

# Russian Media Attack Belarus: Minsk Remains on the Kremlin Radar

Several months after the October presidential elections in Belarus, conservative and Kremlin-affiliated Russian media and commentators have again turned their attention to Belarus.

They warn of an alleged rise in "Russophobia" in Belarus, and criticise the West for plotting to tear the country away from Russia. The last such attack took place in [late 2014](#) but then faded as the Belarusian presidential elections approached.

With Russia's economy in trouble and the regime of President Alexander Lukashenka seeking rapprochement with the West, Kremlin pressure on Belarus may increase.

## Belarus Targeted in Russia

Rather aggressive articles targeting Belarus have once again appeared on various Russian online media portals over the past few weeks: [Lenta.ru](#), an influential, state-controlled online outlet; [Sputnik i Pogrom](#), the well-known nationalistic website; and [Pravda](#), the once-powerful communist newspaper – to name just a few.

All texts contain a near-identical set of messages, indicating that they are part of a coordinated media campaign. As is usual, they all criticise the promotion of Belarusian traditions, language and culture in Belarus, and accuse Lukashenka's regime of being tolerant of "Nazis" and "Russophobes".

"Until recently, Belarusian nationalists were perceived as

marginal and were represented in society by a small layer of radical youth and intelligentsia" – writes Lenta.ru in reference to the Belarusian volunteers fighting in Ukraine. "However, the war in Donbass has changed everything. (...) The influence of youth [nationalistic extremist] organisations in Belarus is growing exponentially".

"Recently, elements of [nationalism] have actively started entering the official ideology of Belarus. This has first of all to do with the infiltration of petty local nationalists into government bodies and state-close organisations", writes Sputnik i Pogrom.

Some articles go as far as painting a picture of repression against Russian-speakers in Belarus

Some articles go as far as painting a picture of repression against Russian-speakers in Belarus. This is an absurd accusation given that it is the Belarusian language that remains seriously discriminated against in Belarus. Public life in Belarus continues to be dominated by [Russian culture](#) and [Russian language](#).

Russian nationalist groups, including paramilitary cossack organisations, [enjoy loyalty](#) from Belarusian state officials and the Russian Orthodox Church, which is the largest religious organisation in Belarus. Most of the articles also criticise Lukashenka's alleged turn to the West and warn Belarus of a scenario of civil unrest like that which Ukraine has faced.

Offline, Belarus-related activity in Russia has increased as well. In Moscow, a conference called BeloRusskiy Dialog took place on January 26, featuring a number of Russian nationalists and Kremlin-affiliated experts, along with a few members of the moderate Belarusian opposition. Three more such conferences are planned for later this year.

The press release summarising the results of the BeloRusskiy Dialog conference states that "The attempts (...) to isolate Russia from political processes in Belarus and its international relations carry serious threats to social economic and political stability in Belarus ... In parts of Belarusian society, anti-Russian sentiment is growing; there is a widespread ban on citizens educated in Russia or those with positive feelings towards Russia working in Belarusian state bodies".

"By Russians we mean the triuny of Great Russians, Little Russians (Ukrainians) and Byelorussians"

Just a day earlier on January 25 a group of influential Russian nationalist leaders and writers created a political alliance. "In the future, we must direct our policy towards reunification of the Russian people within one state. By Russians we mean the triuny of Great Russians, Little Russians (Ukrainians) and Byelorussians", [wrote](#) one of the members of the alliance when describing its priorities.

## **Shrinking resources change Kremlin's international agenda**

After a rapid decline in oil prices and exacerbated by Western sanctions, the Russian economy now faces problems which it has not faced since the crisis of 1998, if not since the late 1980s. Economic difficulties have already caused some social unrest – from striking truck drivers to protesting foreign currency mortgage holders.

Russia has therefore adjusted its international activity. By involving high-ranking personalities like Vladislav Surkov and Boris Gryzlov, it is showing serious interest in the

fulfilment of the Minsk Agreements to partially lift Western sanctions against Russia.

