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**Belarusian government's persecution of the first Polish foreign satellite
channel Belsat TV**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Lorinc Redei, Supervisor

Vladislav Beronja

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channel Belsat TV**

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Volha Dorman

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Abstract

Belarusian government's persecution of the first Polish foreign satellite channel Belsat TV

Volha Dorman, M. A.

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Supervisor: Lorinc Redei

Belsat TV is one of the most successful projects of the Polish government, created with a goal of providing Belarusians with an alternative source of news that is broadcast in the Belarusian language. An enormous contribution of the journalists of Belsat TV in creating political transparency in Belarus by live streaming the events where the erosion of human rights could be found on full display made it a target of the Belarusian government's persecution. During the ten years of the channel's broadcasting to Belarus, the country's authorities applied various methods of persecutions to hinder its works. The research of this Master's thesis centers around the fluctuation in the Belarusian government's repression of Belsat TV over the past decade. Comprehension of the reasons that cause these fluctuations can help policymakers of the countries that aspire to build stronger ties with Belarus to make more precise predictions about Lukashenko's government's response to a variety of their rapprochement tactics.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	vi
List of Figures	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: The place of the first Polish foreign satellite channel, Belsat TV, in the Belarusian media landscape	5
Chapter 3: Evolution of persecution methods deployed by the Belarusian government against Belsat TV's journalists	24
Chapter 4: The influence of geopolitical and socio-economic factors on fluctuations in methods and patterns of the Belarusian government's repression of Belsat TV	42
Belarus's geopolitical situation in the years 2007-2017, and its influence on the intensity of the Belarusian government's persecution of Belsat TV	43
Belarus's relationship with Russia and the European Union in 2007-2009	44
Belarus's relationship with Russia and the European Union during and after the 2010 Presidential election in Belarus	49
Belarus's relationship with Russia and the European Union in 2011-2014	52
Belarus's relationship with Russia and the European Union in 2015-2016	53
Belarus's relationship with Russia and the European Union in 2017	54
The impact of global economic crisis in 2011 and domestic socio-economic crisis in 2017 on Belarusian foreign policy and the intensity of the government's persecution of Belsat TV	56
The influence of the growing popularity of Belsat TV on the intensity of the government's persecution of the channel	59
Chapter 5: Conclusion	62
References	67

List of Tables

Table 1: Mass media landscape in Belarus	9
Table 2: Dynamics of public trust in government and non-government media in Belarus	11
Table 3: Social characteristics of media audiences in Belarus	13
Table 4: The popularity of Belsat TV and major Belarusian state channels, Belarus 24 and STV, on social networks	22
Table 5: The number of fines payed by Belsat TV's journalists for breaking Article 22.9.....	36
Table 6: Online popularity of Belsat TV and other Belarusian state and non-state news outlets in April 2017	60

List of Figures

Figure 1: Belarusian people's trust in the media in 2015	10
Figure 2: Persecution of Belsat TV's journalists by the Belarusian government over 10 years of its history	25

Chapter 1: Introduction

For more than two decades Poland has tried to find channels to restore its historical, cultural and political ties with Belarus and bring it into the fold of Western influence through the promotion of such essential democratic values as free elections, freedom of expression and belief, the rule of law, and human rights. However, with Belarus under the tight watch of “the last European dictator,” Alexander Lukashenko, Poland had to create projects which focus on the distribution of democratic values and strengthening ties between the two countries without direct interference in the politics of the Belarusian government. One of the most successful projects of the Polish government aimed at providing an alternative view on the current issues relevant to Belarusians is the satellite television channel Belsat TV, which is broadcast from Poland. Since launching in 2007, Belsat TV has developed programming content covering a wide array of topics essential for the revival of the historical ties between Belarus and Poland, the development of the Belarusian nation and language and fostering democratic changes in the country. Currently, access to Belsat is available for free via live streaming on its official website, social media portals, and satellite television. For the Belarusian opposition, Belsat TV is considered one of “the most important exile media” sources.¹

Because of Belsat TV’s efforts to influence Belarusian population’s political views by developing high-quality programming that contradicts the propaganda spread by Russian and Belarusian state media, the Belarusian government has created many obstacles to its work. Throughout the ten years that the channel has been in operation, Lukashenko’s regime has applied a variety of different methods of repression of its journalists. However, despite all the efforts of the Belarusian government to halt the broadcasting of Belsat TV, its journalists

¹ Ryhor Astapenia, “Belsat TV Struggles to Survive,” *BelarusDigest*, accessed November 25, 2018, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belsat-tv-struggles-to-survive/>.

continue to make a contribution to instigate protests in Belarus against deteriorating socio-economic and political situation in 2010, 2011, and 2017. And repression only strengthens the conviction of the channel's founders to reinforce its influence on Belarusian people discontent with the course of Lukashenko's politics.

This Master's thesis analyzes the evolution of Belsat TV's role in the Belarusian media landscape from 2007 until 2017, and the fluctuations in the Belarusian government's repression of the channel over this period. Comprehension of the reasons that cause these fluctuations can help policymakers of the countries that aspire to build stronger ties with Belarus to make more precise predictions about Lukashenko's government's response to a variety of their rapprochement tactics.

To conduct thorough and comprehensive research of fluctuations in the government's methods of repression of Belsat TV's journalists, a variety of primary and secondary sources were analyzed in this Master's thesis. The most important of them is the data from opinion polls and social research projects conducted by the Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies; analytical data published by the Belarusian Association of Journalists about fines to journalists working in Belarus without official government accreditation and violating Article 22.9 of the Administrative code; legal cases and stories of persecution of particular journalists of the channel published in Annual Monitoring Reports on Media situation in Belarus by the Belarusian Association of Journalists; and articles, audio, and video content of the official website of Belsat TV, <https://belsat.eu/>.

Chapter 1 of the thesis describes the evolution of Belarusian media landscape and the place of the first Polish foreign satellite channel Belsat TV in it. The first half of the chapter looks into the history of the evolution of freedom of speech in Belarus from 1989 until 2017. It

focuses in particular on a description of media-political relations and the restricted environment for the development of freedom of speech and press created by Lukashenko's regime. In addition, a large part of Chapter 1 is devoted to the analysis of social and demographic characteristics as well as political and economic values of different media audiences in Belarus. The data from opinion polls conducted by the Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies and represented in Chapter 1 shows the changes of these audiences' trust in government and non-government media in Belarus since Lukashenko came to power. The second half of the chapter centers around the motivations behind the Polish government's launch of an unusual foreign media project, Belsat TV, which has been connecting Poland and Belarus over the past decade. It examines different facets of Belsat TV's operation in Poland and abroad, its journalistic team, and programming, and compares the popularity of the channel with three major Belarusian state channels on leading social networks in Belarus.

Chapter 2 is devoted to a description of different methods of persecution of Belsat TV's journalists by the Belarusian government over the ten years of the channel's operation. In addition, it consists of stories and cases of these methods of persecution against particular journalists of the channel, which were collected from Annual Monitoring Reports on Media situation in Belarus published by the Belarusian Association of Journalists. Among methods of persecution applied by the government against Belsat TV's journalists over the past decade are repressive media laws and accreditation rules; summons of the channel's journalists for questioning to the prosecutor's office; warnings sent to Belarusian freelancer journalists cooperating with the Polish channel in Belarus; issuance of foreign travel bans to Belsat TV's freelancers who cooperate with the channel from Belarus; physical violence against Belsat TV journalists by Belarusian police; persecution of other Belarusian non-government media for

cooperation with Belsat TV; economic pressure directed towards the channel, often through heavy fines on its journalists and confiscation of their work equipment; blocking access to Belsat TV's web site; and diplomatic pressure applied on the Polish government by the Belarusian government with the aim to shut down financing and operation of the channel.

Chapter 3 examines the waves of intensity of Lukashenko's regime repression of Belsat TV in the past ten years and analyses the reasons behind changes in the government's response to the channel. Among these reasons are the relationship between Belarus and Russia, and Belarus and the European Union; the effect of the global economic crises on Belarus; domestic socio-economic crises in Belarus; and the growing popularity of Belsat TV among the Belarusian population in the country and abroad as one of the most reliable news and entertainment sources in the Belarusian language. Analysis of these reasons can help Belsat TV's sponsors and management team create different plans for its operation in the future, taking into account the geopolitical and socio-economic risks of Belarus's development and a variety of known methods of the channel's repression by the government in the past. In addition, it can help policymakers of the countries aspiring to build a stronger political relationship with Belarus to design projects and political tactics that can bolster the process of rapprochement.

Chapter 2: The place of the first Polish foreign satellite channel, Belsat TV, in the Belarusian media landscape

Free speech, transparency, and access to information concerning a given government's domestic and foreign policies are of the utmost importance to all of its citizens, as they are essential components for creating and maintaining a democratic state. Civil societies of democratic states are able to collect data about its structure, functions, and the work of the majority of government institutions. Populations of such states have a chance to critically analyze media reporting on the events in their countries and abroad by having access to different sources of print, media, and internet information. The existence of freedom of speech in democratic states creates conditions for socio-economic and cultural developments.

In Belarus, freedom of speech has always been limited by government forces. During some periods of the country's media history the conditions for the development of free thought and speech were more favorable, yet these important characteristics of a democratic state have never been experienced in Belarus with the same level of freedom and independence observable in the West. In the last years of the Soviet Union's existence, its government attempted to improve the conditions under which the media and press operated. The impetus for such a plan of action was part of Gorbachev's politics of Glasnost directed towards increasing transparency in government institutions in all of the Soviet republics, as well as improvements in the relationship between Soviet states and the media.² Belarusian media in 1989-1991 enjoyed an increased degree of freedom and searched for ways to increase the credibility and the quality of the information they broadcast. The coverage of the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear

² "Провозглашение политики гласности 1 января 1987," accessed November 25, 2018, <https://histrf.ru/lenta-vremeni/event/view/provozghlasheniie-politiki-ghlasnosti>.

accident by Belarusian official and oppositional media sources is one example of the advancements made in freedom of speech and freedom of the press during this period.³

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and gaining the state's independence, Belarus's media landscape was affected by nascent economic and political changes. The freedom of speech was an issue of great concern to opposition pro-democratic political forces, yet disregarded by the supporters of the Communist Party who constituted at the time 85% of the recently formed Belarusian parliament's members.⁴ Thus, official media organizations and newspapers which had long appropriated a familiar Soviet discourse enjoyed subsidies and popularity with a large segment of Belarusian population. The discourse of oppositional media intended to promote the ideas of democratic change and a search for national identity was appropriated by a narrow circle of Belarusian intellectuals and oppositional elite.

In the July 1994 presidential elections in Belarus, a candidate not affiliated with any particular democratic or socialist party, Alexander Lukashenko, won after receiving just over 80% of the popular vote. After becoming Belarus's first and only president to date, Lukashenko began taking extensive measures to establish total government control over media in the country and to consolidate his absolute presidential authority.⁵ In 1996 the president called for a referendum to amend the Republic's constitution regarding the power of the office of the president. Likely due to the unclear wording of the referendum ballots and the underhanded advertisement campaign which preceded the vote, the majority of the Belarusian population

³ Olga Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility: Public Knowledge about Radiation Health Effects after Chernobyl* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014).

⁴ David R. Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*, Postcommunist States and Nations (Singapore: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991), 60.

