightly less popular. The brutal style of public debate offered in such shows and the unequivocally formulated evaluations of the West and the situation in the post-Soviet area⁴¹ may also affect the world view of a section of the Belarusian public. At present, the most popular Russian channels in Belarus are: NTV-Belarus, RTR-Belarus, REN TV, ORT and Dom Kino (all of them are broadcast one hour later than Moscow time, which allows the Belarusian operators to select their content). As the Belarusian government has recently admitted, Russian production at present fills as much as 65% of the Belarusian media space⁴², which is clear proof of the vast possibilities the Russian media has to influence ordinary Belarusian citizens.
- One characteristic manifestation of Russia's information policy in Belarus is the operation of the multi-media network 'Sputnik', which was launched

⁴⁰ The current sentiments of the Belarusian public with regard to their eastern neighbour have been presented in more detail in chapter IV.

⁴¹ One example of this kind of narrative is Vladimir Solovyev's show 'Voskresny vecher' ('Sunday night') broadcast in Belarus by the Rossiya TV channel. The participants of the debate on the show which was broadcast on 22 May 2016 expressed their concern that "the West might destabilise the situation in Belarus." See: http://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/21385/episode_id/1302433/video_id/1476249/viewtype/picture/

⁴² This data was presented by the deputy head of the Belarusian Presidential Administration, Igor Buzovsky, in an interview on 15 May 2016 for the Belarusian TV channel ONT. See: <http://news.21.by/other-news/2016/05/16/1191441.html>

in November 2014⁴³ as part of the structures of the Russian News Agency 'Rossiya Segodnya' led by an experienced journalist and one of the best-known propagators of the Kremlin's policy, Dmitry Kiselyov. The Belarusian section began its work in December 2014 and at the initial stage of its operation took over most journalists of the Belarusian branch of the Interfax agency (Interfax-Zapad). **It is worth noting that Andrey Kachura, who was nominated as head of the Belarusian team, had worked for some time at the Press Team of the Belarusian KGB Directorate for Minsk and Minsk Oblast**⁴⁴. Over the past few months, the portal's activity has been expanded to include an Internet radio station and a modern Multimedia Centre (located in 'Moscow House'). **Since the beginning of its operation the news portal www.sputnik.by has stood out for its high level of graphical layout and the quality of its publications, which is most likely the effect of its good financing. Furthermore, its high budget allows it to regularly take Belarusian journalists from both independent and state-controlled media outlets.** It should also be remembered that, given the continuing reductions in the financing of the third sector by Western donors and the decline in living standards in Belarus in general, even those journalists and people representing culture circles who oppose Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime and Russia itself may agree to co-operate with Sputnik, seeing this as currently the only chance not only for a decent wage but also for access to cutting-edge equipment and (which is equally important) professional development understood in a certain way⁴⁵. This is even more understandable given the fact that [sputnik.by](http://www.sputnik.by) has not been engaged in an aggressive information campaign targeted against the Belarusian government or Belarusian culture. Furthermore, the portal has a parallel Belarusian language version and gives information about events promoting the Belarusian language and culture. This policy

⁴³ This is a media project created by the International News Agency 'Rossiya Segodnya' (formerly RIA Novosti). Sputnik is tasked with promoting the Russian media message (and thus also the 'Russian World' idea) abroad, including in the post-Soviet area. There are plans to open local editors' teams in over 30 countries where, alongside the Russian version, a version in the local language will be provided. The assumption is that all the national branches will operate as multimedia hubs, each consisting of: a news agency, an on-line radio station, editorial staff of the news portal and a press centre. Each branch will employ between 30 and 70 people.

⁴⁴ See: <http://jourdom.ru/news/61325>

⁴⁵ Much controversy was provoked in May 2016 by Alexander Pomidorov's decision to accept a job offer from the editorial staff of [Sputnik.by](http://www.sputnik.by). Pomidorov (his proper name is Krivosheyev), a musician and journalist, has worked, for example, for Radio Liberty and is known for opposing the Belarusian regime and anti-Russian views.

allows the editors to successfully avoid strict categorisation and accusations that they present the facts in a biased manner so as to strengthen the influence of the 'Russian World' in the Belarusian media space. In under one and a half years of operation, Sputnik.by has become a strong and dynamic team ready to present variously oriented information. **Sputnik, being Russian government project, if necessary, may become in a relatively short time an effective and thus dangerous tool of the Kremlin's propaganda.** The initiative of expanding the scope of co-operation as part of the Radio-TV Organisation of the Union State (Russian abbreviation TRO) has a similar character. According to declarations made by its head, Igor Ugolnikov, TRO is expected to increase the presence of Russian regional TV channels in Belarus by 2016 and to become engaged in the mutual promotion of the regions of Belarus and Russia. This co-operation is understandable, if one considers the logic of the functioning of the Union State but should be recognised as dangerous, given the entrenchment of the model of thinking in the mindsets of citizens of the two countries that the administrative units (oblasts) of each of them are entities of a single state. The fact that Russia is promoting the benefits of building closer bilateral relations on the regional level, without the participation of the central administration, should also be viewed as dangerous. The cycle of programmes promoting the administrative entities of Russia (such as: Astrakhan, Ufa, Murmansk, Grozny, the Republic of Khakassia, Leningrad Oblast, Samara, Vologda, the Komi Republic) and Belarus (at the first stage these will be Mogilev, Vitebsk and Brest) is intended to serve this purpose. As Ugolnikov said, programmes "acceptable for broadcast in the Union State dimension" will be cleared for broadcast.

5. The pro-Russian publicist and news portals

Several Belarusian non-governmental pro-Russian portals of minor impact which aspire to be viewed as expert publicist opinion-building media outlets have been in operation in Belarus for many years. The portal which has the most political profile is Imperiya (www.imperiya.by), run by Yuri Baranchik, the director of the Analytical Centre of the Academy of Public Administration under the aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus in Minsk. Baranchik for many years was a commentator at the Regnum portal and was actively engaged in the operation of pro-Russian circles in Belarus⁴⁶. The portal was for many

⁴⁶ According to unofficial information, Baranchik has also worked for the Operational-Analytical Centre, i.e. one of the institutions which form part of the Belarusian secret services.

years the only visible manifestation of a Russian presence in the Belarusian media space, but it could never match any of the leading Belarusian independent Internet media outlets in terms of scope of impact. The website's operation was suspended recently, and Baranchik himself left for Moscow, where he is a member of Sputnik's central team of editors. *Novaya Ekonomika* (www.new-economics.info) is another niche profile wielding even less impact with long traditions. This portal is still operating. Sergey Shiptenko, a Belarusian historian and economist, is the founder and editor-in-chief of this portal and the coordinator of a foundation bearing the same name. The activity of this portal is limited to publishing twice a year an expert bulletin titled *Novaya Ekonomika* mostly containing highly specialised political and economic analyses. It is worth paying attention to Shiptenko's activity as a publicist. Given his numerous publications on many portals and participation in numerous conferences, he can be classified as one of the most active propagators of the 'Russian World' in Belarus. Until the beginning of 2016 his texts were published on the Regnum portal, but he is no longer active there. **The historical portal *Zapadnaya Rus'* (www.zapadrus.su) is the most dynamic in the group of pro-Russian expert publicist projects which have existed for years. Igor Zelenkovsky, a member of the Union of Russian Writers, is in charge of this project. The editorial team's mission is to prove and propagate the idea that Belarus belongs historically to the great triune ethnos of Rus'.** Around 100 academics and publicists (mainly educated in history and/or philosophy) from Belarus and Russia co-operate with the portal.