On the other hand, Russia is not the only one in economic trouble. Over the past decades, Lukashenka's regime in Belarus has been heavily [dependent](#) on Russian economic support. In the coming years, this help is likely to disappear. This will weaken Lukashenka's authority.

As Russia's resources became more scarce Lukashenka is turning to the West

Belarus needs external economic support and is currently in talks with both the IMF and Russia to receive loans. As Russia's resources became more scarce, it is to the West that Lukashenka is more and more actively looking for help.

Trading loyalty to Russia against economic benefits is what Moscow wants to prevent Lukashenka from doing. The public discussion of a threat of a Ukraine-like scenario for Belarus might therefore be a warning message to Lukashenka from conservative groups in the Kremlin.

## **Putin's rating and the imaginary Western threat to Belarus**

The Russian media for several years painted a picture of a threat from phantomic Western-sponsored enemies to Ukraine and its Russian speaking population. After that, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass followed. Now the same picture is being painted of Belarus.

Following the annexation of Crimea and the wider confrontation with the West, Russian President Vladimir Putin's approval

ratings in Russia skyrocketed from 45 per cent in November 2013 to 87 per cent in November 2015. A "rescue" of Belarus from a phantomic Western threat might help boost Putin's public support once again, should his ratings fall because of economic problems.

Whether the benefits of unfriendly actions against Belarus will prevail over their costs for the Kremlin is not yet clear. Moscow is likely to have several scenarios on the table and will act depending on the situation.

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## **Criticism of Russia, Alexievich, Belarusians in Antarctica – State Press Digest**

*Belarus Digest launches a regular series of publications reviewing Belarusian state newspapers.*

In the first publication of the series, Belarus has taken further steps to confirm its independence vis-a-vis Russia. Pro-government experts in Minsk have criticised the Russian elite for increased nationalism.

This rhetoric sees Belarus as an integral part of the Russian space. At the same time, a pro-Russian journalist stated that Svetlana Alexievich got her Nobel prize due to the support of the West for her anti-Putin rhetoric.

Belarus has expanded its presence globally. Minsk hosts a high level meeting of the International Electrotechnical Commission. This organisation gathers leading businesses and experts in this sphere. The first Belarusian station in Antarctica will be constructed by 2016 and provided Belarus with access to this Continent. It will allow Belarus to engage in scientific research.

At Lake Baikal there remains a Belarusian village, which while thousands of kilometres from Belarus still retains Belarus's unique culture. All of this and more in this edition of State Press Digest.

[Pro-government experts criticise Russia.](#) *Belarus Segodnya*, the largest national newspaper, analyses pro-government experts' comments on the development of Belarus after the 2015 presidential elections and how the international political and economic situation impacts Belarus.

Director of the Centre for European Integration Jury Šaŭcoŭ argues that because of the new geopolitical situation the West stopped supporting 'radical nationalists' in Belarus. The EU realised that a strong authoritative regime in Belarus curbs radical and destructive forces. He thinks that the Ukrainian scenario is impossible under these circumstances, and moreover, Belarus is a bridge between the two poles of Europe and Russia.

The West rejected colour revolutions as a means of regime change, but still wants Belarus to establish western standards of political and social order

The analyst at the pro-government Cytadel think-tank Aliaksandr Špakoŭski also says that the West has changed its strategy in Belarus. The West rejected colour revolutions as a means of regime change, but still wants Belarus to establish western standards of political and social order. The West will seek to achieve this through engagement with Belarusian

society and the political leadership. it will try to integrate Belarus into its sphere of influence. However, Špakoŭski also accuses Russia of a growing nationalist hostility towards Belarus and its position on Ukraine. He argues that Belarus should preserve armed neutrality towards both conflicting neighbours.