⁵ Paulina Pospieszna, *Democracy Assistance from the Third Wave: Polish Engagement in Belarus and Ukraine*, Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 2.

voted to adopt these amendments.⁶ The amended Belarusian constitution endowed the president with many powers. Specifically, the referendum gave Lukashenko the authority to “determine the structure of the Government of the Republic of Belarus and make decisions regarding the resignation of the Government and any of its members; the right to abolish acts of the Government; the right to dissolve the Houses of the Parliament; the right to appoint six judges of the Constitutional Court and other judges of the Republic of Belarus; the right to be the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus; and the right to appoint and dismiss the high commander of the Armed Forces.”⁷

Since the 1996 referendum, there has been very limited freedom of public expression allowed in Belarus. Despite the fact that freedom of speech is a protected right, guaranteed under Article 33 of the Belarusian constitution, which declares that “everyone is guaranteed freedom of thought and belief and their free expression,” the Lukashenko government ignores it in practice by systematically harassing independent non-government media organizations and their journalists.⁸ Among the methods of state persecution of non-government media are repressive media laws and licensing rules; summons of oppositional journalists for questioning to the prosecutor’s office; warnings sent to Belarusian journalists cooperating with non-government and foreign media outlets; physical violence against independent journalist by Belarusian police; economic pressure directed towards oppositional news outlets, often through heavy fines on their journalists, in concert with creating obstacles to the distribution of their information in the territory of Belarus.

⁶ Uwe Backes and Patrick Moreau, *Communist and Post-Communist Parties in Europe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 425.

⁷ “Конституция Республики Беларусь,” Национальный Правовой Интернет-Портал Республики Беларусь, accessed November 25, 2018, <http://www.pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/normativnye-dokumenty/konstitutsiya-respubliki-belarus/>.

⁸ Pospieszna, *Democracy Assistance from the Third Wave: Polish Engagement in Belarus and Ukraine*, 5.

World-famous American NGO Freedom House in its annual 2007 Freedom of the Press report about Belarus described deteriorating situation with the freedom of the press and democratic developments in Belarus during and after the 2006 Presidential elections. The report focused on instances of government intimidation of oppositional journalists and Belarusian citizens protesting the rigged elections results. Moreover, it consisted of information about the economic pressure applied by the state against independent press outlets. Among them are the refusal of government banks to issue deposits from readers to oppositional newspapers' accounts and banning all official printing houses in the country from having contracts with non-state oppositional newspapers. Freedom House gave Belarus the score 89 in regards of press freedom in it in 2006 while the worst score on such scale is 100.⁹

The deterioration of the aforementioned democratic indicators did not come to a halt in the years following 2006. In 2017, the World Press Freedom Index of the journalism watchdog group Reporters Without Borders ranked Belarus 153rd out of 180 countries in terms of lack of freedom of press.¹⁰ Currently, the Belarusian media landscape is controlled by official government informational sources along with their Russian counterparts, neither of which differ significantly in their overall message, supporting and promoting anti-western and anti-democratic positions. Despite the fact that a large number of media outlets in Belarus are non-state-owned, which is represented in Table 1, the majority of them focus on such areas as entertainment and advertisement. Monitoring by the Belarusian Association of Journalist in 2011

⁹ "Belarus. Freedom of the Press 2007. Reports.," Freedom House, January 12, 2012, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2007/belarus>.

¹⁰ "Watchdog Condemns Belarus's Persecution Of Independent Journalists," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, accessed November 25, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/watchdog-reporters-without-borders-condemns-belarus-persecution-independent-journalists/28695875.html>.

states that there are no more than 30 officially registered non-state media in the country that report on socio-political issues.¹¹

Table 1: Mass media landscape in Belarus (as of 1 April 2018)¹²

Print media		Digital mass media		News agencies	
Total - 1660		Total - 279		Total - 9	
State - 439	Non-state - 1221	State - 193	Non-state - 86	State - 2	Non-state - 7
Newspapers - 751		Radio programs - 176			
State - 220	Non-state - 531	State - 149	Non-state - 27		
Magazines - 867		TV programs - 103			
State - 208	Non-state - 659	State - 44	Non-state - 59		
Newsletters, directories, almanacs - 42					
State - 11	Non-state - 31				

According to Vartanova, media-political relations in Belarus represent a perfect example of a Eurasian paternalistic model, where the state regulates all the aspects of media work, which mainly focus on the preservation of “the traditional respect of the authority in the media.”¹³

The prevalence of official media sources along with their Russian counterparts that spread propaganda has a negative impact on the development of pro-democratic aspirations in Belarusian society, a large part of which views government media as a credible source of news. An opinion poll represented in Figure 1 and conducted in 2015 by the Independent Institute of

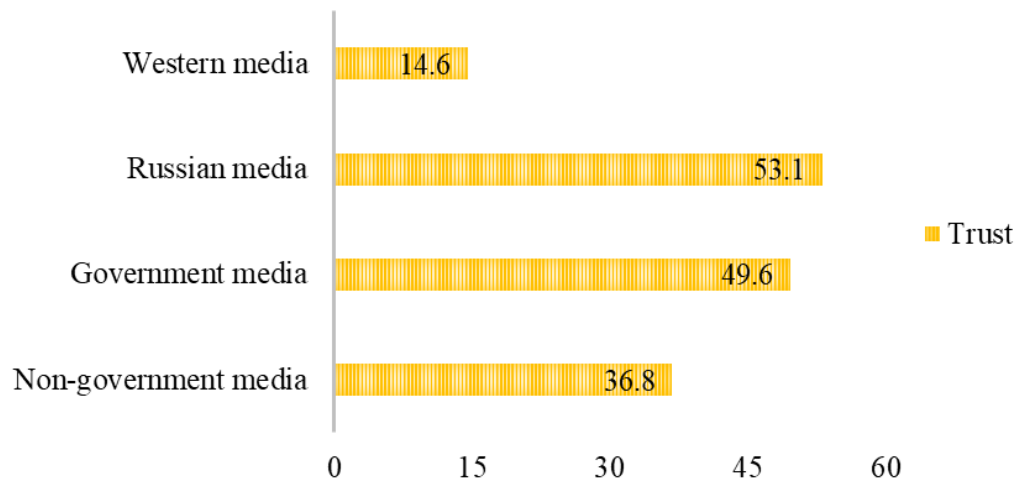
¹¹ Belarusian Association of Journalists, “Mass Media in Belarus 2010,” annual report, 2011, <https://baj.by/sites/default/files/analytics/files/mediamonitoring2010en.pdf>.

¹² “Mass Media in Belarus. Infographics,” Belarusian Telegraph Agency, April 10, 2018, <https://eng.belta.by/infographica/view/mass-media-in-belarus-3426>.

¹³ Beata Ociecka, “International Broadcasting by a Middle-Size Country: The Case of Belsat TV from Poland to Belarus,” *Global Media and Communication* 12, no. 2 (2016): 114.

Socioeconomic and Political Studies shows that the majority of Belarusian people trust the information provided by Russian and Belarusian state media. Only 36.8 percent of Belarusians consider non-state media outlets as reliable information sources, and 14.6 percent of them prefer to receive news from Western media.¹⁴

Figure 1: Belarusian people's trust in the media in 2015 (%)



The data in Table 2 shows that since Lukashenko came to power, the level of trust in state media has been usually higher than in non-state media in the country. It is interesting to note as well that Belarusian people became more distrustful of both types of media from 1997 until 2011, and distrust in state media has been growing more rapidly than distrust in the non-state-media. The year 2011 was a turning point in the Belarusian audience's relations with non-state media. As Table 2 shows, the level of Belarusian people trust in non-state media was higher than in state media this year. Furthermore, the level of their distrust in state-media was higher than in non-state media by 10 percent. By active participation in the coverage of events preceding and

¹⁴ "MASS MEDIA IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE BELARUSIAN SOCIETY," Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, November 1, 2015, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=3073&lang=en>.

following the 2010 Presidential election in Belarus, journalists of non-state media outlets were able to bring the attention of many Belarusians to the corrupt nature of Lukashenko's regime. Besides, they made Belarusians question the information, that was spread by state media at that time. Belsat TV's and other non-state media outlets' engagement in broadcasting events, like the protests against fraud in the results of the 2010 Presidential election and economic crisis in Belarus, might have strengthened the motivation of many Belarusians to take part in these protests and take an attempt to bring up changes in the country's political system.

Table 2: Dynamics of public trust in government and non-government media in Belarus (%)¹⁵

Years	State media		Non-state media	
	Trust	Distrust	Trust	Distrust
09'2011	25.7	62.2	32.8	52.2
09'2010	35.9	48.7	30.4	49.4
09'2009	44.7	42.1	45.3	35.5
06'2008	47.7	46.9	49.6	48.5
05'2007	51.0	39.7	50.6	35.5
06'2006	57.0	35.0	37.0	47.3
03'2005	53.9	33.2	40.0	40.2
03'2004	47.6	37.0	35.7	42.1
03'2003	45.0	37.3	43.8	33.8
04'2002	38.7	43.1	32.2	43.5
04'2001	33.1	35.4	25.3	31.8
04'2000	38.5	31.6	25.7	31.9
03'1999	39.1	31.0	21.8	32.6
09'1998	41.8	26.0	19.6	32.6
11'1997	43.7	21.0	25.4	24.1
Total average	42.9	38.0	34.3	38.7

The split between the consumers of Russian, state and Western media can be accounted for by demographic differences. The data from an opinion poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies in 2015, depicted in Table 3, illustrate that the

¹⁵ Peter Gross and Karol Jakubowicz, *Media Transformations in the Post-Communist World : Eastern Europe's Tortured Path to Change*, 2013, 206.

audience of Western and non-government media is younger, more educated and more economically active, and reside in big cities. By contrast the audience of state media (and, to a lesser extent, Russian media) consists of an older, less educated and economically active part of the Belarusian population that prefers to live in small towns and villages. In addition, it is evident from the data presented in Table 3 that the audience of non-state and Western media espouse more democratic and Western-oriented political and economic values, characterized by an interest in the market economy, and private property, improvement in Belarus's relationship with the European Union and the West, and disapproval of the current government. However, the audience of non-state and Russian media prefer centralized power, a planned economy, the union between Belarus and Russia instead of stronger ties between Belarus and the European Union and the West. It supports the course of politics conducted by the state authorities. It is important to mention that while a large percentage of the audience of non-state and Western media supports more Western-oriented course of politics, its major part does not aspire to integration with Europe or active participation in Western political and military structures, such as the Council of Europe, the European Union, and NATO. Furthermore, a large part of this audience prioritize Belarus's relationship with Russia as well as its relationship with the West, considering a future possibility of creating a union between Belarus and Russia. While the major part of state and Russian audience want to stay in Belarus, a large percentage of the audience of Western and non-government media would prefer to emigrate to the West. Despite all the above-mentioned differences there are a few common or partially coinciding characteristics that the audiences of all four types of media share. These are mistrust of political parties, trust in independent research centers, and preference for ordinary elections as a major democratic mechanism of replacing the existing state powers.

Table 3: Social characteristics of media audiences in Belarus (%)¹⁶

Characteristics	Western media (14.6)	Non-government media (36.8)	Government media (49.6)	Russian media (53.1)
Social and demographic characteristics:				
<i>1) Age:</i>				
– 16-29	35.8	35.4	18.7	25.3
– 30-39	27.2	22.4	15.8	20.0
– 40-49	18.6	21.0	18.6	20.7
– 50-59	9.2	9.6	14.2	12.3
– 60+	9.1	11.8	32.7	21.7
<i>2) Education:</i>				
– elementary (up to 4 years at secondary school)	4.6	4.4	18.1	10.4
– unfinished secondary (up to 8 years at secondary school) education	12.1	12.7	16.4	13.0
– secondary	39.4	40.5	31.6	39.0
– technical college	24.7	24.9	22.5	22.4
– higher and non-finished higher education	19.1	17.6	11.4	15.3
<i>3) Social status:</i>				
– state sector employee	44.6	47.9	43.0	47.2
– private sector employee	19.2	17.3	8.4	12.5
– student	14.0	12.9	7.6	9.3
– senior citizen	15.2	15.2	37.7	25.9
– housewife, unemployed	9.4	7.8	4.3	6.4
<i>4) Place of residence:</i>				
– capital	17.0	21.5	11.9	14.3
– regional center	23.2	16.4	15.1	16.2

¹⁶ “MASS MEDIA IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE BELARUSIAN SOCIETY.”

Table 3, cont.