IV. THE BELARUSIAN GOVERNMENT'S UNDECIDED POLICY WITH REGARD TO THE THREAT OF THE EXPANSION OF RUSSIAN SOFT POWER

1. The superficial Belarusisation vs. the Soviet paradigms in historical policy and state ideology

The vast catalogue of accusations Russian experts address to the Belarusian government may create the impression that there has been a policy of the Belarusisation of public life aimed at marginalising the Russian language and culture underway over the past few years in Belarus. Alyaksandr Lukashenka has been quoted as emphasising the importance of the Belarusian language and the need to bring up young people in a spirit of national awareness⁴⁷. Furthermore, the Russian media have also tracked the statements of all representatives of the Belarusian state apparatus (not only the most senior government officials) which even to the slightest degree refer to the issue of strengthening the role of the Belarusian language in the various aspects of the functioning of the state⁴⁸. **However, the truth is that Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime has for many years been conducting a policy of reducing the role of the Belarusian language and has maintained and even enhanced the scope of use of the Russian language.** The real share of the two national languages⁴⁹ in Belarusian public life can be best tracked using the example of data concerning school education on all levels. In the school year 1994–1995 (when Belarusian was the only official language) around 75% of first grade pupils received their education in the Belarusian language, while the share for all age groups was 40%. The referendum in 1995, when Russian was also granted official language status, marked the beginning of the tendency to reduce the share of the Belarusian language in school education. In the school year 2012–2013, already 83% of pupils received their education only in Russian, and 17% in Belarusian. One

⁴⁷ A fragment of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's speech at the 42nd Congress of the Belarusian Youth Union (Russian abbreviation: BRSM) held in January 2015 in Minsk provoked numerous comments. The Belarusian president emphasised that it is very important that young people should be brought up and educated in the spirit of awareness of cultural distinctness and know the Belarusian language. See: http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/42-oj-sjezd-belorusskogo-respublikanskogo-sojuza-molodezhi-10682/

⁴⁸ On 8 May 2016, the Regnum portal published an article by a Belarusian historian criticising the speech of Valentina Moroz, a lecturer at a school of the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs, who said that the role of the Belarusian language needed to be strengthened as a factor of the national security of Belarus. See: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2129569.html>

⁴⁹ Pursuant to Article 17 of the Belarusian constitution, Russian and Belarusian have the status of national languages.

year later, the proportions were even more disadvantageous, and reached 86% and 14%. This proves that the Belarusian government has for years accepted the intensifying (re-)Russification of school education. The natural consequences of this situation include a constant decrease in the number of grades and schools with Belarusian as the language of instruction, most of which are located in the provinces⁵⁰. The only (secondary) school to have Belarusian as the language of instruction in Minsk at present is the Yakub Kolas Humanities Lyceum, which functions illegally in the light of Belarusian law. **As a result of this tendency, in 2015 only 24% of secondary school graduates decided to take secondary-school final examinations in Belarusian, and 76% chose Russian (in 2007, this proportion was 42% against 58%)⁵¹.** Only in January 2015, most likely in part influenced by the developments in Ukraine, did the Belarusian government begin taking its first steps towards a real (and not only declared) strengthening of the Belarusian language's role in education. The newly appointed minister for education, Mikhail Zhuravkov, said that the subjects of the history and geography of Belarus should be taught only in Belarusian⁵². One year later it was announced that the number of hours of Belarusian and Russian language classes would be made equal, regardless of a school's language profile⁵³. However, there is no precise date that would allow an evaluation of the degree to which the changes have been implemented, which suggests that these are merely plans at the present stage.

Given this situation, it is difficult to disagree with the opinion commonly shared by independent Belarusian experts suggesting that the government is only going through the motions of promoting the Belarusian language and Belarusian culture. Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime, which is to a great extent based on the Soviet tradition, supports manifestations of Belarusianness in certain

⁵⁰ According to a survey commissioned by the Belarusian organisation Solidarity with Belarus Information Office (located in Warsaw, Poland), even data stating that 14% of pupils currently receive education in Belarusian could be overstated. According to results of the expert opinion, in fact some of the classes are taught in Russian anyway. This is partly an effect of the stereotype deeply rooted in people's mindsets that education received in the 'terminologically poorer' and 'small-town' Belarusian language is of lower quality. See: http://belarusinfofocus.info/by/p/6062obrazovanie_na_belorusskom_yazyke_ostaetsya_na_glubokoy_periferii

⁵¹ See: <http://krynica.info/ru/2016/02/22/tolko-14-shkolnikov-obuchayutsya-po-belorusski/>; <http://news.tut.by/society/484321.html>

⁵² See: <http://news.tut.by/society/432381.html>. The Belarusian minister's statement was commented on in an emotional way by the Russian media, see: <http://www.pravda.ru/news/world/formerussr/beloruussia/27-01-2015/1245781-belarus-0/>

⁵³ See: http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2016/2/11/ic_news_116_470653/

areas, mainly linked to: folklore, folk art, poetry and literature, as well as street names and the entire extensive sphere of information in public places, such as announcements in the Minsk underground and at railways and bus stations. In turn, Russian predominates in all other areas (including government agencies and other state administration entities) as the language used in communication with citizens. This policy strengthens the stereotypical distinction between Russian, which is viewed as the dominant language that is rich in diversified terminology, and Belarusian, which is believed to be a 'less developed' language and thus unsuitable for more extensive use. It seems that such cautious and simultaneously limited measures taken by the Belarusian government to support the Belarusian language on the one hand are an effect of the belief that Belarus belongs to the same civilisational area as Russia. On the other hand, this is linked to the experience from the early 1990s, which is still living in the memory of a great part of the Belarusian *nomenklatura* (and also the moderate section of the opposition), when Belarusian was suddenly granted the status of the only national language⁵⁴ and this provoked extremely negative reactions from a significant part of the post-Soviet establishment, who viewed this move as an act of marginalising a great part of Belarusian citizens who had no links with Belarusian culture.

