

The Weapons of Mass Information

In his Independence Day speech today, Alyaksandr Lukashenka described "information intervention" as the main danger to independence of Belarus. According to him, external enemies of the country deploy the weapons of mass information to manipulate public opinion in Belarus. He has a peculiar understanding of independence. For Lukashenka, independence of Belarus means the same as his personal independence from other institutions and forces.

At the military parade today, the authorities should have also demonstrated the modern tools which help them remain independent. At least three important things were missing – giant police trucks designed to transport detained protestors, plain-clothed security service agents who grab people in the streets and Internet warfare specialists, who block web sites and combat protesters on social networks. But these units were busy today fighting for independence of Belarus rulers from their people.

The police trucks were patiently waiting for their passengers who were delivered to them in hundreds by plain clothed security agents during the day. Men in black promptly detained those who looked suspicious or tried to clap. The state IT specialists were busy with denial of service attacks on independent internet media. They also succeeded in blocking all large Belarus protest groups on the Russian social networking service Vkontakte.

Despite their rhetoric and military parades, Belarusian authorities understand that controlling the spread of information is the key to their political survival. In today's Europe, using military force to unseat a ruler of

another country is very unlikely. Fortunately, these times are long gone. Even Russia stopped short of using its army to unseat Georgia's president Saakashvili in 2008. The main threat for autocratic rulers comes from their own people who need to be kept either loyal or at least fearful. Mass media is the main instrument to achieve that.

The protests organized by means of Internet only engaged a limited number of people. Most in Belarus gather their information from television and radio. Nothing can beat their hypnotic effect. State television and state radio are available in virtually every Belarusian flat. As a result, people learn political news from these easily available sources. They may also prefer not to watch the news at all or watch Russian channels, which are available in Belarusians a part of the standard package.

Russia often criticizes and even offends Belarus authorities. However, the official Minsk learned how to filter such broadcasts. This filtering is not always effective, which undermines the state's nearly complete TV and radio monopoly. Russian media have their own agenda. For instance, they like to hint that if Belarus replaces its national currency with the Russian ruble, the economic problems of Belarusians will soon be over. They do not mention that it will also be the end of the country's independence too. Many analysts agree that Russia wants to weaken Lukashenka, but not interested to unseat him.

The only alternative television channel for Belarusians is Poland-based Belsat. This satellite channel is primarily financed by the Polish Government, is structurally a part of the Polish public television but employs many Belarusian journalists. The channel's reach in Belarus is limited. Because of the lack of finance, they can only prepare less than an hour of daily Belarusian news coverage and cannot be watched without a satellite dish. Because of the economic crises, the satellite dish became a luxury unaffordable to

many in Belarus. Belsat still does not have live internet broadcast. An effective improvement of its reach could be trans-border broadcasts to cover at least large border towns such as Brest and Hrodna. However, this has not yet been done.

The role of Internet in Belarus is steadily increasing, but it is far from being the dominant source of information. According to a May survey of the Independent Institute for Sociological and Political Studies, 33% of the adult population in Belarus received information from the Internet and only 2.2% – from social networks. This 33% include those who never read any political news on Internet as well as strong supporters of the authorities. And the 2.2% using the social networks, even assuming if they all want to protest, cannot do much against the army of security agents. The state security services block social networks and fill Twitter and Facebook feeds with false and misleading information to disorient and intimidate protesters.

As a result, the authorities are winning the information battle and Internet does little to dilute the effect of the state propaganda machine. As long as state propaganda succeeds in making Belarusians either loyal or fearful – it will take a long time before real changes will take place. However, if the economic decline continues, even the most aggressive brainwashing and sophisticated security services may fail.

YK