– large city (50 thousand people and more)	15.9	16.2	11.6	14.6
– small town	18.0	17.3	20.5	21.9
– village	0	28.3	40.7	32.6
Economical values:				
<i>1) Prefer the type of economy:</i>				
– market economy with little state interference	60.2	58.6	25.2	40.0
– market economy with heavy state regulation	21.6	24.2	34.5	30.7
– administrative economy	13.9	13.8	35.2	25.8
<i>2) Most efficient form of ownership</i>				
– private property	74.1	69.1	37.3	53.8
– state property	18.7	24.5	58.1	40.7
Political values and behavior:				
<i>1) The blame on the deteriorating economy is on the:</i>				
– president	58.8	48.1	19.9	36.7
– organized crime	10.7	11.1	18.8	14.8
<i>2) Trust the president:</i>				
– yes	15.6	23.3	56.6	38.8
– no	60.4	49.6	17.3	35.1
<i>3) Trust political parties:</i>				
– yes	7.0	7.0	5.3	6.3
– no	51.7	46.4	40.0	45.0
<i>4) Trust independent research centers:</i>				
– yes	45.8	42.4	19.3	31.0
– no	16.6	15.6	18.6	17.5

Table 3, cont.

5) <i>The best relations between Russia and Belarus:</i>				
– friendly relations of independent countries	47.9	45.5	24.8	33.2
– union of independent countries	28.3	30.8	31.4	29.9
– merger into one country	22.3	22.1	40.8	34.8
6) <i>Voting in a referendum about the unification of Russia and Belarus:</i>				
– for unification	40.7	41.2	67.2	56.5
– against unification	38.2	33.7	15.6	22.2
7) <i>Think that Belarus should aim to integrate into Europe and aspire to:</i>				
– membership in the Council of Europe	47.0	43.0	31.7	37.9
– membership in the European Union	45.2	41.4	26.0	35.6
– NATO membership	10.5	9.9	6.8	6.9
8) <i>Would like the following person to be president of Belarus:</i>				
– single candidate of the democratic opposition parties	19.3	16.5	3.4	9.2
– representative of a different political party	1.2	1.9	2.7	1.5
– independent candidate	33.7	27.5	14.6	23.3
– A. Lukashenko	17.6	20.9	51.3	34.2
9) <i>If the powers do not satisfy people, they should be replaced by:</i>				
– ordinary elections	31.7	35.7	45.7	40.4
– large-scale non-violence actions (rallies etc.)	10.6	10.5	4.3	6.6

Table 3, cont.

<i>10) Would like to emigrate to the West:</i>				
– yes	46.8	39.5	21.3	31.4
– would not like to move anywhere	40.8	53.4	72.7	61.3

The role of foreign media in preserving or overthrowing authoritarian regimes that disregard essential democratic values, such as freedom of speech, human rights, free election, and rule of law, cannot be underestimated. Foreign media organizations, such as Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (RFE/ RL) or Voice of America, mainly sponsored by the United States government, played a crucial role in public delegitimization and overturning of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. The main aim of these organizations was to promote democracy and freedom as the fundamental rights of citizens of all progressive democratic countries. Speaking on the importance of foreign media and NGOs' assistance in helping the Solidarity movement in Poland achieve victory over communism, authors of an article from a leading think tank in Warsaw write that the collapse of the communist government "would not have been possible without considerable Western assistance which... [was] effectively implemented over the course of many years."¹⁷

Poland, as the most culturally and historically close neighbor to Belarus, for more than two decades has tried to find channels for the most efficient spread of democratic values to Belarus. Having formerly been on the same side of the Iron Curtain, Poland and Belarus were both targets of Western democracy assistance. However, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the victory of the Solidarity movement in Poland and the election of Alexander Lukashenko as

¹⁷ Gerald. Sussman, *Branding Democracy : U.S. Regime Change in Post-Soviet Eastern Europe* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 128.

Belarus's first president propelled these neighboring countries in utterly opposite directions. After becoming a member of the European Union in 2004, Poland, having been a long-time recipient of western democratic aid, became its provider. With Belarus being a pro-Russian authoritarian regime, the efforts of Poland to aid in democracy-building through cooperative projects between the Polish and Belarusian governments have been largely unsuccessful. For this reason, the Polish government has found the most effective method of aiding the democratization of Belarus to be through funding free media projects, and Polish NGOs engaged in building Belarus's civil society.

One of the most successful media projects designed by the Polish government to promote democratic values and revive a sense of national identity in the Belarusian people is the satellite television channel Belsat TV. The channel was launched on World Human Rights Day, December 10th, 2007 by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in partnership with Polish Public Service Television (TVP SA) and several European governments and foundations. The main founder of the channel, Agnieszka Romaszewska, has said that the primary objective of Belsat TV is to provide Belarusians with an alternative source of news that is broadcast in the Belarusian language. As a daughter of one of the leaders of Poland's anti-communist Solidarity movement, Romaszewska learned from a young age about the role of foreign media in overthrowing authoritarian regimes. In addition to her Belsat TV project, Romaszewska is a journalist and since 1989 has worked in Russia and Belarus as a Polish correspondent. Romaszewska has stated, "It's about giving something back – in this case providing independent

news to Belarus. After all, the underground opposition in Poland during the 1970s and later under martial law depended so much on news from international broadcasting stations.”¹⁸

The secondary objective of Belsat TV is reviving the feeling of national pride in the Belarusian population through broadcasting programming focused on promoting Belarusian language, culture, and history. Such an objective can be viewed as an attempt of the Polish government to decrease the cultural and political influence of Russia on Belarus. In addition, the promotion of nationalistic sentiments by Belsat TV emphasizes long historical and cultural ties between Poland and Belarus, and the role of Poland as the main democracy provider to Belarus. Thus, the secondary objective represents the Polish government’s attempts to bring Belarus into the sphere of Poland’s cultural and political control. Besides, since Polish Public Service Television (TVP SA) allocates a small portion of its financial resources acquired from license fees, tax dollars, advertising, and government subsidies to the operation of the channel, the content of Belsat TV must comply with the interests of the Polish government and promote Poland’s political image in Belarus.¹⁹

The programming of Belsat TV consists of news and opinion programs, documentaries, films, and serials. The majority of programs are broadcast in the Belarusian language, with the exception of a thirty-minute nightly news broadcast shown in Russian and occasional documentary movies in Polish. Since a large percentage of the Belarusian population prefer to speak Russian in their everyday life, Belsat TV’s team makes a work to promote the Belarusian language its priority. In fact, the first video ever uploaded on the channel’s official web-page was devoted to preserving the native language of the Belarusian people. The characters in the video

¹⁸ Judy Dempsey, “From Poland, Satellite TV Pierces Belarus Media Muzzle,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2011, sec. Europe, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/world/europe/24belarus.html>.

¹⁹ Ociepka, “International Broadcasting by a Middle-Size Country: The Case of Belsat TV from Poland to Belarus,” 116.

represent different nations and say what nation they are from and that they speak the native tongue of their nation (e.g. “I am from Portugal and I speak Portuguese).” The video ends by showing a photo of the 2009 Belarusian census form with the box indicating “Belarusian” as one’s native language having been clearly ticked in dark black ink. As the census form is shown across the screen, the narrator states, “your choice speaks for you!”²⁰ The data from the 2009 census showed that Belarusians made up a majority, representing 83.7 percent of the population. However, only 24% of the population reported Belarusian as being the predominant language they use in everyday speech.²¹ In addition, Belarusian has been included in UNESCO’s list of endangered languages with the sub-status of “vulnerable.”²²

Belsat’s broadcasts in Belarusian have recently made an unexpected impact on state television in Belarus as its use has steadily increased in state run media programming.²³ Moreover, the efforts of Belsat TV to revive the Belarusian language have had a positive impact on the Belarusian educated millennials who speak Belarusian on a daily basis and stigmatize the lack of knowledge of the native language.²⁴ Even though Lukashenko’s government has not taken strong measures to end the promotion of Russian as the primary language spoken throughout Belarus, it has supported a select group of cultural and private organizations promoting the wider use of Belarusian. In 2011 the government-run advertising company, “Belvnieshreklama” (“Belarusian outdoor advertising”), launched a new project supporting the

²⁰ БЕЛСАТ NEWS, *Твой Выбар Гаворыць За Цябе. Першы Ролік “Белсата,”* accessed November 25, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKELKsqfT-w&feature=youtu.be>.

²¹ Ociepka, “International Broadcasting by a Middle-Size Country: The Case of Belsat TV from Poland to Belarus,” 117.

²² UNESCO, “Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger,” 2013, <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/>.

²³ Ociepka, “International Broadcasting by a Middle-Size Country: The Case of Belsat TV from Poland to Belarus,” 117.

²⁴ Katerina Barushka, “After Decades of Russian Dominance, Belarus Reclaims Its Language,” *World News. The Guardian*, January 28, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/28/-sp-russian-belarus-reclaims-language-belarusian>.

use of the Belarusian language across the country. The promotion of the language was implemented through billboards with the pictures of Belarusian berries, fruits, vegetables, and well-known dishes of Belarusian cuisine with beautiful printings of their names in Belarusian. The name of the project “Smak belaruskaj movy” (“a taste of the Belarusian language”) fully implied its main objective.²⁵ Moreover, another similar project of the company “Rodnyja daty” (“Dates of significance to the Belarusian people”) promoted the study of Belarusian history and culture by displaying billboards with pictures of famous Belarusians and the dates of their births and deaths.²⁶

Since the Belarusian media is under strict control of the government, many Belarusians have access only to the version of their country’s history promoted by government elites. Thus, documentaries and programs devoted to Belarusian history take an important place in the programming of Belsat TV. In September of this year the channel began broadcasting historical films created by the well-known Belarusian writer Vecheslav Rakicki, called *Svedki* or Witnesses in English. These films are about the struggle of various famous and ordinary Belarusians (Witnesses) for the independence and democratization of their country from the 1980s through to the 2000s.²⁷ Another program depicts the aspects of Belarusian history that are not well known. It is called *Zagadki belaruskaj gistoryi* or The Mysteries of the Belarusian history. The author and the host of the program is the prominent Belarusian historian, Aleksander

²⁵ Юрась Ускоў, “‘Смак беларускай мовы’ на вуліцах Мінска,” *TUT.BY*, August 14, 2011, <https://news.tut.by/society/245760.html>.

²⁶ “Чарговы Сацыяльны Праект Ад ‘БелЗнешРэкламы’ — БелВнешРеклама,” accessed November 26, 2018, <https://bzt.by/news/chargovy-sacyyalny-praekt-ad-belzneshreklamy.html>.

²⁷ “Сведкі. 2000-я,” accessed November 25, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/program/svedki-2000-ya/>.

Kraucevich. In each episode he travels to obscure historical sites in Belarus and gives his viewers the history of each location.²⁸

Currently Belsat TV programming consists of educational, satirical, and entertainment genres. A new satirical program launched in September of 2016, called *Zhestachajshy Ilyuziyn*, consist of exceptionally critical satire involving famous Belarusian, Russian, and foreign government officials, and serves as a commentary on domestic and international political events. The director of the program, Yuri Hashcavacki says that “power without satire becomes rusty... (and) has to be afraid of media.”²⁹

In addition to watching Belsat TV via satellite, its viewers are also able to access the channel’s programming online for free via youtube.com and belsat.eu. Moreover, on the channel’s website there is material available in the Russian, Polish, and English languages in the form of news columns and informative articles. Belsat TV also maintains accounts on social media sites, such as V Kontakte, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Currently Belsat TV has 16,464 followers on V Kontakte, 75,202 on Youtube, and 19,279 on Twitter. The Belarusian page of Belsat TV on Facebook has the highest popularity among users and currently is followed by 53,559 people. The Facebook pages of the channel are also available in English and Russian. The popularity of Belsat TV currently exceeds the popularity of the main Belarusian state channels, Belarus 24 and STV, or Stolichnoye televideniye (Capital television, in translation to English), which broadcast information designed to propagate the values of the current government. However, the larger popularity of STV on V Kontakte, and Belarus 24 on Facebook are an

²⁸ “Загадкі беларускай гісторыі,” accessed November 25, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/program/zagadki-belaruskaj-gistoryi/>.