It needs to be remembered that the participation of Belarusians in the so-called Great Patriotic War and (to a lesser extent) the achievements, mainly in the areas of education and industrialisation reached by the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic as part of the USSR form an essential part of the Belarusian regime's ideology, a kind of founding myth for the country. This means that the Belarusian government's language and historical policy must take these circumstances into account, maintaining the proper proportions, so as to ensure that the state ideology matches the reality. Hence the constant search for a compromise and equilibrium between the national and the post-Soviet (and at the same time pro-Russian) narratives visible in the government's actions, proof of which can be found in the example of Vitebsk, where a monument to Alexander Nevsky was erected in June 2016⁵⁵. This move was most likely intended to counterbalance the erection of

⁵⁴ The decision to this effect was passed in 1991 by the Belarusian parliament on the Belarusian People's Front's initiative. In a referendum held in 1995 most citizens of Belarus voted for granting equal status to Russian and Belarusian as national (official) languages. However, in fact this was the beginning of bringing back the dominance of the Russian language in almost all spheres of public life.

⁵⁵ See: <http://www.kp.by/online/news/2427633/>

the monument to Grand Duke Algirdas two years earlier in this city, which pro-Russian circles viewed as controversial and criticised⁵⁶. Furthermore, the introduction of modern multimedia and museum technology at the new Great Patriotic War Museum, which was solemnly opened in Minsk in 2014, was not accompanied by a change in the narrative. The heroism of the great majority of Belarusians (as part of the USSR) in the war against Nazi Germany is still the main message of the display, while more controversial issues, such as large-scale collaboration with the Nazi occupier and the animosity felt by a significant part of the residents of Belarus towards Soviet guerrillas have been almost completely overlooked⁵⁷. It is difficult to brand the policy of restoring and rebuilding monuments referring to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania adopted over the past few years as clearly anti-Russian, even though this is also criticised by Russia. This mainly concerns the castles in the western part of Belarus (Mir, Nesvizh, Lida) and also historic city centres (the Upper Town in Minsk). Although these objects strengthen the awareness of the presence of European elements in Belarusian history among the Belarusian public, they have not been used by the government to negate the tradition of the coexistence of Russians and Belarusians in the Russian Empire and then in the Soviet Union.

The examples presented above illustrate the extremely cautious and limited nature of the Belarusian government's policy aimed at strengthening the Belarusian language and culture. Some actions are mutually contradictory, which is a result of the need to maintain equilibrium between each country's need to develop its own typical identity and the awareness of respecting the cultural community of Belarus and Russia. Considering centuries-long traditions and the different potentials of the two nations, the Russian language and Russia's cultural achievements still clearly prevail. At present, we can only talk about a superficial Belarusisation of the political and social space in Belarus. This means that we are still witnessing an inept attempt to oppose the increasing expansion of the Russian civilisational offer branded as 'Russian World'.

⁵⁶ This is discussed in more detail in part II section 1 presenting the narrative of Russian experts concerning the Belarusian government's policy.

⁵⁷ The way issues linked to Poland are presented also raises serious reservations. Poland at the very beginning of the display is presented on a par with Italy as a Fascist state responsible for destabilising the situation in Europe in the 1930s. Meanwhile, the entry of Soviet troops on 17 September 1939 to the Second Polish Republic is presented as only "protection of local Belarusians and Ukrainians." It is also worth adding that a large Soviet flag is flying on the large museum building which occupies a prominent place in the city centre.

The Belarusian government's media policy is equally moderate and far from anti-Russian accents. **The government in Minsk, even though it is sensitive to the Kremlin's information policy, counteract it in a limited way, usually in cases when it directly criticises Lukashenka or undermines Belarus's position in the international arena.** On the other hand, it can be said that the Belarusian government either does not understand or consciously disregards the threats posed by the omnipresence of the Russian media in Belarus's information space. President Lukashenka does not officially undermine the legitimacy of the concept of building a common information space of the Union State of Russia and Belarus. Furthermore, given its small organisational and financial potential, the government is unable to reduce the advantage the Russian media has as a supplier of pop culture products. All Russian TV channels with national coverage are available **on the cable TV system in Belarus (people who want to have a satellite dish encounter administrative difficulties).** **Belarus re-broadcasts one TV channel in Russia, Belarus24. This situation is used by the Russian side, which is constantly building up its information assets. In a statement made for the national television in May 2016, Igor Buzovsky, the deputy head of the Belarusian Presidential Administration, who has already been quoted here, said that the dominance of Russian companies in the Belarusian information space was disturbing, and on this basis he pointed to the need to strengthen the potential of Belarusian TV production.** On the other hand, almost at the same time, during the meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Union State of Russia and Belarus in Mogilev on 12 May 2016, the Belarusian minister for information, Lilia Ananich, and her Russian counterpart approved an 'Action plan for 2016–2020 for creating a common media space'. Among its reasons for signing this document, the Belarusian side mentioned the need to exchange information and to coordinate the fight against extremism in the Internet⁵⁸.

The future of the media space is still an open issue. A secret service specialised in controlling the Internet space, the Operational-Analytical Centre under the President of the Republic of Belarus, which is also the administrator of the '.by' domain, operates in Belarus. One of the main state ideologists, Usevalad

⁵⁸ See: http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2016/05/12/ic_news_112_474821/ During the meeting of the Belarusian minister for information, Lilia Ananich, and the general director of Rossiya Segodnya agency on 7 April 2016 in Minsk, the Belarusian side emphasised that the increasing presence of the Russian media proved that the epoch of information wars between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation was over and that the two countries had become the focal point of information aggression observed in relations between the West and the East.

Yancheuski, is in charge of supervising the 'Bynet' and the development of the computerisation of the country. The government has interfered with Net content to a limited extent so far; no comprehensive blockings of websites for political reasons have been seen, and limited measures against people whose views are considered extremist have been taken. However, no such measures have been taken with regard to individuals representing pro-Russian views; the repressions have affected the circles promoting pro-Western and anti-regime views. The portals criticising the regime have also been hacked or blocked.

2. The illusion of safety – Belarus's attempts to counteract and block the activity of Russian soft power

The Belarusian government noticed the threat posed by the intensifying activity (in the context of the developments in Ukraine) of Russian and pro-Russian organisations in Belarus quite early. Alyaksandr Lukashenka, answering questions asked by Belarusian MPs⁵⁹ on 22 April 2014, firmly criticised the “idiots” who “create tension in our country” and “suggest that the Russian language is allegedly discriminated against”. He branded such statements as “criminal” and ordered the KGB “to treat such people as saboteurs”. At the same time, he expressed his surprise that one of the most active critics of the Belarusian government “has still not been banished from the country”⁶⁰. However, observations of the operation of these organisations in Belarus over the past few years do not indicate that Lukashenka's decisions have been fully carried out. **The Belarusian apparatus of repression, so experienced and effective in dealing with the pro-democratic opposition financed by the West, is surprisingly passive with regard to organisations propagating the 'Russian World'. No event held by any of these entities has been banned or obstructed by the government to date. Members of these organisations, unlike activists of Belarusian democratic forces and the third sector, have not encountered violence or arrests, not to mention court trials**⁶¹. Rare manifestations of firm actions have affected only selected individuals who are especially active either

⁵⁹ In the Belarusian authoritarian regime, questions addressed by MPs to the head of state are in principle a stage-managed imitation of public 'dialogue' and for this reason they are asked according to a previously agreed scenario.

