INFORMATION AND CYBER RESILIENCE IN BELARUS

Five years ago, information resilience was named as a core element of national and international defense. Within the last five years we have been witnessing a festival of fake news and disinformation around the world, mastering our skills on finding trustful sources of information and individual journalists whose words we can trust. On the governmental level, however, the leaders were supposed to take measures and actions to build national information and cyber resilience systems to make the digital environment more trusted and secured. This article highlights the worst practices of resilience that the Belarusian government has implemented, while providing an overview of Belarus' media setting in light of the post-electoral rallies.

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T he presidential election in Belarus was held on 9 August 2020. At the start of the presidential campaign there were three politically viable competitors to the active president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, who also proclaimed his participation in the elections. These candidates were:

- Mr. Viktar Babaryka: philanthropist; patron of Belarusian art, literature, and culture; former head of one of the leading banks in Belarus, Belgazprombank (owned by Russia's Gazprom and Gazprombank)
- Mr. Sergei Tikhanovsky: YouTuber and vlogger
- Mr. Valery Tsepkalo: founder of Belarus Hi-Tech Park; former Ambassador of Belarus to the US

All of them were denied the chance to take part in the elections. Mr. Babaryka and Mr. Tikhanovsky were accused for alleged crimes, imprisoned, and later on considered by the international community as "political prisoners." As for Mr. Tsepkalo, he received alleged threats of prosecution by the prosecutor's office, but managed to escape the arrest by leaving the country.

Ultimately, besides Mr. Lukashenko, four different candidates took part in the election. They were:

- Mr. Siarhei Cherachen: Chairman of Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly
- Ms. Hanna Kanapatskaya: MP (2016-2019)
- Mr. Andrey Dmitriyeu: Co-chairman of the political movement "Tell the Truth"
- Ms. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: Wife of Sergei Tikhanovsky (not politically affiliated and self-nominated)

Ms. Tsikhanouskaya—called in some media as an "overnight candidate"—proclaimed three main goals for her program: conduct free presidential elections within six months (she would not take part in it), release political prisoners, and end the regime of Lukashenko. Genuinely, she became the new and consolidated face of Belarusian opposition. The official results of the elections gave 80.10 percent to Alexander Lukashenko and, to Tsikhanouskaya, 10.12 percent.[1] After the results of the elections were announced, Tsikhanouskaya was threatened by the ruling regime, and with the assistance of the Lithuanian government, exited Belarus. Afterwards, she addressed the international community to recognize her as the winner of the

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[1] "Results of the presidential election in Belarus on August 9," *Statista*, 2020, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1147363/belarus-presidential-election-results/

presidential elections and established the Coordination Council to organize the peaceful transfer of power from Lukashenko.

From the day the official results of the elections were announced, the situation in Belarus started to dramatically deteriorate due to massive protests and brutal repressions. The European Parliament rejected the official results of the elections due to the "large-scale electoral fraud in favor of the incumbent Alexander Lukashenko,"[2] and recognized the established Coordination Council as an "interim representation of the people demanding democratic change."[3] Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Germany, Bulgaria, and Czech Republic[4] recalled their ambassadors from Belarus for consultations. On 10 October 2020, only the ambassadors of Italy and Austria were continuing to perform their responsibilities within the country.[5]

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The country for now is in a deep political and economic crisis. Moreover, the events that happened within the last two months pointed out many problems, such as national and self-identification, weakness of civil society, difficulties in media, and resilience, that were lacking particular attention.

Silencing the Media

Every foreign journalist working on Belarus or any Belarusian journalist working in a foreign media agency in Belarus needs to have press credentials confirmed by the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is not possible to legally work as a journalist without the accreditation. On 1 September 2020, it was confirmed that 60 national journalists[6] were arrested and 19 foreign journalists'[7] press credentials were revoked in August only. The government changed the procedure of acquiring press credentials

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[2] European Parliament, "Joint motion for a resolution on the situation in Belarus," 15 September 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2020-0271_EN.html

[3] European Parliament, "Joint Motion."