²⁹ “«Жэстачайшы ілюзіён» – новая праграма на «Белсатсе»,” accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/news/zhestachajshy-ilyuziyn-novaya-pragrama-na-belsatse/>.

exception. The data represented in Table 4 illustrate the popularity of Belsat TV, Belarus 24, and STV on the main social networks in Belarus.

Table 4: The popularity of Belsat TV and major Belarusian state channels, Belarus 24 and STV, on social networks (as of 29th October, 2018), (number of followers)

Social networks	Channels		
	Belsat TV	Belarus 24	STV
Vkontakte	16, 464	6, 883	24, 198
Facebook	53, 559	80, 189	5, 916
Twitter	19, 279	13, 873	4, 402
Youtube	75, 202	4, 200	68, 310

A team of nearly three dozen Polish and Belarusian journalists work at Belsat TV’s nerve center inside the headquarters of Polish Public Service Television (TVP SA) in downtown Warsaw. Furthermore, there are now more than a hundred freelance journalists in Belarus who “unofficially” contribute to the work of the channel. Belarus-based freelancers are exposed to the highest risk, since they do not have the legal right to work as journalists in the country.

According to Article 35 of the Belarusian Media Law, Belarusian journalists working for foreign media organizations are required to have operating job contracts with them and a mandatory accreditation from the country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Without these documents, they cannot legally work as journalists in Belarus and are subjected to legal persecution by the government in cases when they try to participate in journalistic activities there. Despite the legal barriers and other persecution measures deployed by the Belarusian government, the majority of

the channel's reporters are willing to take the risk of underground journalistic work. In the documentary about Belsat TV directed by Janusz Gawryluk, Agnieszka Romaszewska says that,

“Belsat is a risk. Taking up such work is a risk. Luckily, our journalists are free men and women. But to be free, one must not fear... When people arrived in Warsaw for training, I met them frequently after it. They often asked: “Will you guarantee our safety?” Hmm, I had to tell them, sadly, that unfortunately we could not.”³⁰

The director of Belsat TV was able to enter the territory of Belarus for the first time after ten years in 2015. She had been deported from the country in 2005 for working without official accreditation and had her visa application denied three times.³¹ In addition to journalists from Poland and Belarus, many correspondents of the channel are working in Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Germany, Belgium and Great Britain providing additional coverage of foreign news.

³⁰ *Дарога. Фільм пра «Белсат»*, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/films/daroga/>.

³¹ “«Белсат» зноў паспрабуе акрэдытаваць сваіх карэспандэнтаў у Беларусі,” *baj.by*, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://baj.by/be/content/belsat-znou-pasprabue-akredytavac-svaih-korespondentau-u-belarusi>.

Chapter 3: Evolution of persecution methods deployed by the Belarusian government against Belsat TV's journalists

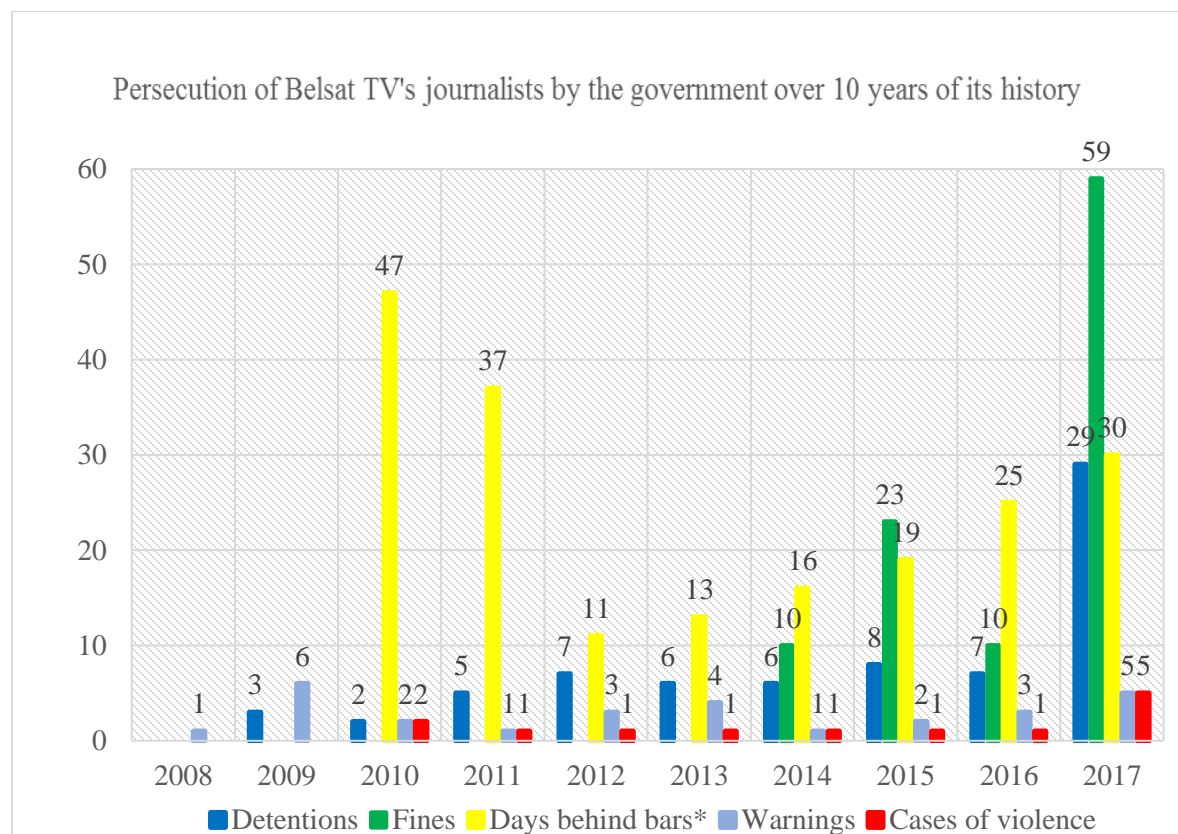
Even before the channel's launch in 2007, its developers knew that it will be hard for them to reach any consensus with the Belarusian government. However, their dedication to bringing about democratic changes in the country and tearing down the power of Lukashenko's corrupt regime motivated them to continue their work. The opinion of the head of the Belarusian government towards Poland's media project was exposed during a press conference in Bychovo (Mogiliov district, Belarus) on April 26, 2006, where he stated that in his opinion "this idea about broadcasting independent news on Belarus from Poland is foolish, pointless, and unfriendly," and that "Poland has to find solutions for its numerous domestic problems" before it starts to dictate to other states what they should do.³²

An enormous contribution made by the journalists of Belsat TV in creating political transparency in Belarus is the live streaming of protests, court proceedings against dissidents and journalists, as well as other such events where the erosion of human rights could be found on full display. These made the Belarusian president view the channel as a serious threat to his well-established totalitarian political regime. Thus, during the ten years of Belsat TV's broadcasting to Belarus, the government applied various methods of persecution to hinder its work. Among them are repressive media laws and accreditation rules; summons of the channel's journalists for questioning to the prosecutor's office; warnings sent to Belarusian freelancer journalists cooperating with the Polish channel in Belarus; issuance of foreign travel bans to Belsat TV's freelancers who cooperate with the channel from Belarus; physical violence against Belsat TV journalists by Belarusian police; persecution of other Belarusian non-government media for

³² БелаПАН, "Лукашенко: Независимый телеканал - 'глупый, бестолковый и недружественный' проект," *TUT.BY*, April 26, 2007, <https://news.tut.by/politics/86821.html>.

cooperation with Belsat TV; economic pressure directed towards the channel, often through heavy fines on its journalists and confiscation of their work equipment; blocking of access to Belsat TV's web site; and diplomatic pressure applied on the Polish government by the Belarusian government with the aim to shut down financing and operation of the channel. Figure 2 below displays the 10-year history of various methods of persecution used by the Belarusian government against Belsat TV's journalists.

Figure 2: Persecution of Belsat TV's journalists by the Belarusian government over 10 years of its history³³



The category Days Behind Bars in the Table 1 refers to the overall number of days that all Belsat TV journalists spend in jail in a particular year.

³³ Belarusian Association of Journalists, "Mass Media in Belarus," annual reports, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 2009, <https://baj.by/en/analytics/45>.

The legal environment in Belarus creates many pitfalls for Belsat TV's broadcasting. Until the entry into force of the Belarusian Media Law on February 8th, 2009, the Belarusian media landscape and the access to information in the country were mainly controlled by the Belarusian Constitution (especially articles 33 and 34) and the Law on Press and Other Mass Media enacted in 1995.³⁴ Both media laws require journalists to have a professional accreditation to work legally in the country. However, a change in the legal definition of the term "accreditation" in the Belarusian Media Law gave the government an additional legal tool to hinder the activity of non-state media. Until 2009, in the Law on Press and Other Mass Media, accreditation was defined as the right of journalist or mass media organization to receive information from a government body about its work. In the new Belarusian Media Law the meaning of this term is interpreted as the right of a government body to allow a journalist to gather information about its operation.³⁵ This led to a scenario where only state media organizations and journalists are able to obtain information about the Belarusian government. Oppositional journalists are often denied access to official government documents and banned from attending the majority of government meetings and conferences.

The inability of Belsat TV and other non-government media outlets to receive official accreditation from the Belarusian government prohibits them from legally working in the country. In most cases, they are penalized by Article 22.9 of the Belarusian Administrative Code, according to which the production and distribution of media materials without a journalist's

³⁴ Олег Агеев, Оливер Мани-Керл, and Михаил Пастухов, *Доступ к Информации: Международные Стандарты и Белорусское Законодательство*, Андрей Бастунец, Сборник Авторских Материалов (СПб., 2012), 4.

³⁵ Агеев, Мани-Керл, and Пастухов, 5.

accreditation is illegal in the Republic and is subject to legal punishment.³⁶ Thus, the Belarusian government creates a media environment that resembles a closed circle: non-government journalists cannot receive accreditation because of breaking the law, but they are forced to do it by being denied accreditation. Over the more than ten years that Belsat TV has been in operation in Belarus, none of its attempts to receive official accreditation from the Ministry of Foreign affairs for any of its journalists and for its foreign media organization itself met with success. Two main reasons for such denials to accredit the channel or its journalists as stated by the Belarusian government are the inappropriate preparation of the documents required to be submitted with the application for obtaining the official journalistic accreditation in Belarus as well as prior unauthorized work (without official accreditation) by these journalists in the territory of the country.³⁷ As such, all Belsat TV journalists reporting from Belarus are in violation of Belarusian law and are subject to persecution at any time.

In addition to tightening the accreditation rules in Belarus, the new Media Law enabled the government to shut down any media outlet for reporting information that threatened the state's political values and safety. Thus, it was almost impossible for any non-government media to avoid violating this rule since any kind of information in the reports of opposition journalists could be considered by the government forces as dangerous for the country's political values and safety.

Since the majority of oppositional media outlets currently enjoy a high level of popularity on the internet, the government tries to maintain control of the online media environment. On February 1, 2010 the president of Belarus passed a new decree "On Measures for Revising the

³⁶ "Independent Journalist to Be Tried Twice for Contributing to Belsat TV," accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/independent-journalist-to-be-tried-twice-for-contributing-to-belsat-tv/>.

³⁷ "«Белсат» зноў паспрабуе акрэдытаваць сваіх карэспандэнтаў у Беларусі."