⁶⁰ See: http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2014/04/22/ic_news_116_435065/; <http://nn.by/?c-ar&i=127176&lang=ru> Independent Belarusian experts and publicists agree that this concerned Viktor Gerashchenko, whose activity has been described in part III, section 3.

⁶¹ The last time Belarus saw a massive wave of repressions against organisations propagating the pro-Russian idea was in 1999, when measures were taken against the neo-Nazi paramilitary movement named Russian National Unity (Russian abbreviation RNE).

as publicists (revoking Kirill Averyanov's Belarusian citizenship) or as social activists (the dismissal of Viktor Gerashchenko)⁶². However, it needs to be noted that even these single acts of repression did not affect ethnic Russians⁶³ and did not end in the incarceration of these individuals, which is often the case with pro-Western critics of the regime.

Channelling the activity of individual organisations by introducing individuals totally loyal to the regime into their management structures is another measure that is worth noting in which the Belarusian government attempts to take control of Russian soft power. One example of such moves is the case of the Belarusian Cossacks; its present leader (i.e. chief ataman) is Mikalai Ulakhovich (a 'rival' of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the presidential election last year), who has the reputation of being a man totally controlled by the government. As mentioned before, the central command of this organisation has little influence on its local branches, so it is difficult to say if this method is effective (at least in this case). At the same time, there is no sufficient information that would allow the scope of these moves to be precisely determined. Some of them are most likely made on the level of the operational work of the Belarusian secret services. It can only be assumed that the Belarusian government at least monitors the activity of pro-Russian structures in its territory relatively effectively. However, there is no doubt that, in contrast to the effective, consistent and firm repressions applied to pro-Western organisations, the measures taken by the Belarusian security apparatus with regard to the propagators of the 'Russian World' have been indecisive and cautious, and have been used on a very limited scale. This has been happening regardless of Lukashenka's clear stance expressed, for example, in the statement quoted at the beginning of this section. This means that the Belarusian leader demonstrates resolve as regards this issue only on the level of rhetoric, while in fact his policy is slightly more cautious. This may be caused by at least three factors:

Firstly, even though the Belarusian government understands the threat posed by the increasing presence of the 'Russian World', it fears that a wave of repressions against pro-Russian organisations will drastically worsen its relations with Russia, thus provoking it to make aggressive moves.

⁶² Both of these aspects have been described in parts II and III of this report.

⁶³ With the sole exception of the Russian political analyst Andrey Suzdaltsev, who had his Belarusian residence permit revoked and was deported from Belarus due to "posing a threat to national security" in March 2006. Suzdaltsev was a well-known public critic of the Belarusian government's policy, especially in the context of Russian-Belarusian integration.

Secondly, the mechanisms, procedures and operational habits of the Belarusian security apparatus, which have developed over many years, cover basically only the structures which are pro-European and pro-democratically oriented and financed by the West. Minsk is unable to counteract the operation of pro-Russian structures in a way that would not negate its alliance with Russia, the idea of the integration of the two nations and of belonging to the same cultural and civilisational circle. This gives rise to another limitation: **the Belarusian government does not want to and, at the same time, is objectively unable to strengthen the natural counterbalance to Russian soft power, i.e. the Belarusian right-wing and national organisations. This would mean that Alyaksandr Lukashenka would have to open genuine dialogue with the Belarusian opposition who call into question the legal grounds of his power. A move of this kind in the regime's domestic policy would be too radical and difficult to control.**

Thirdly, the government is uncertain about the loyalty of the elites. **It seems that, given the long tradition of being part of a common state governed by Russia (the Russian Empire and then the USSR), the integration process of the two countries underway since the mid-1990s, strong bonds as political allies and in the economic and military sense, and the cultural proximity (which is, however, far from indistinguishability), it is extremely difficult to separate 'us' from 'them'.** The examples of the engagement of representatives of local administration and law enforcement agencies in the activity of pro-Russian organisations given in the previous sections are most likely a small fragment of the real picture of the situation. This problem is not limited only to the eastern districts of Belarus, but also to its two western districts: Grodno and Brest. In the case of Brest Oblast, other important factors are the fact that national identity is developed here to a lesser extent than in other parts of the country due to the strong presence of Polesia 'indigeneity', i.e. local identification on the frontier with Ukraine, and a large share of retired military officers and their families among the local population who are far from the Belarusian national idea.

V. AN ALLY OUT OF NECESSITY? THE ATTITUDE OF THE BELARUSIAN NOMENKLATURA AND LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES TO RUSSIA

One characteristic of Belarusian political life is that the president holds a monopoly on the official attitude towards Russia. His public statements are treated by representatives of the *nomenklatura*, state administration workers and state-controlled media outlets as the current interpretation of the state of bilateral relations with Russia. Opinions emphasising Belarus's loyalty to its ally prevail. However, statements criticising Russia can sometimes be heard, as well. These are usually made in response to current political developments or the condition of economic negotiations. Sometimes they are also expressions of the president's emotions, when he feels offended by criticism from Russian politicians. **This double speak towards Russia results from Lukashenka's principled approach to the issue of Belarus's sovereignty. He understands it as independence in domestic policy and autonomy as Russia's partner in the international arena where he has no obligation to unconditionally support all the goals of Russian foreign policy.** Determining the scope of this autonomy has been a constant element of the current political game with Russia, and also a manifestation of Minsk's fear of possible external interference with its domestic affairs. At the same time, Lukashenka represents a simplified approach to the 'Russian World' notion, treating it as merely a manifestation of the nationalist views of a section of the Russian elite who want to deprive Belarus of its status of an independent state or to cause its federalisation. In this context, it is worth quoting Lukashenka's interview for CNN on 31 March 2015. He said in the interview that many Russian politicians think in imperial terms and want to deprive Belarus of its independence. However, he, emphasised that President Putin had never come up with the proposal of incorporating Belarus into Russia, knowing that this would provoke strong resistance from the government in Minsk. Meanwhile, the 'Russian World', as the Russian government understands it, is an ideological concept and a long-term political strategy aimed at unifying all those who speak Russian and who see Russian culture as appealing and for whom Russia is the cultural and civilisational centre.

The Russian activity in this area shapes the views of the Belarusian *nomenklatura*. It strengthens their conviction that there is no alternative geopolitical choice as regards both security policy and economic relations. This also strengthens the belief that were Moscow to meet with strong defiance, the present shape of Belarusian sovereignty will be challenged. If this situation continues, the greater part of the Belarusian elite will become even more

passive, and if there is a possible serious political crisis, this will make it easier for Russia to influence the political scene in Belarus.