[4] "Slovakia, Czechia and Bulgaria to recall its ambassadors from Belarus," *BelarusFeed*, 8 October 2020, https://belarusfeed.com/slovakia-czechia-bulgaria-recall-ambassadors-belarus/

[5] "В Минске остались послы только двух стран ЕС — Австрии и Италии [Ambassadors of only two EU countries - Austria and Italy remained in Minsk]" *Tut.By*, 10 October 2020, https://news.tut.by/economics/703556.html

[6] RSF, "Belarus: Many Journalists Arrested, Foreign Media Stripped of Accreditation | Reporters without Borders," 1 September 2020, https://rsf.org/en/news/belarus-many-journalists-arrested-foreign-media-stripped-accreditation.

[7] RSF, "Belarus."

for foreign journalists, and put new rules into force as of October 2020. The entire procedure of receiving a temporary press credential card will take from 5 to 30 days, whereas for a permanent card, this would be between 30 to 60 days. This means that the situation and events in Belarus will receive limited international media coverage outside of the country in October-November due to the lack of international journalists. The government justifies these restrictions by referring to the document called "Framework of Information Security in the Republic of Belarus,"[8] particularly to the "Information Sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus."[9]

In total, from the election day on 9 August 2020 to 10 October 2020, there were 277 local and international journalists detained in Belarus.[10]

According to the 2020 World Press Freedom Index prepared by Reporters Without Borders, Belarus ranks 153 among 180 countries.[11] The low score was given due to the total control over national TV channels (there are no private TV channels in Belarus), independent media outlets being forced to leave the country (e.g., Belsat, a Polish TV channel that broadcasts in Belarusian and is co-funded by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and the threats and detainments that journalists face. Moreover, the government had banned three newspapers between 1997 and 2006.[12] There were also attempts in 2011 to block access to the newspapers *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaya Vola* by a judicial decision, but was unsuccessful due to heavy international pressure. Recently, in September 2020, the Ministry of Information filed a lawsuit to the Economic Court against Tut.by[13]—an independent news and media portal.

Attempts of a Media Coup

The state-run media in Belarus is still massively using Soviet-style propagandistic

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8 "Постановление Совета Безопасности Республики Беларусь № 1 от 18 Марта 2019 г. О Концепции информационной безопасности Республики Беларусь [About the Concept of Information Security of the Republic of Belarus]," http://president.gov.by/ru/official_documents_ru/view/postanovlenie-soveta-bezopasnosti-respubliki-belarus-1-ot-18-marta-2019-g-20703/

9 Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, "Сообщение Министерства иностранных дел «О возобновлении работы комиссии по вопросам аккредитации журналистов иностранных СМИ». Министерство иностранных дел [Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the resumption of the work of the commission on accreditation of foreign media journalists]," 2 October 2020, https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/edfd3a91aec30891.html

10 "Belarus: At Least 40 Journalists Detained on Sunday," *European Federation of Journalists*, 11 October 2020, https://doi.org/10/11/belarus-at-least-40-journalists-detained-on-sunday/

11 RSF, "2020 World Press Freedom Index," https://rsf.org/en/ranking

12 Decision of the High Economic Court made on 24/11/1997 to liquidate the newspaper *Svaboda*; Decision of the High Economic Court made on 12/11/200 to liquidate the newspaper *Pagonia*; Decision of the High Economic Court made in 2006 to liquidate the newspaper *Zgoda*.

13 "Суд приостановил рассмотрение иска Мининформа о лишении TUT.BY статуса СМИ — портал обжалует предупреждения [The court suspended the consideration of the claim of the Ministry of Information about the deprivation of TUT.BY media status - the portal will appeal the warnings]," *Tut.By*, 8 October 2020, https://news.tut.by/society/703156.html

techniques. When the protests started after the elections, state media, both printed and TV, avoided publicizing it. Even if they did feature the protests, the media commented they were inspired and ruled by foreign countries like the Czech Republic, Poland, and Lithuania—further distressing troubled political and diplomatic relations with these countries. On 17 August, the wave of countrywide strikes started. The main companies that supported the national economy, such as the potassium company Belaruskali, and other companies like Minsk Tractor Works, Minsk Automobile Works, and BMZ Steel Works, stopped working. Dozens of journalists, reporters, cameramen, and technicians working for the state-owned media company, National State Television and Radio Company, resigned in solidarity with the protestors. There were no broadcasts on national TV channels, except for sport news.