Use of the National Segment of the World Wide Web.” The new legislation enabled the government to retrieve the data of individual internet users collected by state-run internet providers. In addition, it endowed internet providers with the ability to block internet access for users suspected of violating the republic’s laws online.³⁸ The amendments in the Belarusian Media Law which were passed in 2015 further exacerbated the already oppressive online media environment in the country. The changes gave the Ministry of Information the power to seize access to any media outlet online which disseminates “propaganda of violence, war, cruelty, extremist activities, consumption and use of drugs and psychotropic substances, pornography, and information able to inflict harm to the national interests of the state.”³⁹ The law also shifted the liability for distribution of such information from the person who publishes it to the website owners, hampering their motivation to abstain from facilitating government censorship. It was specified in the amendments that a decision to block an online media source by the Belarusian Ministry of Information may be taken extra-judicially. Websites can be blocked as a response to a single violation of the law. Furthermore, according to the new legislation, websites can be blocked up to three months after such a violation has occurred.⁴⁰

To date, the only case of cyberattack on Belsat TV’s web site took place during the channel’s online broadcasting of the protest during the Presidential Elections on December 19, 2010. At 20.30 the channel was planning to show a two-hour program entitled “Vybarchy vechar” (“The Election evening”) that would report the latest news about the events happening in Minsk that evening. However, Belsat TV’s website was blocked immediately after the start of

³⁸ Viachaslau Bortnik, “Internet Censorship in Authoritarian Belarus,” *BelarusDigest*, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/internet-censorship-in-authoritarian-belarus/>.

³⁹ Прэс-служба ГА “Беларуская асацыяцыя журналістаў,” “Рэгуляванне Байнэту,” *baj.by*, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://baj.by/be/content/regulyavanne-baynetu-0>.

⁴⁰ Прэс-служба ГА “Беларуская асацыяцыя журналістаў.”

the program as a result of a massive cyber attack from Belarus. It is not exactly known who was standing behind the attack. The information about the attack was mentioned in a news article published on the channel's official webpage on December 20, 2010. It is stated in the article that the website was only able to renew its work at noon on December 20 after fixing a server error.⁴¹

In addition to Article 22.9 of the Belarusian Administrative Code and laws controlling access to information in the media space (including online media space), the government creates a myriad of other legal obstacles for non-government media organizations and their reporters. According to the amendment to the Criminal code of the Republic passed in 1998, a person spreading information insulting the reputation of the Belarusian Head of State can be sentenced to up to five years in prison. The vilifying of the honor of a government officials, distributing propaganda discrediting the image of the country, and damaging state security were also made illegal by this act.⁴² In order to enhance its tight control over Belarus's informational sphere, the government requires all non-state media seeking to distribute information about government laws and decrees to acquire a special license from the Belarusian Ministry of Justice. The conditions for obtaining such licenses are almost impossible to fulfill.⁴³ Moreover, in 2001 Presidential Decree No. 8 was issued limiting the extent to which non-government media can accept foreign financial aid.⁴⁴ As a result, many media and press organizations could no longer afford the costs of their operations and were forced to discontinue their various media projects.

In the first two years of Belsat TV broadcasting, the methods used by the Belarusian officials against the channel's journalists for breaking Article 22.9 did not involve violence and

⁴¹ "Сайт «Белсату» аднавіў працу пасля кібератакі," accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/news/875/>.

⁴² Nelly Bekus, *Struggle over Identity: The Official and the Alternative "Belarusianness"*. (Budapest: CEU Press, 2010), 171.

⁴³ Bekus, 171.

⁴⁴ Pospieszna, *Democracy Assistance from the Third Wave: Polish Engagement in Belarus and Ukraine*.

had an administrative nature. They included official warning letters from the prosecutor's office sent to the channel's freelancers, and in some cases, their detentions and questioning by the Belarusian KGB. In the period 2008-2009 seven Belarusian journalists received warning letters for cooperating with Belsat TV. Among them were Gomel-based members of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, Aleg Rarzkou and Taciana Bublikava. In the letters, the government also notified the journalists of two complaints filed by individuals alleging that their personal information had been disclosed by the journalists without their expressed consent during a broadcast on Belsat TV. In their defense, Rarzkou and Bublikava said that they have legal accreditation to work in Belarus as journalists, and they refute the government's unverified allegation of their cooperation with the Polish satellite channel.⁴⁵

On July 27, 2009, Belarusian journalist Hienadz Sudnik was summoned to the prosecutor's office in Shklou, on the basis of a complaint received from the head engineer of a local pulp-and-paper mill of this town. The head engineer accused the journalist of spreading false information about the situation of this factory through Belsat TV. In his defense, Hienadz Sudnik said that he had never even visited Schlou, the town where the pulp-and-paper mill is located. Besides, he also stated that he had never heard of or spoke with the author of the complaint.⁴⁶

In addition to occasional detentions and warning letters received by Belsat TV's freelancers in this period, the government twice attempted to apply pressure on its main developer and director, Agnieszka Romaszewska. In March 17, she was fired from the position of the channel's director, however in a week she was hired back. Agnieszka Romaszewska says

⁴⁵ Belarusian Association of Journalists, "Mass Media in Belarus 2009," annual report, 2010, <https://baj.by/sites/default/files/analytics/files/mediamonitoring2009en.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Belarusian Association of Journalists.

that “political forces that do not want to act against Lukashenko’s will are involved in this accident.” Agnieszka Romaszewska’s dismissal from the position of the director of Belsat TV could be explained by changes in the management team of the Polish Public Service Television (TVP SA), which is one of the main sponsors of the channel in Poland. She was fired by Piotr Farfal, a new Executive Director of the Polish Public Service Television (TVP SA). He explained the dismissal of Agnieszka Romaszewska from her post by “her disregard of the majority of TVP SA Board’s decisions” and her disrespect of opinions and decisions of Board members by making public statements to mass media without their previous approval.⁴⁷ It is important to note that Piotr Farfal is an active member of Poland’s nationalist-conservative political party, The League of Polish Families, whose far-right ideology does not oppose autocratic style of Lukashenko’s governing.⁴⁸

In November 2009, the director of the channel was invited to participate in the “Minsk Forum” conference organized by the German-Belarusian society to discuss Belarus’s relationships with the countries of Western Europe.⁴⁹ In spite of her plans to visit the annual conference which took place October 4-6, Romaszewska’s application for a Belarusian visa was denied, presumably for political reasons.⁵⁰ Her inability to legally cross the Belarusian border also deprived her of the opportunity to celebrate the second birthday of Belsat TV in Minsk with the rest of her crew. In addition, just before the start of the festivities, Belsat TV’s crew received

⁴⁷ Belarusian Association of Journalists, “Mass Media in Belarus 2012,” annual report, 2013, <https://baj.by/sites/default/files/analytics/files/mediamonitoring2012en.pdf>.

⁴⁸ “Звольненая дырэктарка «Белсату» Агнешка Рамашэўская,” Наша Ніва, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=24630>.

⁴⁹ “Пасья шасьцігадовага перапынку адкрыўся «Менскі форум»,” Радыё Свабода, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/paslia-sascihadovaha-pierapynku-adkryusia-mienski-forum/28137766.html>.

⁵⁰ “Дырэктары тэлеканалу ‘Белсат’ адмовілі ў беларускай візе,” Радыё Свабода, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/1869949.html>.

information from the administration of the club where the celebration was planned to take place that their electricity was not working.⁵¹ Thus, the celebration had to be cancelled.

The first case of Belarusian government forces using violence to put pressure on Belsat TV journalists happened during the 2010 Presidential election in Belarus (see Figure 2 on page 25 of this chapter). During the protests on the eve of the announcement of the presidential election results on December 19, 2010, twenty seven Belsat TV's journalists were arrested; several of them were severely beaten by police while being detained, and had to spend multiple weeks in the hospital. The overall number of days that Belsat TV's reporters had to spend in jail for live-streaming the events happening at that time reached 47 days (Figure 2).

In addition, in order to intimidate Belsat TV's journalists in preparation for the Presidential election, government police conducted a search of the channel's informal office in Minsk. The justification for such actions was the fact that the office was not officially registered with local authorities, due to Belsat TV's failure to receive accreditation for legal media activity in Belarus. After the protests of Belarusian citizens discontent with the results of the Presidential election, the government made a second attempt to search Belsat TV's office to prohibit the incitement of more civil revolts by the opposition media channel. On the night of December 25, the office of Belsat TV in Minsk was again raided by the KGB. Only this time the authorities came up empty handed, as the channel's journalists had anticipated the attack and moved all its property to another location. A spokesman for Belsat in Minsk, Mikhail Yanchuk, said that "out

⁵¹“Пераслед «Белсату» За 10 Гадоў Працы. Інфаграфіка,” accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/news/125-sodnyau-za-kratami-i-27-tysyachau-dolarau-shtrafau-10-gadou-belsat-pratsue-u-belarusi/>.

of all office equipment the journalists only left a forty-year-old prehistoric typewriter with a note for the KGB reading, ‘Especially for you.’”⁵²

Immediately after the protests, the government also conducted searches of the homes of journalists suspected of working in cooperation with non-accredited and opposition media sources. On the evening of December 30, the apartment of Belsat TV journalist Katiaryna Tkachenka was searched during the same time that she was at the KGB’s office in Minsk fulfilling a summons issued for questioning.⁵³ On January 12th government special forces conducted a search of the home of Belsat TV journalist Larysa Shchyraakova in Homel.⁵⁴

Two instances of the Belarusian government’s intimidation of other non-government media organizations in the country for cooperating with the non-accredited Polish satellite channel occurred in preparation for the 2010 Presidential election in June and November. On June 11, the editorial board of the non-state newspaper *Novy Chas* (“New Time”) received a letter from the Ministry of Commerce. The letter included a protocol on administrative violation addressed to the editorial board of the newspaper. It accused the newspaper of violating sub-clause 4.6 of Article 10 of the Law on Advertisement by printing an advertisement by Belsat TV on its pages without indication of the channel’s name, details of the license of the advertiser or its taxpayer identification number.⁵⁵ Another instance of deployment of this method of harassment by the Ministry of Commerce against non-government media cooperating with Belsat TV took place on November 25. The representative of the editorial board of the non-state regional newspaper *Inform-Pragulka* was summoned to the Ministry of Commerce for the

⁵² “Уначы напалі на офіс,” accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/news/944/>.

⁵³ “Ператрусы на кватэрах журналістаў,” accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/news/1038/>.

⁵⁴ “Radio Station Closed, Journalist Fined, Homes Searched,” Reporters without borders, January 14, 2011, <https://rsf.org/en/news/radio-station-closed-journalist-fined-homes-searched>.

⁵⁵ Belarusian Association of Journalists, “Mass Media in Belarus 2010.”

creation of a legal protocol for violation of the Law on Advertisement by improperly advertising Belsat TV in several issues of the newspaper in May.⁵⁶

During the four years after 2010 Presidential election, the largest number of imprisonments and violence deployed by the government against Belsat TV's journalists happened during the so called "silent protests" that took place in many Belarusian cities in summer 2011. The protests were instigated by the social network group "Revolution Via Social Networks" on Facebook and its Russian-language equivalent, VKontakte. It summoned people to express their disapproval of the authoritarian regime and the deteriorating economic situation by clapping and peacefully walking in groups. Explaining the implied meaning behind such demonstrations, the creator of the online-based group said, "It's about a guy who stands near the Kremlin handing out leaflets. When police arrest him, they see that the leaflets are blank. 'Well, the guy says, everyone knows what's wrong, there's no need to write it down.'"⁵⁷ From June 8th until the end of August peaceful public rallies of "silent protest" occurred throughout Belarus, with the majority of their participants arrested and beaten by the police. Belsat TV's journalist, Mikhail Yanchuk, reported to international NGO "Reporters Without Borders" that all of Belsat TV's freelancers involved in the coverage of the protests were detained, some of them were beaten, and their equipment confiscated by the government police.⁵⁸ To prohibit future public "flash mobs" of this kind the government passed a ban against any social gathering or

⁵⁶ Belarusian Association of Journalists.