The periodical volatility and Minsk's nuance-based perception of relations with Moscow, however, do not result in durable revisions of Belarus's strategic choice. The Belarusian government unfailingly declares its support for the integration initiatives being implemented under Moscow's patronage in the Eurasian space, maintaining its strategic military alliance with Russia and positioning Belarus as a guarantor of Russian security. President Lukashenka simultaneously makes assurances that he is a staunch supporter of strengthening the Union State of Belarus and Russia, acknowledging that this formula allows Belarus to maintain the position of Russia's equal partner.

Loyalty of the Belarusian armed forces and law enforcement agencies to the president is one of the key guarantors of stability of the country's political system. For this reason, the fact that these structures are receptive to influence from Russia is a challenge to the Belarusian government. The fulfilment of bilateral commitments linked to the emergence of the common security area with Russia has undermined the regime's ability to completely independently shape the policy in this area. In the Belarusian reality this is limited to declaring concern about the increasing military presence of NATO and Russia close to Belarusian borders, and the lack of consent to the Russian plans to permanently deploy armed forces in Belarusian territory. This, however, does not affect the temporary presence of Russian armed forces in its territory as part of military exercises. Belarus's military security is closely linked to the strategic plans of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. The Belarusian army, given the need to comply with the interoperability requirement, is organised on the basis of the Russian model. As a result, any plans of modernising it are closely linked to the Russian vision of using it in a possible military operation. One consequence of close co-operation with Russia is the intensifying process of indoctrination of the personnel of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus. The indoctrination work is based on inculcating the two paradigms: the Belarusian army safeguards the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state and the constitutional order, and in alliance with Russia guarantees security of the Union State.

The Belarusian government has given assurances that the Belarusian armed forces will only be used in the case of aggression against Belarus or Russia, thus emphasising the defensive dimension of the alliance with its eastern neighbour. The new Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus, which was signed on

20 July by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, acknowledges the strategic role of military co-operation with Russia. New threats of ‘hybrid wars’ and ‘colour revolutions’ were added to it in response to the destabilisation of the situation in Ukraine, although it does not have a clearly anti-Russian character. One proof of this is the fact that the term ‘local war’ as well as other destabilising operations have been defined as actions organised by a foreign country with the intention to destabilise the present political system. The doctrine takes into account the possibility of using the armed forces of the Republic of Belarus when “other non-military means have been unsuccessfully applied” to repel external aggression or to neutralise a military conflict of an internal character. The announcement that a military doctrine of the Union State will also be developed on the basis of the military doctrines of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation also proves that the two countries have a common approach to the catalogue of threats. The document has no clear anti-NATO or anti-EU nature—it recognises the activity of military alliances as a threat to Belarusian security but also contains a declaration of its readiness to co-operate with NATO and the EU in the area of security in the region⁶⁴. The official interpretation of the defence strategy of the Belarusian state has been supplemented by the vast analytical report published in August 2016 by the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies entitled *Belarus in the context of the rivalry between Russia and NATO*⁶⁵. The authors of this report in a much more direct manner point to the real security threats Belarus will face in case Russia continues its policy of confronting the West. They suggest, for example, that Russia, having deployed its troops along the eastern frontier of the Republic of Belarus, may use them also for military operations in Belarusian territory. Meanwhile, Moscow is placing more and more pressure on Minsk in an attempt to convince it to become more engaged in its military actions in the region. Lukashenka’s stance on military security issues has been presented, for example, in his speech at the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus on 21 April 2016. He emphasised that Special Operations Forces and a territorial defence system had been established to counteract ‘hybrid wars’ and ‘colour revolutions’. He confirmed that Belarus’s defence system was part of the regional defence system of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation in the western strategic direction, and that the Belarusian government would strengthen its defence potential to make sure that the state was not defenceless in the case of a local armed conflict. This and similar statements from Lukashenka are often interpreted as an expression of his fear

⁶⁴ The text of the Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus: <http://www.pravo.by/main.aspx?guid=3871&p0=H11600412>

⁶⁵ For more information see: <http://csfps.by/files/files/belarus-russia-nato.pdf>

of aggression from Russia and a warning that any interference with domestic affairs that may lead to a destabilisation of the situation in Belarus will meet with military resistance.

The suggestions that Belarus will repel 'Russian aggression' are undermined by the practice of the operation of the Belarusian Armed Forces. The scenarios of military drills performed either jointly with Russian troops or by Belarusian troops alone are clearly anti-Western. This does not concern only the large exercises organised cyclically by Russia, such as *Zapad*, where the scenario envisages a joint grouping of armed forces of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus breaking a blockade of Kaliningrad. The routine drills performed two or three times a year by the Russian 76th Air Assault Division based in Pskov Oblast and the Belarusian 103rd Independent Airmobile Brigade from Vitebsk and the 38th Independent Airmobile Brigade from Brest also have an anti-Western character. The most recent drill took place in April 2016 at a training ground near Brest. The subject of the drill is the neutralisation of alien armed formations wanting to take control of strategic targets (e.g. airports). Staff command exercises of the Belarusian territorial defence were held on 13-17 June 2016 near Grodno and Brest. Troops representing the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the State Committee of Border Troops, the KGB, the Ministry for Emergency Situations and the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus took part in the exercises. The scenario envisaged actions being conducted which are aimed at ensuring control of the frontier with Poland in 'martial law' conditions, and the liquidation of saboteur and intelligence groups. 2,100 people took part in the exercises. A factor which makes it difficult to successfully curb the ideology affirming Russian imperialism is the weakness of educational work in militarised structures. It is based on the uncomplicated historical message which links the tradition of the Belarusian Armed Forces with the achievements of the Red Army⁶⁶.

The situation is quite different in the case of the agencies in charge of state security (the National Security Committee, the Presidential Security Service, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Analytical-Operational Centre, the Investigations Committee and the Financial Investigations Department of the State Control Committee). Officers, who are ethnic Russians or those openly representing

⁶⁶ The Belarusian Ministry of Defence returned to using the Russian terminology for naming combat units in August 2016. The term 'mobile brigades' has been replaced with 'air assault brigades'. The Ministry of Defence said that the official reason for the change was the need to improve soldiers' morale by making them aware of the fact that they serve in units whose combat traditions date back to Soviet times.

pro-Russian views were dismissed under the president's decision in 2005. No cases of dismissal of officers due to undercover collaboration with Russian state security agencies have been seen in these services. This, in addition to the staffing policy based on the adequate selection of candidates for the service, is to a great extent an effect to reduce the scale of education of Belarusian officers in the education system of the Russian secret services. As a result, President Lukashenka was able to independently decide on domestic security policy. On the other hand, as with the Armed Forces, co-operation with Russian services has not weakened in what Russia views as top priority areas. This concerns the integration of the system of protecting the border with EU member states, combating organised crime, terrorism and drug smuggling, and intelligence co-operation against NATO.