> ❝*The state-run media in Belarus is still massively using Soviet-style propagandistic techniques.*❞

The National State Television and Radio Company of Belarus is the main state-owned media company. The company operates with six TV channels (five of them distribute information nationally, and only one internationally), and two smaller state-run channels: ONT (All National TV) and STB (Capital TV). These two channels produce only their news content; the rest of the content is reproduced from Russian media. When reporters started to resign from these channels, President Lukashenko said he asked Russians to "send to Belarus two-three groups of Russian journalists" to teach younger Belarusian journalists "how to work."[14] A few days later, Russian journalists, most of whom were from the state-controlled and funded international television network RT, arrived in Belarus and were publically acknowledged by President Lukashenko.[15] 32 Russian journalists from RT and Ruptly (the Berlin-based division of RT that specializes in video content) worked in Belarus throughout September.[16] There were also Russian journalists from the Russian state-owned TV channel run by the Russian Ministry of Defence—Zvezda, All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK)—the bigger brother of the National State Television and Radio Company of Belarus, and NTV, controlled by Gazprom Media,

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[14] РБК. "Как стало работать белорусское телевидение после забастовки сотрудников, [How Belarusian TV began to work after the strike of employees- How RT helped BT after Lukashenka's request]," *RBC*, 31 August 2020, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/31/08/2020/5f44ce2e9a794742baeada1b

[15] на русском. "Лукашенко прокомментировал своё выступление в Гродно, [Lukashenko commented on his speech in Grodno]," *RT*, 22 August 2020, https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/776289-lukashenko-rossiya-belorussiya

[16] "Что стало с госканалами Беларуси после приезда российских журналистов — и при чём тут Гуцериев, [What happened to the state channels of Belarus after the arrival of Russian journalists - and what does Gutseriev have to do with it]," *KYKY*, 11 September 2020, https://kyky.org/pain/chto-stalo-s-goskanalami-belarusi-posle-priezda-rossiyskih-zhurnalistov-i-prichyom-tut-gutseriev

the largest Russian media holding and subsidiary of the Russian gas company. It is difficult to say Belarusian TV channels started to cover the events differently, as their news TV programs were already highly biased even before the journalists' arrival. Therefore, their presence did not dramatically affect the propagandist agenda. Moreover, there was news[17] that some technicians of the main TV company were replaced by specialists working for RT. The director of RT, Ms. Margarita Simonyan, disposed of this fact, stated that the RT staff is not working at Belarusian TV channels, but can be delegated, if they were "nicely asked."[18]

On 10 October 2020, the head of the multinational television broadcaster MIR,[19] the company that broadcasts in Russian for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—a regional intergovernmental organization of nine post-Soviet republics in Eurasia—announced the reform of Belarusian journalism. Mr. Vladimir Pertsov accused Belarusian media as being "toothless",[20] and it was said that from now on, national media should focus on the largest media agencies and in particular, local newspapers that previously focused on neighborhood news and events, should be "a news donor for international media."[21] A day before, the president had announced the need to create a "powerful core" that will be able to defend the national informational sovereignty "sharply, completely, and proactively."[22]

Belarusian Cyber Partisans

In its long history of protest movements, the Belarusian cyberspace experienced serious disruptions for the first time. Anonymous groups of hacktivists called "Cyber Partisans of Belarus"[23] successfully compromised dozens of government web-sources throughout September. At the end of the month, the Partisans hacked the live broadcasting of the leading national TV channel Belarus 1 and transmitted the protests that were taking place in Minsk. They left the message on the web page of the National

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[17] Konstantin Prydybaylo, "Лукашэнка сказаў, што на БТ журналісты «чакалі рэвалюцыі», і падзякаваў Russia Today за дапамогу [Lukashenka said that journalists on BT were ‹waiting for a revolution› and thanked Russia Today for its help]," *Svaboda*, 1 September 2020, https://www.svaboda.org/a/30815547.html

[18] "Симоньян назвала условие работы сотрудников RT на гостелевидении Белоруссии [Simonyan called the working conditions of RT employees on the state television of Belarus]" *Govorit Moskva*, 19 August 2020, https://govoritmoskva.ru/news/243621/

[19] Abbreviated from Russian: International Television and Radio Company.