⁵⁷ Oleg Boldyrev, "Silent Protests Spook Belarus Regime," June 30, 2011, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13975788>.

⁵⁸ "Updates on Media Freedom Violations during Protests in Belarus," Reporters without borders, July 21, 2011, <https://rsf.org/en/news/updates-media-freedom-violations-during-protests-belarus>.

assemblies. The level of absurdity of the new decree was exposed by awarding Lukashenko and the government police the Ig Nobel Prize in 2013.⁵⁹

Between 2012-2013 the extent of the government's oppression of Belsat TV tapered off a bit. Starting in 2012, the detention of reporters suspected of cooperating with the channel was most often followed by warning notices, not the physical brutality that had previously been the norm.⁶⁰ In 2013, Andrey Belyakou, owner of "BELSATplus," a company selling home satellite dishes and electronic equipment, sued Belsat TV for financial losses as a result of his business being incorrectly associated with the controversial channel. On September 4, 2014, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the owner and banned Belsat TV from using its name when broadcasting via satellite to Belarus and on its website.⁶¹ The director of the channel stated that the claims made against them by Belyakou were suspicious, as his company had been registered in Belarus under another name "Hightech-market" since 2011.⁶² Andrey Belyakou's case seemed to most likely be an attempt by the Belarusian government to permanently deny the channel official accreditation in Belarus.

In 2012, a rather new form of Belarusian oppression of non-government media journalists who cooperate with foreign media channels became the issuance of foreign travel bans. Officers of the Citizenship and Migration Department of the Republic of Belarus blamed the application of such bans on trips abroad on a software bug.⁶³ On March 20, Mikhail Yanchuk, Belsat TV's official representative, received a certificate by the Office for Citizenship and Migration of the

⁵⁹ "Шнобелевскую премию мира получил запретивший аплодисменты Лукашенко," Росбалт, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2013/09/13/1175202.html>.

⁶⁰ "Пераслед «Белсату» За 10 Гadoў Працы. Інфаграфіка."

⁶¹ "Для «Белсата» рашэнне беларускага суду нічога ня зменіць," Радыё Свабода, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/26566276.html>.

⁶² "На «Белсат» Падалі ў Суд," Наша Ніва, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=117541>.

⁶³ Belarusian Association of Journalists, "Mass Media in Belarus 2012."

Maskouski district in Brest (his official place of residence in Belarus) that restricted his travelling abroad. According to the certificate, the ban on his trips abroad was applied by the government on the basis of a request sent on March 5 by the Ministry of Defense, because of his “avoidance of draft to military service or service in the reserve.”⁶⁴ In an attempt to search for a legal explanation of the actions of these government institutions, the journalist went to the military commissariat in Brest. Military commissioners at the office could not find him in the database and told Yanchuk that he could not even be legally drafted by the country’s military service anymore. According to the Belarusian law Yanchuk passed the draft age 12 years before, because he was thirty nine years old. Besides, the military commissioner told the journalist that no restrictions on travel outside of the country were imposed on anybody by the Ministry of Defense on March 5.

The application of fines as a method of economic repression against Belsat TV’s journalists for breaking Article 22.9 became widely used by the Lukashenko’s government after 2014. The number of fines paid by Belsat TV’s journalists for violation of the Article 22.9 during the period 2014-2017 is depicted in Table 5 below.

Table 5: The number of fines paid by Belsat TV's journalists for breaking Article 22.9⁶⁵

	In Belarusian rubles	In dollars
2014	52.05 mln	5095.45
2015	106.28 mln	6699.02
2016	70.77 mln	3558.96
2017	49.680	24840.03

On July 1, 2016 a new Belarusian ruble was introduced. The new currency slashed five zeros from the old denomination of all banknotes.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Belarusian Association of Journalists.

⁶⁵ Belarusian Association of Journalists, “Fines to Journalists for Violating Article 22.9 of the Administrative Code,” data report, October 7, 2018, <https://baj.by/en/analytics/fines-journalists-violating-article-229-administrative-code-chart-updated>.

As seen in Table 5, the largest number of fines levied against Belsat TV's reporters was in 2017. According to information from the Belarusian Association of Journalist, 94 percent of government fines against independent journalists working without official accreditation in 2017 were imposed on Belsat TV's journalists.⁶⁷ The geographical hotspot for government fines against the channel's journalists became Homel region. In addition, 17 of 45 fines in Homel region from 2014 to 2016 were applied against Belsat TV's journalist, Kastus Zhukouski.⁶⁸ On April 15, 2016, after one more instance of the government's application of a fine against his violation of the Article 25 of the Administrative Code of the Republic of Belarus the journalist decided to make a vivid action of protest. He published a video on Youtube which depicts him sewing his mouth in protest of continuous disrespect of the right for free speech and expression by the Belarusian government authorities.⁶⁹

The deployment of a large number of fines in 2017 against the channel's journalists happened at the same time as their participation in live-streaming of the protests against "Dekret Nomer 3," a law intended to impose steep fines (the Belarusian government considers "Dekret Nomer 3" to be imposing a "tax") on Belarusian citizens for being unemployed. A widespread series of protests erupted across the country during this period due to the fact that the law was set to begin in the middle of 2017. The protests quickly caught fire across the republic, even reaching small towns that had last seen protests during the final days of the Soviet Union. They lasted for the entire spring and pushed the government to postpone instating Dekret Nomer 3.

⁶⁶ "Деноминация валюты, белорусского рубля | Деноминация в Беларуси в 2000, 2016 годах," accessed November 26, 2018, <https://myfin.by/info/denominaciya>.

⁶⁷ "Няпросты год «Белсату»: саджалі ў турмы, адбіралі дзяцей," accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/in-focus/nyaprosty-god-belsatu-sadzhalu-u-turmy-adbirali-dzyatsej/>.

⁶⁸ "Пераслед «Белсату» За 10 Годоў Працы. Інфаграфіка."

⁶⁹ БЕЛСАТ NEWS, *Кастусь Жукоўскі Зашывае Рот На Знак Пратэсту Супраць "Судзілішча,"* accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNThKkLDPqc&feature=youtu.be>.

The protest looked to have the momentum to create lasting change and was termed the “Belarusian Spring.” However, the government did not abolish the law, only deferred its implementation to calm the public and slightly amend the details of the “tax.”

Over the course of the protests, Belsat TV’s journalist live-streamed coverage of all events against, about, and connected to the new government decree. This caused Belarusian government officials to implement serious measures against the journalists of the channel. In addition to imposing hefty fines on Belsat TV’s reporters, in March 2017 two offices of the channel in Minsk were raided by police. All computers, electronics, and office furniture were confiscated. When journalists returned to work in the morning they found themselves in completely empty office spaces. According to statements made by Belsat TV employees, the value of the confiscated property was roughly equivalent to 20 thousand euros at the time. Furthermore, after the protests in the Spring, many Belsat TV journalists were arrested by the state police and spent brief periods in jail.

In 2016, after a meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs from both Poland and Belarus on March 22 and 23, 2016 information was revealed about the Belarusian government’s attempts to shut down the channel by conducting negotiations with the Polish side in regards to illegal Belsat TV’s broadcasting. In an interview with Wpolityce.pl after the meeting, Poland’s minister of foreign affairs Witold Waszczykowski said that the country is planning to stop funding Belsat TV and replace its broadcasting with the official channel of Polish television, TVP Polonia.⁷⁰ Attempting to demonstrate the absurdity of the discourse between Belarus and Poland considering halting the channel’s operation, director of Belsat TV, Romaszewska, said:

⁷⁰ “Editorial: Supporting Belsat Is in the Real Interest of Warsaw and Minsk,” BelarusDigest, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/editorial-supporting-belsat-is-in-the-real-interest-of-warsaw-and-minsk/>.

“The first channel of Polish Television (TVP 1) cannot be included in the terrestrial television in Belarus due to licensing rights. In addition, TVP Polonia is created on the basis of TVP1 and TVP2 programs, which will lead to the same licensing problems. One should realize that replacing Belsat TV with TVP Polonia is nonsense, because Belsat is a channel for Belarusians while the main audience of TVP Polonia is the Polish minority and diaspora.”⁷¹

At the end of 2016, the non-government organization, “The Movement for Freedom,” founded by well-known Belarusian pro-Western politician, Aliaksandr Milinkevich (a candidate in the 2006 presidential election and laureate of European Parliament Sakhrov Prize “For Freedom of Thought”), started a petition addressed to the Polish President, Andrzej Duda, to protest the closing of Belsat TV. The petition was signed by 4, 507 supporters of the channel in Belarus and abroad.⁷² At the same time civil society activists and organizations in Belarus started an online campaign to support Belsat TV. Under hashtags #belsatzhywi (#longlivebelsat) and #abaronimbelsat (#timetodefendbelsat) many followers of Belsat TV’s social network pages (Facebook, V Kontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Twitter) wrote comments in support of the channel continuing to operate.

The negative news about the future of the channel were quickly retracted by the public statements of Polish government officials. In January 2017 the Speaker of the upper house of the Polish parliament, Stanisław Karczewski, said to the journalists of the official Polish government newspaper “Rzeczpospolita” that:

⁷¹ “Belarus Authorities Tempting Poland to Cut Belsat TV Air Time?,” accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/mensk-vyadze-peramovy-ab-skarachenni-vyashchannya-belsatu/>.

⁷² “Sign the Petition,” Change.org, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.change.org/p/прэзідэнт-польшчы-сп-р-анджэй-дуда-захаваць-тэлеканал-белсат>.

“The Senate will make amendments. However, opinions vary. Belsat TV should operate further. I respect the achievements of director Agnieszka Romaszewska-Guzy and Belsat TV team, because they do a good job. The TV station should be financed in such a way as to be able to work freely and independently. In the Senate, we will resume financing Belsat so that it can work in normal conditions in 2017.”⁷³

In the same month, an encouraging comment about continuing Belsat TV’s broadcasting was posted by Agnieszka Romaszewska on her Facebook page after her meeting with the Prime Minister of Poland, Beata Szydło, to discuss the channel’s financing. Agnieszka Romaszewska wrote:

“I believe that you will share my joy over the news I want to spread: Prime Minister has assured me that there is no threat to Belsat TV. Over the next month the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Belsat TV will be establishing further principles of cooperation.”⁷⁴

At the end of 2017 news about additional sources of financing and international media cooperation opportunities for Belsat TV came to light. A few days before the start of Poland’s winter holidays, British Prime Minister, Theresa May, visited Warsaw to negotiate joint political goals in the spheres of cybersecurity and defense and security cooperation between Poland and the United Kingdom. May said that both countries should specifically focus on joining their forces with the aim of combating Russian informational propaganda in the region. She offered to launch new joint strategic communication projects. Belsat TV would be included in the plan. The

⁷³ “Мы вернем фінансаванне «Белсату», – маршалак Сенату Польшчы,” accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/news/my-vernem-finansavanne-belsatu-marshalak-senatu-polshchy/>.

⁷⁴ “No Threat to Belsat TV, Director Says after Meeting with Poland’s Prime Minister,” accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/telekanalu-nichoga-ne-pagrazhae-dyrektarka-belsatu-paslya-sustrechy-z-kiraunitsayu-polskaga-uradu/>.

United Kingdom offered to donate 5 million dollars to the project asking Poland to make a similar contribution. Following the plan, in 2018 Belsat TV began its cooperation with BBC and currently broadcasts a wide range of BBC programs, documentary, and feature films.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ “Правительство Великобритании поддержит «Белсат» в борьбе с кремлевской пропагандой в регионе,” accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/pravitelstvo-velikobritanii-podderzhit-belsat-v-borbe-s-kremlevskoj-propagandoj-v-regione/>.