The ambivalent attitude demonstrated by state security agencies with regard to the operation of pro-Russian organisations in Belarus is still an open question. Representatives of Russian soft power are tolerated, but their activity is not backed by the Belarusian government despite attempts to gain this support. It is certainly monitored, but no open moves to curb their activity have thus far been observed. The Russian direction is a kind of taboo for Belarusian services which act very moderately even in situations of confrontation and try to resolve disputed issues on the working level in consultation with their Russian partner. One example can be seen in the official reaction from Belarusian law enforcement agencies to the information received in late March 2016 that Russian nationalist organisations trained Belarusian young people at military camps in Russia. The Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs, despite the extremely critical reaction from the state-controlled media (which claimed that such activity posed a direct threat to national security), limited its action to issuing a statement that action would be taken to check whether any possible crimes had been committed⁶⁷. Such behaviour may suggest that informal talks with the Russian counterpart have been launched to reduce the tension in bilateral relations.

The conflict in Ukraine made it clear to the Belarusian government how easily the Russian side may be willing to start destabilising actions in the territory of another state. It is difficult to judge how likely such a move is in the case of Belarus. However, the government in Minsk is certainly

⁶⁷ СБ: «Нацисты и фашисты не должны иметь доступа к белорусским детям», http://udf.by/news/main_news/140603-sb-nacisty-i-fashisty-ne-dolzny-imet-dostupa-k-belorusskim-detyam.html

concerned about the possibility of such a scenario. On 22 April 2016, the Lukashenka signed a law expanding criminal liability for propagating extremism and illegal participation in military operations in other countries (for example, forming an extremist organisation is punishable by three to seven years in prison, and participation in illegal armed formations outside the country is punishable by two to five years in prison). It is worth noting that the strictest penalties are envisaged for crimes linked to recruiting and training Belarusian citizens with the intention of using them in military operations in a different state, for which a custodial sentence of between five and ten years can be imposed⁶⁸. Belarusian law enforcement agencies have announced that 138 Belarusian citizens participating in the fighting in Ukraine on both sides of the conflict have been identified and that criminal proceedings in absentia have been launched against them⁶⁹. This proves that the government is concerned about the emergence of a group of Belarusian citizens who have combat experience and who might potentially be used in destabilising actions inside Belarus.

⁶⁸ О внесении дополнений и изменений в некоторые законы Республики Беларусь, <http://www.pravo.by/main.aspx?guid=12551&p0=H11600358&p1=1&p5=0>

⁶⁹ Фигурантами уголовных дел о наемничестве проходят 138 человек – КГБ Беларуси. Читать полностью: <http://www.interfax.by/news/belarus/1208254>

VI. RUSSIA IN THE BELARUSIAN STATE IDEOLOGY

Unlike with other post-Soviet countries, the structure of state agencies responsible for ideological work with the public has been preserved in Belarus. The agency in charge of ideological work is the Main Ideology Directorate of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Belarus. Since December 2013, it has been headed by Vsevolod Yanchevski, who is supervised by one of the deputy heads of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Belarus, Igor Buzovsky (former head of the Belarusian Republican Youth Movement, BRSM). The results of sounding out public sentiment are useful for developing the guidelines of ideological work and the Information and Analytical Centre under the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Belarus (established in 2006 and is directed by Alexey Derbin) plays an important role in this process. The methodological basis of ideological work is developed by the Academy of Public Administration under the aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus led by Marat Zhilinsky. All the directors of the institutions in charge of ideological work issues are representatives of the generation of the *nomenklatura* who received higher education in Belarus after Lukashenka had come to power, and loyalty to the system is the only guarantee of career development. This has a direct influence on the content of the ideological message focused on supporting the president's policy. They do not represent pro-Russian views and are focused on emphasising the independent role of the Belarusian state in shaping foreign policy. Ideological work is based mainly on speeches given by Lukashenka. The organisational form is a centralised structure of the agencies in charge of ideological work: specialised departments at state agencies and local administration offices.

The definition of the state ideology of the Republic of Belarus covers “the overall activity of the state apparatus led by the president aimed at ensuring favourable conditions for the development of the state, strengthen Belarusian statehood and consolidating the sense of national distinctness among the citizens of the Republic of Belarus”⁷⁰. Important elements of the state ideology include building the historical identity of Belarusians and highlighting their contribution to the development of Central and Eastern Europe. Emphasising the weight of state sovereignty and the right to choose one's own path of state development are the dominant elements of the message. According to the Programme for the Socio-Economic Development of the Republic of Belarus adopted on 17 June 2016, it is the task of the

⁷⁰ http://www.pac.by/dfiles/002324_960780_ir_gup_ochno.pdf

government and the public to ensure political stability, economic efficiency and public welfare. Relations with Russia are taken into account only in the context of co-operation as part of the Union State as a mechanism of integration in the CIS area, without granting any particular status to bilateral relations.

The issue of Russia appears to a limited extent in the narrative of Belarusian ideologists. Russia is described as a partner in integration processes and is not positioned as a state to which Belarus is unconditionally oriented. Nor is Russia the dominant factor in the historical context, either. The historical policy created by the government is based on taking historic facts into consideration selectively (references to the achievement of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Union of Lublin, being part of the Russian Empire, and the participation of Belarusians in the Great Patriotic War are present). It then uses this selection to support the thesis that the Belarusian nation has existed throughout the ages. However, this message does not contain a cultural context that would unambiguously connect Belarusians to the western or the eastern world—it declares tolerance for different religions, leaving the public on the crossroads of multicultural existence fastened by the brace of statehood. For this reason ‘Belarusianness’ is associated above all with identifying it with state sovereignty and emphasising that there is no alternative to the present political system. The president remains the central power, guaranteeing a peaceful development of the state⁷¹.

It is noticeable that Belarusian ideologists appreciate the issue of the Belarusian language and cultural distinctness. The deputy head of the Presidential Administration, Igor Buzovsky, who is in charge of ideological work, has emphasised that the Belarusian language and culture are “the insurance policy of Belarusian statehood”⁷². This positive signal has not yet caused a definite turn towards supporting the Belarusian language as a state-building factor counterbalancing the Russian language. The government, updating the state ideology concept on an ongoing basis, has chosen the formula of ‘soft Belarusisation’. In a desire to undermine the meaning of the symbols linked to the Russian historical narrative, the government have adapted them for their own needs. One example can be the replacement of the symbols used during the celebrations of the Victory Day on 9 May. The Russian orange-and-black Ribbon of Saint George has been replaced with a similar green-and-red one, symbolising the official Belarusian national colours, and the ‘Immortal

⁷¹ Владимир Мельник, *Основы идеологии белорусского государства*, Minsk 2012.