According to Ihar Marzaliuk, MP and a famous historian, Belarus will never be a satellite of Russia, although Russia was and currently remains a strategic partner of Belarus. "We are interested in integration with Russia economically, socially and militarily, but this should be a union of equal sovereign states," the expert says.

**Authorities organise youth debates.** The newspaper *Žyccio Prydźvinnia* reports on the youth project Open Debates. This was organised by the Ideology Department of Viciebsk district executive, the Belaja Ruś and BRSM GoNGOs and government-controlled trade unions before the elections. Schoolchildren, students and soldiers were divided into teams to debate political issues.

The organisers say they want to develop political and civil culture among Belarusian youth. They want to teach them to promote their views and see elections as a mechanism of influencing the government. The main reason behind it was perhaps to secure a high turnout among the young, but the authorities apparently started to understand the importance of civil discussion.

**Nobel prize for Russophobia?** In the article "Was the Nobel prize awarded to the right person?" *Soyuznoe Veche*, the newspaper of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Belarus-Russia Union, takes a critical stance towards Svetlana Alexievich's Nobel prize.



According to the article's author,  
the West wants to hurt Russia.

By awarding the prize before the presidential elections it aimed to help the Belarusian opposition. These are the opponents of Belarus-Russia Union State and so it was an attack on Russia too. The author concludes that the politicisation of the award will hang over the writer for the rest of her life despite the fine quality of her work. Meanwhile, [Vecherniy Brest](#) (Evening Brest) reports that Alexievich's books are practically absent in Brest's bookstores. However, after the news on the award people immediately rushed to buy her books.

[Belarusians in Antarctica.](#) *Soyuznoe Veche* continues with a piece about the construction of the first Belarusian station in the Antarctic. The station is due to be constructed at the start of 2016. It will be transported to the South Pole on a Russian ship and will be placed on the spot called Hara Viačerniaja (Evening Mountain). The Head of the National Centre for Polar Studies, Alieh Snycin, says that building Belarus's own station is a matter of national prestige.

Importantly, to receive the status of a participant of the international agreement on the Antarctic, Belarus has to fulfil a number of conditions. One of them is the building of a station. Antarctica contains huge reserves of hydrocarbons and other treasures, which Belarus hopes to get a piece of.

[High Level Meeting of Electronic Experts in Minsk.](#) On 5-16 October Minsk hosted the 79th General Meeting of the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) in Minsk with 1,500 delegates. This was reported by *Zviazda* daily. The IEC is a worldwide noncommercial organisation which produces international standards for the free movement of electronic goods.

The meeting also serves as a major business forum in the



field, which gathers representatives of leading companies in electronics, IT, and energy. For Belarus it became a rare opportunity to demonstrate its potential for investments, improve its image abroad and promote Belarusian production.



[Belarusian traditions in Eastern Siberia.](#) *Holas Radzimy* newspaper writes about the Dažynki harvest festival in the village Turheneŭka located in the Irkutsk region of Russian Siberia, near Lake Baikal. Although the region is largely inhabited by ethnic Buryats, this Belarusian vilage, which was

founded in 1909, is similar to other settlements near Lake Baikal, which exist even today.

Local Belarusians preserve their traditions and rites. The villagers perform traditional folk songs and dances. A group of producers for the Belarusian ONT TV channel visited the festival to as a part of a series filming people who retain their identity far away from Bealrus. According to the 2010 Russian census, currently about 8,000 Belarusians live in the Irkutsk region.

[Alternative cinema comes to Minsk.](#) *Zviazda* newspaper is advertising the film festival Bulbamovie ('Potato-movie'), which will be held in Warsaw, Cracow and for the first time in Minsk. The fact that the festival is advertised in the state press and will be held in Minsk looks at the vert least unusual.

The festival has long been working as a free site for alternative Belarusian cinema with movies often critical to Belarus's political reality. The state has a monopoly on film production and during Lukashenka's rule the state cinema has largely made films based on Soviet patriotism and World War II episodes.

The State Digest is based on review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.