Chapter 4: The influence of geopolitical and socio-economic factors on fluctuations in methods and patterns of the Belarusian government's repression of Belsat TV

The response of Lukashenko's government to Belsat TV has fluctuated over the course of the ten years the channel has been in operation, despite the Belarusian government's general disapproval of the channel's aims and work. In the first two years of Belsat TV's broadcasting, Lukashenko's government did not view the channel as a serious threat to its regime and relied on sparse detentions and warning letters sent to Belsat TV's freelancers and its founder and director, Agnieszka Romaszewska, as a means of discouraging its reporting. However, public protests against the suspect results of the Presidential election in 2010 and 2011, and Belsat TV's active involvement in live-streaming their every detail with an explicit goal of attracting the attention of democratic countries to violations of human rights in Belarus pushed the Belarusian government to respond to the channel's actions with more violent and oppressive means. Physical violence and imprisonment of Belsat TV's reporters as well as the searches of the channel's offices by the police were the main methods of government repression against Belsat TV in this period. After the wave of "silent protests" in summer of 2011 subsided, the government's repressions tapered off a bit. The most overt attempt to hinder the channel's broadcasting during the period from 2012-2014 occurred when the channel was charged with using the trademarked name of the "BELSATplus" company. After 2014, the government's strategy for persecuting non-state media was mainly economic, specifically the imposition of hefty fines on journalists working without accreditation in Belarus. Over the course of its ten years in existence, 2017 was the hardest for Belsat TV's Belarus-based journalists in terms of all mentioned methods of government persecution.

The reasons for such inconsistencies in the Belarusian government's approach towards Belsat TV - as well as other foreign independent media - can be explained by geopolitical and socio-economic factors. Among the most important of them are: the relationship between Belarus and Russia, and between Belarus and the European Union; the effect of the global economic crises on Belarus; domestic socio-economic crises in Belarus; and the growing popularity of Belsat TV amongst the Belarusian population in the country and abroad as one of the most reliable news and entertainment sources in the Belarusian language.

BELARUS'S GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION IN THE YEARS 2007-2017, AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE INTENSITY OF THE BELARUSIAN GOVERNMENT'S PERSECUTION OF BELSAT TV

The fluctuations in the Belarusian government's response to Belsat TV in the past ten years can be explained by changes in the three-way relationship between Belarus, Russia, and the European Union. One of the most important features of this relationship is Lukashenko's ability to skillfully manipulate his partners to reach specific economic and political goals and keep his regime afloat. When Belarus's relations with Russia reached a political and economic stalemate in 2008-2009, Belarus stretched its hand to Europe and eased the government pressure on oppositional foreign media. During and after the 2010 Presidential election, Lukashenko's regime faced a real threat of collapse. Thus, the government deployed all the leverage available to it against foreign independent press and media at that time to inhibit its influence on Belarusian population discontent with Lukashenko being in power. Such actions of the government ended the period of rapprochement in the relationship between Belarus and the European Union, and pushed Belarus into economic and political dependence on its traditional Russian ally. However, after the summer wave of "silent protests" in 2011, the country's authorities were looking again for ways to obtain loans and financial support from the European Union and protect themselves against falling into deeper dependence on Russia. Thus, the

repression of non-state and foreign media at the time consisted of non-violent, economic and administrative measures of persecution. Since 2014, economic measures of oppression of non-accredited journalists, in particular fines, became widely deployed by the Belarusian authorities. The Belarusian government disguised such measures as legal and democratic, which in many cases was not noticeable to Western politicians or the major part of the Belarusian population. The deployment of these measures helped the Belarusian government to avoid deterioration in its ties with the European Union. A domestic-socio economic crisis in Belarus in 2017, which culminated in the wave of spring protests against “Dekret Nomer 3” and exacerbated by Lukashenko’s fear of Russian invasion, spurred Belarusian authorities to crack down on oppositional media and foreign journalists. Despite the government’s deployment of violence against protesters and non-state media, it was still able to preserve the improved relationship with the European Union. In addition, in an attempt to overcome a long period of stagnation in the Belarusian economy, Belarus had to stay under Russian political and economic influence.

BELARUS’S RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION IN 2007-2009

Despite a negative attitude towards the first Polish foreign satellite channel about Belarus in the Belarusian language, the Belarusian government did not enact any violent or harsh economic measures to impede its broadcasting in the first two years. The reluctance of Belarusian officials to apply more aggressive leverage against the influence of this foreign channel can be explained by the country’s external political position and economic stalemate, which was exacerbated by its traditional Russian ally’s reluctance to continue subsidizing supplies of gas and oil. Specifically, Russia had retaliated against the Belarusian state’s failure to recognize the independence of two new republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which emerged

after Russia's five days war with Georgia in 2008.⁷⁶ In 2010 Lukashenko reported that at that time he tried to negotiate with the Russian president, Dimitri Medvedev, recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Belarus.⁷⁷ However, the Russian side refused to make necessary financial concessions that could have convinced Belarus to accept the independence of these two states. The international political cost for Belarus to officially recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence was too high. Namely, it could have had a significant negative influence on its newly improved relationship with the West. Moreover, Russian officials could not tolerate Lukashenko's vacillating approach to the country's foreign policy. Lukashenko's political habit of fluctuating between the West and Russia depending on geopolitical circumstances angered Russian officials when, in May 2009, Belarus declined a 500 million dollar stabilization loan from Russia and instead took one billion Euros in addition to an already agreed loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁷⁸ Russia's ambitions to control Belarus economically and politically continued to be eluded by the Belarusian leader's wily political manipulations.

While the relationship between Russia and Belarus from 2008 to 2009 reached an economic and political impasse, Lukashenko decided to reach out with an olive branch to Europe again. In doing so, the Belarusian government had to make it appear that it adhered to the essential democratic values of the European Union, which focus on - among other things - the crucial importance of human rights and the existence of free media in any democratic state. Thus, during this period, Lukashenko's administration tried to avoid the use of special police

⁷⁶ Александр КЛАСКОВСКИЙ, "Как Лукашенко Поставил Крест На Признании Абхазии и Южной Осетии," *Naviny.By*, August 7, 2018, <https://naviny.by/article/20180807/1533643590-kak-lukashenko-postavil-krest-na-priznanii-abhazii-i-yuzhnoy-osetii>.

⁷⁷ КЛАСКОВСКИЙ.

⁷⁸ Vitali Silitski, "The Milk Split by the Milk War," *POLITICO*, June 24, 2009, <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-milk-split-by-the-milk-war/>.

forces and other violent measures to suppress the activity of anti-government opposition, media, and civil society organizations.

The war between Georgia and Russia, as well as the events of the Orange revolution in Ukraine, which ended in the election of a Western-oriented and pro-democratic president, Viktor Yushchenko, inspired the European Union to make an attempt to bring Belarus into the European fold and reach a rapprochement with the country.⁷⁹ After witnessing the Belarusian government's reluctance to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the European Union understood the necessity of starting a dialogue with the Belarusian government. In 2008, in an attempt to lay the foundation for democratic changes in Belarus, the European Union reconsidered its original twelve conditions for bilateral engagement with the Belarusian government. The original twelve conditions were first published in a non-paper entitled "What the European Union could bring to Belarus" in November 2006. In 2008, the European Union decided to focus on three of them: democratic elections, a free media, and free assembly. The European Union decided to minimize the importance of other nine conditions after understanding that they were unacceptable to Belarusian authorities and were not widely circulated among the Belarusian public. The original twelve conditions were as follows.⁸⁰

- Democratic elections, including the right of opposition candidates to campaign freely;
- Free expression and the right of journalists to conduct their activities without harassment;
- Full rights for NGOs

⁷⁹ Stephan Keukeleire and Tom Delreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*, European Union Series (Palgrave Macmillan (Firm)) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 258.

⁸⁰ David R. Marples, "Between the EU and Russia: Geopolitical Games in Belarus," *The Journal of Belarusian Studies* 7, no. 1 (n.d.): 42.

- The release of all political prisoners, which included those in opposition parties, NGOs, and others arrested at public demonstrations;
- A review of cases of those who ‘disappeared’ in 1999-2000 (Zacharenka, Hanchar, Krasouski, and Zavadski);
- An impartial and independent legal system;
- The ending of arbitrary arrests and incarcerations;
- Full rights for national minorities;
- Workers’ rights, including the right to join (an independent) trade union;
- Full rights for entrepreneurs (small businessmen) to operate without hindrance;
- The abolition of the death penalty in concert with the other countries of Europe;
- To accept support from the OSCE, EU, and other agencies were willing to assist Belarus and support popular rights.

Once these essential three conditions were fulfilled by the Belarusian side, the European Union offered the country numerous economic and social benefits of closer cross-border cooperation. They focused on increasing the European Union’s financial aid to Belarus, which would be distributed for modernizing the country’s small and medium enterprises, and improving the quality of Belarusian health care and education. Other benefits would cover such areas of common concern as the environment, food safety, working conditions, and the development of transport and energy networks.⁸¹

Furthermore, on 13 October 2008, European Union foreign ministers came to an agreement to temporarily (for a 6-month trial period) lift the travel bans on Lukashenko and 40

⁸¹ Marples, 42.

members of his administration, which had been applied to them after the Belarusian government's brutal crack-down on opposition candidates and independent media during the 2006 Presidential elections.⁸²

A significant step on the side of the European Union towards strengthening its relationship with Belarus and preventing the country from drifting further into the Russian orbit of influence was the inclusion of Belarus into the eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy, called the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Since 2009, Belarus has been engaged in EaP's non-binding multilateral track of regional cooperation.⁸³ Negotiations on a visa facilitation and readmission agreement were the only exceptions made for the EU cooperation with Belarus on a bilateral track.⁸⁴ Within this framework, Belarusian civil society activists are invited to participate in EaP's forums (multilateral track), such as the Civil Society Forum (CSF), national platforms, the Business Forum, CORLEAP, and EURONEST.⁸⁵ However, due to a lack of agreement about who would represent Belarus at EURONEST meetings, the involvement of the country in the parliamentary assembly was suspended.⁸⁶

The bilateral and multilateral assistance to Belarus under the EaP in the form of country Action Programs is funded by the European Union's financial instrument called the European

⁸² Bruno Waterfield, "Alexander Lukashenko Travel Ban Lifted by EU," October 13, 2008, sec. World, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/belarus/3190871/Alexander-Lukashenko-travel-ban-lifted-by-EU.html>.

⁸³ EUROPEAN COMMISSION- et al., "Strategy Paper and Multiannual Indicative Programme for EU Support to Belarus (2014-2017)," accessed November 26, 2018, http://ec.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/pdf/financing-the-enp/belarus_2014_2017_programming_document_en.pdf.

⁸⁴ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, "EU-Belarus Relations Factsheet," accessed November 26, 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eap_factsheet_belarus.pdf.

⁸⁵ Elena A. Korosteleva, "The European Union and Belarus: Democracy Promotion by Technocratic Means?," *Democratization* 23, no. 4 (2016): 682.

⁸⁶ Matthew Frear, "The EU and Belarus after the 2010 Presidential Election," accessed November 26, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/633567/The_EU_and_Belarus_after_the_2010_presidential_election.

Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI).⁸⁷ Since the European Union does not have much influence on the official course of politics espoused by the authoritarian Belarusian government, its aid focuses on the development of Belarusian civil society, the modernization of public institutions, reforms in energy, environment, food safety, regional and local development, education and people-to-people contacts.

BELARUS'S RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION DURING AND AFTER THE 2010 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN BELARUS

Two years of the Belarusian government's tacit toleration of Belsat TV and other independent news organizations came to an end after the 2010 Presidential election in the country. Belsat TV played a large role in live-streaming every detail of public protests against the forged election process in Belarus. These protests took place on the eve of the announcement of the presidential election results on December 19, 2010, and reached their culmination in summer 2011. One of the channel's main goals at that time was to attract the attention of democratic countries to the violation of human rights in Belarus. Belsat TV's active work in covering the protests pushed the Belarusian government to respond to the channel's actions with more violent and oppressive measures. Physical violence and imprisonment of Belsat TV's reporters, as well as searches of the channel's offices by the government police, were the main methods of government repression against Belsat TV after the 2010 Presidential election. The deployment of violence by the government can be explained by Lukashenko's fear of losing power as well as his apprehension of a Russian invasion in case the protests got out of hand.