⁷² <http://www.belta.by/culture/view/buzovskij-jazyk-kulturu-pismennost-mozhno-nazvat-ohrannoj-gramotoj-belorusskoj-gosudarstvennosti-161570-2015/>

Regiment' march held as tribute to veterans of the Great Patriotic War has been renamed 'Belarus remembers'. **The Belarusian state ideology is thus not anti-Russian, although, as shown by the examples presented above, it is making it more difficult for Russia to make the view of the ethnic and cultural community of the two nations entrenched.**

The weaknesses of the Belarusian state ideology include: the archaic bureaucratized formula of the work of the state apparatus; rather unappealing forms of communicating information, reminiscent of Soviet times (for example, the formula of the meetings of lecturers from the ideological section with office and other workers); and its inconsistency resulting from the contradictory message. The idea of Belarusian sovereignty is being promoted, historical links with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania are emphasised, and the fact that Belarus belongs to Europe is highlighted. However, it is difficult to logically connect between these theses with the rhetoric of the dependence of state security on the strategic military alliance with Russia, Belarus's economic development combined with Russian-style Eurasian integration and the periodical criticism of Western states' policy (they are accused of carrying out plans to cause internal destabilisation in Belarus). At the same time, the Belarusian president contradicts himself in his typical way when referring to state ideology issues. He contradicted obvious facts in October 2014 with his statement that there was no ideology in Belarus but there were people dealing with ideology. He narrowed down ideological work to work comparable to that of political commissioners who are tasked with working with the public and interpreting current political affairs⁷³. During the same public address, without going into details he stated that it was necessary to develop an idea that would make the Belarusian nation distinct, that would not only emphasise patriotism and links with history but also, in particular, the participation of Belarusians in the Great Patriotic War and their desire to regain statehood⁷⁴.

The fact that the president formulates the key elements of the state ideology concept in an unclear manner results in the Belarusian ideological programme having an incoherent narrative. This is especially visible in the educational modules which present the interpretation of historical policy in the ideological work guidelines developed by the Academy of Public Administration under

⁷³ It was determined on the grounds of the presidential decree of 16 June 2003 on the operation of information and propaganda groups that every third Thursday in the month is the day of informing the public on the basis of guidelines from the Belarusian Presidential Administration.

⁷⁴ <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1858051.html>

the aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus. The topic 'Concept of Belarusian statehood as a component of the national state ideology' takes into consideration the following historical periods which had a decisive impact on the formation of the 'independent Belarusian ethnic community': the settlement of Slavs between the 6th and 9th centuries; the shaping of the old Russian ethnos between the 10th and the 13th centuries; the formation of the Belarusian, Little Russian (Ukrainian) and Great Russian (Russian) communities between the 13th and the 16th centuries; the development of the Belarusian self-identity between the 17th and the 19th centuries, laying the foundations for the existence of the Belarusian nation and its right of self-determination as a nation and a state. The contribution of the Belarusian ethnos to building the history of Kievan Rus', the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (viewed as the progenitor of the Belarusian state), the Republic of Poland and the Russian Empire is also taken into account. The characteristic critical approach to the attempt to set up the Belarusian People's Republic and the claim that the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was the first real Belarusian national state are proof of the attachment to the Soviet historiography matrix. The collapse of the USSR is treated without a shade of resentment as an event which enabled the country's independence to be strengthened, and at the same time the significance of the Union State of Belarus and Russia and the Eurasian Union project are emphasised since, according to the authors of the ideological programme, these projects will strengthen the "socio-cultural identification of the Belarusian public in the face of ever stronger globalisation"⁷⁵. Lukashenka's attachment to the concept of building relations with Russia resulted in the development of the ideology of defending and strengthening the Union State of Belarus and Russia at the time of his meeting with the Russian president on 8 June 2016. This appeal should be seen in political terms – it was a reaction to the increasingly aggressive information campaign in the Russian media suggesting that the Belarusian government had embarked upon an anti-Russian policy and that nationalist sentiments had been increasing in Belarus. Lukashenka's statement, offering Russia to take joint action to protect the 'brotherly relations' is his typical political gesture to calm down the Kremlin⁷⁶. From the social perspective, Lukashenka's appeal makes the dominant position of Russia as the only possible political and economic partner entrenched in the mindset of the Belarusian public.

⁷⁵ http://www.pac.by/dfiles/002324_960780_ir_gup_ochno.pdf

⁷⁶ Лукашенко: Союзное государство - самое продвинутое интеграционное объединение на постсоветском пространстве. <http://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-sojuznoe-gosudarstvo-samoe-prodvinutoe-integratsionnoe-objedinenie-na-postsovetskom-196759-2016/>

VII. THE DEPENDENCE STEREOTYPE – RUSSIA’S PLACE IN THE MINDSET OF THE BELARUSIAN PUBLIC

The long tradition of coexistence as part of one state managed by Russia along with cultural and linguistic proximity mean that the conviction of close bonds with Russia and Russians are deeply rooted in the minds of the Belarusian public. **Moscow (and for some time Petersburg), as part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, was treated by Belarusians as the centre where final strategic decisions were made and as a synonym of the ‘better’ metropolitan culture and education and, consequently, also of the opportunities for better wages and career development. In this way the centuries-long subordination to the stronger neighbour has given rise to a kind of ‘province complex’ among Belarusians, that their state is always dependent and therefore not quite self-reliant.** The 25-year period of independence has brought about some changes in the mindset of Belarusians as regards their perception both of themselves and their neighbours, including Russia. A sense of pride in having their own sovereign state has evidently emerged and strengthened, which is a natural process in the case of almost every post-Soviet republic. The stereotypical indicators of the distinctness (viewed as indicators of Belarus’s superiority) of the standards public life in Belarus and in Russia, which were popular in Soviet times, are now even more front-of-mind in people’s consciousness. These indicators are above all: good roads, clean and well-tended cities and villages, lower levels of alcohol abuse, violence and immorality, a lower scale of corruption, the absence of mafia structures and oligarchs, etc. However, as proven by many years of research conducted by Belarusian independent sociologists, Russia has almost always⁷⁷ been placed first as regards the geopolitical preferences of citizens of Belarus, which proves that, despite the scepticism outlined above, the greater part of Belarusian society has maintained its pro-Russian orientation.

The conflict in Ukraine has proven that the sentiments existing among Belarusians presented above are durable and that they are very receptive to the message from the Russian media which can now be recognised as the main factor forming the Belarusian public’s perception of Russian policy

⁷⁷ There were sporadic periods when the number of supporters of integration with the EU significantly grew in the polls, as for example in 2010, when relations between Minsk and the West were still thawing, and simultaneously tension in contacts with the Kremlin was growing. At those times the change in the tone of the Belarusian government’s propaganda affected the geopolitical orientation of Belarusian people. However, these changes were short-lived.

in the region. According to the most recent public opinion poll conducted in March by an independent Belarusian sociological research centre (these polls are conducted on a quarterly basis), 52.4% respondents would vote for unification with Russia (understood as an enhancement of integration) while only 24.8% would vote for integration with the EU. **As many as 73.9% of them believed that Russia was the nation whose culture was closest to them, and only 25.8% indicated nations of EU member states. Nevertheless, Belarusians are a little more sceptical about the ‘Russian World’ idea, as only 30.9% of respondents expressed support for this concept, while as many as 52.7% of them said that this issue was irrelevant.**

However, the answers to the questions directly concerning the developments in Ukraine provide the best illustration that helps understand the scale of the pro-Russian orientation among Belarusians. When asked about their opinion concerning the annexation of Crimea, 57.8% answered that this was an act of “restoring historical justice”. In turn, 51% of respondents believed that the Ukrainian government was to blame for the failure to implement the Minsk Accords, and only 20.8% said blamed the Russian government. On the other hand, it must be noted that most Belarusians strongly fear an escalation of tension in the Eastern European region. 45.4% expressed their concern that Belarus might be forced to participate in a possible confrontation between Russia and the West. The deployment of Russian military bases in Belarusian territory met with even lower support (22%), while as many as 42.9% of respondents had a clear negative attitude to this⁷⁸. Given this situation, Russian experts and publicists seem to fall some way short of the mark in their suggestions that anti-Russian sentiments are allegedly intensifying in Belarus and that this is coupled with a Belarusisation and Europeanisation of the Belarusian public. In turn, the fears of the consequences of a conflict between the ‘great powers’, typical of the Belarusian mentality, can only strengthen pro-Russian sentiments, since Russia is still viewed as the only power capable of influencing the situation in the post-Soviet area.