[20] "На БТ рассказали, как районные газеты победят «весь окружающий мир [BT told how regional newspapers will defeat ‹the whole world around']," *The Village* Беларусь, https://www.the-village.me/village/city/architecture/285113-rayonka-vperde

[21] The Village Беларусь, "regional newspapers."

[22] Елена Приходько. "Лукашенко - о СМИ: «Журналистика должна, наконец, перестать быть «памяркоўнай», Lukashenka - on the media: 'Journalism should finally stop being a 'pamyarkoŭnay']," *kp.by*, 9 October 2020, https://www.kp.by/online/news/4041556/

[23] "В Беларуси 'кибер-партизаны' взломали эфир государственных телеканалов [In Belarus ‹cyber partisans› hacked the air of state TV channels]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 26 September 2020, https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/09/26/7267842/

State Television and Radio Company of Belarus that said: "If you don't want to show the truth to the people, we will do it."[24] Among other TV channels, the web pages of the Office of Presidential Affairs, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Chamber of Industry and Commerce, Ministry of Taxes and Levies, Minsk Police Department, the Office of the Prosecutor General, and many other institutions' systems were compromised. Even the payment system at the Belarusian national bank collapsed.[25]

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A feature of the Belarusian protests has been the masked identity of police officers. If anyone is injured in consequence of the actions of police officers, it is impossible to bring justice to the case due to the standard or three-hole balaclavas officers wear. The Partisans announced the use of OSSINT[26] technology to deanonymize the riot police and secret police officers who severely beat protestors during marches. Game developer and artist, Andrew Maximov, revealed a YouTube video where he demonstrated how artificial intelligence restores covered faces on photos, while calling on the police officers in Belarus to stop executing violent orders.[27] According to their manifesto, the Cyber Partisans aim to end banditry and terrorism in Belarus, and restore the rule of law[28] by penetrating into classified government IT systems, searching for materials that concern the interests of officials and law enforcement agencies, and then disclosing them. In interviews, the Partisans mention they are aware that Russian IT experts might be invited (as Russian journalists were) to respond to the breach in the Belarusian governmental cyberspace and private data of police officers.[29]

There are three public notions about the Partisans.[30] First, that their existence is the regime's provocation, since the government is constantly finding reasons to restrict

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[24] Ukrayinska Pravda, "Cyber partisans hacked the air."

[25] "How a Belarus Cyber Army Is Taking on Lukashenko and His Goons," *The Independent*, 5 October 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/belarus-lukashenko-protests-cyber-attacks-minsk-b807184.html

[26] Open Source Social Network Technology.

[27] "Искусственный интеллект снимает маски с омона / AI Unmasks Secret Police," YouTube Video, 5:05, 24 September 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAJIrnphTFg&ab_channel=AndrewMaximov

[28] "'Манифест.' Белоруский IT Фрон ['We are ready to fight.'IT-front of Belarus publishes uncompromising manifesto]," *KyKy*, 29 September 2020, https://kyky.org/news/my-gotovy-borotsya-it-front-belarusi-opublikoval-beskompromissnyy-manifest

[29] Sergey Kozlovsky, "Киберпартизаны: что известно о хакерах, которые хотят разрушить режим Лукашенко [Cyber partisans: what is known about hackers who want to destroy Lukashenka's regime]," *BBC News*, 8 October 2020, https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-54425325

[30] Tamara Kolos, "Что известно про «киберпартизан Беларуси»? Поговорили со специалистами по инфобезопасности [What is known about the "cyber partisans of Belarus'? We talked with information security specialists]," *42.Tut.By*, 16 September 2020, https://42.tut.by/700656

access to the Internet in Belarus. Second, that this is a group of highly professional yet unstructured IT enthusiasts who rather act unpredictable to carry out their agenda. Third, that they are financed by some foreign government or organization. The real impact of their activity that they display the tremendously low level of information security and resilience in Belarus, as well as governmental workers' lack of computer literacy, who have been opening phishing emails with malware attachments from the Partisans.