⁷⁸ See: <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=3960>. A survey conducted by another independent sociological research centre, NOVAK, led by Andrei Vardomatsky, revealed an even higher indicator of pro-Russian orientation among Belarusians. According to poll results published in January 2016, almost 70% respondents said that the union with Russia was the best solution for Belarus. See: Andrei Vardomatsky, ‘Adaptation without borders. Full-year 2015 results’ [in: *Belarus. Reality. Getting to the heart of the matter*, 20 January 2016 issue], p. 3.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS

1. None of the pro-Russian organisations operating in Belarus has attracted masses of members so far, and most of them are merely based on framework structures consisting of up to a dozen or so activists, the maximum being several hundred. In some cases these structures do not even have their own office or any movable assets. The organisations propagating the 'Russian World' are controlled and financed (via various channels and to a different extent) from one source and one centre of power—the Kremlin. Furthermore, their members are characterised by high discipline and ideological devotion (or at least the conviction that so-called Russian civilisation is superior) and the sense of representing the state which is dominant in the post-Soviet area. Therefore, these seemingly harmless and marginal pro-Russian organisations, if necessary – owing to intensified financing and support from the Russian media – may in a relatively short time increase the number of their members and take active measures in a direction that will serve Moscow's current interests.
2. The numerous publications by Russian experts and those Belarusian commentators who share (or copy) their views, with their radical form and not quite adequate (and thus manipulative) content, are not reflected in the Kremlin's official stance and are often (though not always) published on portals which have a marginal and extremist reputation. However, the striking similarity of the theses put forward in this text and of the narrative style prove that this is a consciously planned campaign coordinated by one centre, intended at creating a new concept of Russian policy towards Belarus. It needs to be emphasised that the present Russian narrative intentionally presents its own vision of reality in Belarus. The existence of anti-Russian sentiments among the Belarusian public and the 'Belarusisation' policy allegedly adopted by the Belarusian government have been intentionally exaggerated. A significant part (if not a majority) of these publications are financed from the Russian budget or by GONGOs. On top of that – and this seems to be the most important thing – the Russian narrative addressed to Belarus is already so well-developed that it may at any time be raised to the rank of Russian government propaganda and be used as an excuse for taking more or less assertive measures with regard to Minsk (from intensified pressure to a coup or military intervention). Their marginality is therefore only apparent.
3. Everything suggests that the Belarusian government has not developed a coherent strategy with regard to the 'Russian World' issue, and is still trying to find

its way in a situation which is new to it in many ways. Moreover, this is not only disorientation but also a growing sense of threat intensified by the inability to take firm action. One example of the Belarusian regime's weakness in dealing with this challenge is the situation in the area of information. The Belarusian government is unable (and will be unable in the coming future) to break the dominance of the Russian message in the Belarusian media space. Were there to be a threat from Russia, the loyalty of the Belarusian *nomenklatura* is a key problem which, apparently, has not been solved. It appears that Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the section of his inner circle who are pro-state oriented are aware of the fact that, given the complicated and not quite clear background, any radical measures taken with regard to the 'Russian World' might lay bare the weakness of the Belarusian state apparatus (which is otherwise so effective and relatively united in dealing with the culturally alien Western influence) and lead to a candidate who is more loyal to Moscow taking power in the country.

4. It is also unclear how the Belarusian public, most of whom declare a positive attitude to Russia, would react to a possible violent move from Moscow, especially considering the current situation of economic crisis and the resulting deterioration of living standards. It may turn out that pauperised and frustrated Belarusians will show indifference to independence, an abstract issue from the viewpoint of everyday life.
5. As a consequence of all this, the Belarusian government has adopted a 'wait and see' tactic, typical of the Belarusian mentality. Minsk has assumed that the anti-Belarusian moves from Russian organisations and, in particular, the experts' aggressive rhetoric has nothing in common with the decision-making level, i.e. the Kremlin. Given this assumption, the 'Russian World' is not viewed as a threat to Belarus but only as a 'voice in the discussion' on the further civilisational development of countries in the post-Soviet area. Furthermore, it is often argued that there is no rational reason whatsoever for initiating a conflict by Moscow since this would mean "discarding the project of integrating the two countries in which Russia has invested so much over so many years." Furthermore, some experts linked to the Belarusian government even claim that the tactic of integration and alliance with Russia adopted by Minsk many years ago protects Belarus's independence more effectively than in the case of Georgia or Ukraine, which chose a more independent and simultaneously pro-Western policy.
6. In contacts with Western diplomats, experts and journalists, it is characteristic of the stance that the Belarusian government currently adopts to avoid

the topic or downplay the issue of the Russian threat so as not to escalate tension and thus not provoke a situation where Belarus would become an object of rivalry between the EU, the USA and Russia. It seems that this is an effect of the fear that the destabilisation of the situation in the region, as was the case with Ukraine, may be repeated. The conflict in Ukraine is still the key psychological and also political factor affecting the behaviour not only of Belarusian elites but also the opposition and most of the public.

7. The Belarusian government, wishing to avoid a situation of confrontation and conflict, on the one hand tries to maintain good relations with Russia and participates in any forms of co-operation as Russia's ally. On the other hand, it cautiously emphasises Belarusian distinctness, which is aimed at building at least minimal but strong and clear distinctness as regards culture and identity.
8. The Russian moves presented in this report are doubtless aimed at building an infrastructure of pro-Russian social organisations in Belarus and preserving its dominance in the media space. It is still an open question what the goals of these moves are. The most likely minimum goal seems to be maintaining control of the Belarusian government which, being aware of the strong presence of the 'Russian World' in its territory, should conduct a loyal policy as Russia's ally while avoiding actions contrary to Moscow's interests. In turn, should Minsk's policy change leading, for example, to repressions being used against these structures, Russia may employ the instruments available to it to take more assertive measures ranging from a palace coup or initiating protests among selected social groups to a military intervention. The 'wait and see' tactic adopted by the Belarusian government proves that the Russian strategy is effective.

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