Internet Blackouts

The protests in Belarus have come with Internet shutdowns in zones where there are social unrest and gatherings. The preliminary idea of weak Internet connectivity is to reduce access to social media, forestall people from exchanging messages about their locations, and to prevent videos from being posted online. IT activists have been sharing detailed tips and tricks on how to use tools to bypass the restricted access to some web-pages by using VPN, TOR browser, proxy-servers, and other tools with the public. However, weak Internet connection will also prevent journalists from accessing these videos and, as a result, performing their duty to promptly inform their editorial team and publish news about the happenings.

President Lukashenko said that the problems with the Internet were caused by foreign countries, and not by the Belarusian government.[31] The government-run leading telecommunication company Beltelecom declared in a statement in August that their servers were under multiple foreign cyberattacks that caused the lost connectivity.[32] The history of shutting down the Internet in Belarus during protests goes back to 2006, and reoccurred in 2010, 2015, and in 2020 during the last presidential elections. At the end of August, Bloomberg reported that Belarusian authorities, specifically the National Traffic Exchange Center, purchased equipment that filters up to 40 percent of incoming and outgoing Internet traffic from the manufacturer Sandvine Inc.[33] The equipment is capable of stopping traffic to websites such as Google, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Viber. The main reason behind purchasing this equipment is to paralyze the protests, make online communication between protests impossible, and block information from being communicated to outside of Belarus. Since the US placed sanctions on the Belarusian

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[31] "Лукашенко: интернет в Беларуси отключают из-за границы, это не инициатива власти [Lukashenko: Internet in Belarus is cut off from abroad, this is not an initiative of the authorities]," *Belta*, 10 August 2020, https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-internet-v-belarusi-otkljuchajut-iz-za-granitsy-eto-ne-initsiativa-vlasti-402299-2020/

[32] RUE Beltelecom, "Вниманию абонентов | Белтелеком [Attention to Subscribers]," 10 August 2020, https://beltele-com.by/news/main/vnimaniyu-abonentov-3

[33] Ryan Gallagher, "U.S. Company Faces Backlash After Belarus Uses Its Tech to Block Internet." *Bloomberg*, 11 September 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-11/sandvine-use-to-block-belarus-internet-rankles-staff-lawmakers

government after the 2006 presidential elections, making such kind of purchases impossible, the Belarusian government found a third party contractor, the Russian company Jet Infosystems, to make this investment possible.

Striking the Balance

The post-election events in Belarus shook all of Europe. However, post-election protests for democracy and human rights in Belarus have not been on the front pages, nor has it been the primary topic of political negotiations, for the first time. The 2020 protests are very much a result of the bold falsifications of the election results, brutal violence, non-adherence to international law standards, negligence of diplomatic rules and practices but, most importantly, the intentional commissioning of severe crimes by police officers and authorities.

It is not the proper time to draw conclusions yet. Because of ongoing rallies and protests, every weekend brings new developments to the Belarusian situation. For now, it is possible to highlight several issues. First, the government muzzling the press, especially journalists and media outlets who cover sensitive issues like protests, detentions, and violence. This creates an information vacuum and results in a lack of access to information, especially for the older generation who lack the digital skills to use VPN or other bypass tools. The regions are cut off from Minsk, where the most important rallies and events are happening—pared away from the international information community due to the Internet shutdowns. Secondly, the activity of the Cyber Partisans pointed to many loops in the system of national information resilience, as well as poor legislation and regulation in the field of information security. For now, the government uses old Soviet-style propaganda methods that do not fully work in the current informational and digital environments. The usage of equipment for reducing the incoming and outgoing traffic creates an information bubble and polarizes society. Third, the events within the last two months revealed once again the importance of ideology and loyalty to the apparatus within the country. The activity of Russian journalists in the territory of Belarus once again displayed how the country is strongly perched on the Russian information setting.