The actions of the Belarusian government towards non-state media sources and their journalists during the 2010 Presidential election and afterward were condemned by the European

⁸⁷ In 2014 the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) was replaced by the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI)

Union. During the meeting with Belarusian independent journalists in Brussels in 2012, the European Union's commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy Štefan Füle said that:

“The Belarusian independent media fulfil a crucial role in the state dominated media landscape in Belarus and have been one of the main victims of the authorities’ crackdown on independent opinions after the 2010 Presidential elections. The independent media deserve all of our support in these difficult times.”⁸⁸

Despite the government's reluctance to put an end to the period of rapprochement in the relationship between Belarus and the European Union, Lukashenko could not permit any opportunity for his authoritative power to be overthrown. Thus, the government used all the leverage available to it to prevent such a course of events. Presidential elections in the years before 2010 had never gathered such strong attention from the Belarusian population. An exit poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) in early December showed that 58 percent of the voters supported Lukashenko, while 9.7 and 7 percent of them backed his main competitors, Nyaklaeu and Sannikau respectively.⁸⁹ Besides, there were far more financial, media, and administrative resources at Lukashenko's disposal to promote his campaign in comparison with other candidates. Thus, the Presidential administration was shocked when on the night of December 19 thousands of Belarusians came to protest fraudulent election results in Independence Square, where the Parliament and the Central Election Committee building are located. While protests were peaceful at first, it is not exactly clear why they became violent in the end. There are various theories that try to explain how

⁸⁸ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, “Belarus: With Independent Journalists about European Future,” *Press Room*, 2012, http://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/fule/headlines/news/2012/07/20120718_2_en.htm.

⁸⁹ Elena. Kropatcheva, “Presidential Election in Belarus in 2010 : The Winner Takes It All?,” *OSCE Yearbook : Yearbook on the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE)* 17 (2012): 95.

events developed in this way. One of them focuses on the opinion that there was a small group of protesters that were ready to storm the building of the Central Election Committee after being motivated by the speeches of popular opposition candidate Sannikau. Another theory suggests that a small group of undercover protestors was hired by Lukashenko to perform a fake “coup d’état” to provide cause to suppress the protests and get rid of opposition candidates.⁹⁰ Finally, Belarusian authorities feared the intervention of Russia in the case of the victory of a Western-minded opposition candidate and had to demonstrate to Russian political officials their ability to neutralize the actions of anti-government opposition.

The brutal crackdown of the Belarusian authorities on non-violent protesters during and after the 2010 Presidential election ended a period of sustained and pro-democratic dialogue between Belarus and the European Union. However, despite beatings and interrogation of the main opposition leaders and the riot police’s brutal actions towards non-violent protesters who decried the falsification of the election results, the EU decided not to impose strict economic sanctions on Belarus, since that could harm a large part of the Belarusian population and push the country closer towards cooperation with Russia. The EU’s sanctions towards Belarus were mainly imposed against government elites responsible for election fraud and violence against the Belarusian people and presidential candidates. By March 2012 the EU imposed travel restrictions and froze the assets of 243 Belarusian politicians and businessmen; imposed an embargo on arms and materials that could be used for internal repression; applied restrictions on lending from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB); and froze the assets of 32 companies with foreign capital.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Kropatcheva, 95.

⁹¹ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, “ENP Package – Belarus,” *Press Release MEMO RAPID*, March 20, 2013, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-244_en.htm.

BELARUS'S RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION IN 2011-2014

After the summer wave of “silent protests” in 2011 the Belarusian government’s oppression of Belsat TV and other independent media outlets softened. The Belarusian government’s main priority during 2012-2014 was overcoming the consequences of the country’s economic crisis by looking for ways to obtain loans and financial support from the West and avoiding further economic and political dependence on Russia. Thus, it temporarily eased its pressure on the media and opposition. In addition, on September 1, 2011, the Belarusian government released 13 of 28 political prisoners detained during the 2010 Presidential elections. However, the European Union was still cautious and diplomatic in its response to such actions by the Belarusian authorities.⁹² It seems that European politicians did not want to take any active steps to improve ties with Belarus until they saw reciprocal action from the Belarusian side. Europe awaited the release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners and serious reforms of the government, as well as social and economic reforms in the country.

In preparation for the country’s fifth Presidential election, the Belarusian government altered its strategy for persecuting forms of non-state media. Since 2014, it was focused mainly on economic pressure, specifically on imposition of hefty fines on journalists working without accreditation in Belarus. The main reason for such a change in the strategy was the government’s aspiration to strengthen its ties with the West, while fearing the repetition of the scenario of Russian aggression in Ukraine. On the one hand, the application of physical violence against independent journalists during and after the 2010 Presidential election in Belarus was covered by many foreign news outlets and received enormous publicity and condemnation in many Western states. But the imposition of financial penalties on journalists breaking Article 22.9 of the

⁹² “Mladenov about Lukashenko: The President Seemed Sincere,” *UDF.BY | Новості Беларусі*, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://udf.by/english/main-story/47299-mladenov-about-lukashenko-president-seemed-sincere.html>.

Belarusian Administrative Code for working without official accreditation was only brought to the attention of a small share of the Belarusian and Western population who had access to independent opposition print and media outlets focusing on current events in Belarus (Belsat TV is one of them). Thus, this economic form of repression was deliberately hidden from a Western-oriented population in Belarus and abroad. Therefore, Belarus's international political image would not suffer in the eyes of democratic powers in the West. Violence against opposition journalists is viewed in the West as an infringement on universal human and free speech rights as well as the right of journalists to conduct their activities without harassment. But the imposition of fines on journalists cooperating with a foreign satellite channel, which is not officially legally accredited by the government, might be viewed by the Western states as the Belarusian authorities' attempts to protect the power of law in the country.

BELARUS'S RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION IN 2015-2016

From 2015-2016 the priority of the Belarusian authorities was to improve the relationship between Belarus and the European Union. In response to the decision of Lukashenko to release all political prisoners on August 22, 2015 and conduct the Presidential election on October 11, 2015 in a free peaceful environment, the Council of the European Union suspended its sanctions against 170 individuals and three companies.⁹³ In January 2014, the two sides had started negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements. Many members of the European Union continued to use flexibilities in the existing visa code to ease the conditions and process of issuing visas to Belarusian citizens.⁹⁴ In addition, Belarus and the European Union started to

⁹³ Council of the European Union, "Belarus Sanctions: EU Delists 170 People, 3 Companies; Prolongs Arms Embargo," *Press Release*, February 25, 2016, sec. 83/16, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/02/25/belarus-sanctions/#>.

⁹⁴ EUROPEAN COMMISSION and HIGH REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNION FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY POLICY, "Eastern Partnership - Focusing on Key Priorities and Deliverables" (Joint Staff Working

resolve the problem of the Belarusian Parliament's absence at the Euronest. At the meeting of the Bureau of the European Parliament on January 25-26, 2016, the heads of the Parliamentary delegations to the Parliamentary Assembly of Euronest from Azerbaijan, Armenia and Ukraine, spoke against the absence of the Belarusian delegation in Euronest. Thus, the actions of three EaP members supporting the inclusion of Belarus in the Parliamentary Assembly might make the European Union revise its decision regarding the exclusion of Belarus from Euronest meetings.⁹⁵

The determination of the Belarusian authorities to build closer ties with the European Union from 2015-2016 was caused in a large degree by Russia's expansionary ambitions in eastern Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Ryhor Astapenia, a researcher of the Ostrogorski Centre political think tank, which focuses on Belarusian politics, writes that the Belarusian government had never been so wary of a Russian military invasion in Belarus as in 2015.⁹⁶ In May 2015, the Belarusian president, at a seven hours-long press conference in Minsk, made a comment regarding the government's necessity to strengthen the Belarusian army to enable it to be rapidly moved from Minsk to Vitebsk to strike a blow in case Russia decided to repeat a scenario similar to Ukrainian in Belarus.⁹⁷

BELARUS'S RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION IN 2017

An escalation of the government's repression of independent journalists could be observed in many Belarusian cities during the protests against "Dekret Nomer 3", a law intended to impose "tax" on Belarusian citizens for being unemployed. The scale of the protests and active

Document, December 15, 2016), https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/near-eeas_joint_swd_2016467_0.pdf.

⁹⁵ "Future of Belarus in the EURONEST," Solidarity with Belarus Information Office, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belarusinfofocus.info/international-relations/future-belarus-euronest>.

⁹⁶ Ryhor Astapenia, "Analytical Paper 5: Belarus-Russia Relations after the Ukraine Conflict," *BelarusDigest*, August 1, 2016, 7, <https://belarusdigest.com/papers/belarus-russia-relations.pdf>.

⁹⁷ "О чем на пресс-конференции говорил Лукашенко более 7 часов (фото, видео)," Новости Беларуси | euroradio.fm, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://euroradio.fm/ru/press-konferenciya-lukashenko-onlayn>.

involvement of independent journalists in the mobilization of protesters pushed the Belarusian government to deploy violence, as well as administrative and economic measures of persecution against them. While the main goal of Lukashenko's authorities was to put an end to the protests, they were also wary of the reaction of the West to its violent tactics of media repression. Thus, in an effort to preserve its improved relationship with the European Union, the authorities mitigated their repression in the middle of spring and took a decision to postpone the implementation of "Dekret Nomer 3". As a result, the wave of protests subsided, and the repressive tactics deployed by the Belarusian government in the beginning of social unrest did not have a negative impact on the relationship between Belarus and the European Union.

The ability of the Belarusian government to promptly cease the wave of the protests helped it to avoid condemnation by Russian authorities in Belarusian authorities' inability to avoid domestic political crisis without external interference of its neighbor. Thus, Belarus's relations with Russia after the 2017 spring protests did not go through any noticeable changes and remained relatively stable. Although Belarusian politicians were wary of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, they did not have much space for political maneuvering and tried to use any excuse to abstain from close political cooperation with Russia. After the start of Russian conflict with Ukraine, the Russian government made numerous attempts to convince Belarusian officials in the necessity of the construction of a Russian airbase in Western Belarus.⁹⁸ However, the Belarusian side continued to postpone debates about its construction.⁹⁹ Belarusian authorities realized that close military cooperation between Belarus and Russia could push it into a deeper political dependence on Russia and deteriorate Belarus's political image as an independent

⁹⁸ Astapenia, "Analytical Paper 5: Belarus-Russia Relations after the Ukraine Conflict."

⁹⁹ Astapenia.

country in the West. In addition, the continuous stagnation in the Belarusian economy forced the country's authorities to look for ways to strengthen its economic ties with the West.

THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS IN 2011 AND DOMESTIC SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS IN 2017 ON BELARUSIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE INTENSITY OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PERSECUTION OF BELSAT TV

Despite the EU's wariness of pushing Belarus into the hands of Russia following the protests during and after the 2010 Presidential election, such a political scenario became unavoidable. The situation was largely influenced by the global financial crisis, which caused hyperinflation and a national currency devaluation in Belarus in 2011. The Belarusian ruble fell from BYR 3,000 to the dollar in the beginning of 2011 to BYR 8, 650 on October 20, 2011: an annual devaluation of 189 %, ¹⁰⁰ the largest drop in 20 years. ¹⁰¹ The International Monetary Fund's recalcitrance to provide Belarus with up to \$8 billion in recovery loans due to the government's neglect of essential democratic values and defective macro-economic policies induced Lukashenka to ask Russia for help. Thus, on June 4, 2011, the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) approved the terms for a \$ 3 billion bailout loan from its anti-crisis fund to Belarus to stabilize its economy. The total amount of the loan was to be transferred in tranches throughout a period of three years. The loan agreement between Belarus and the EurAsEC provided a 10 year period for the loan. However, according to one of the agreement's conditions, the extension of the loan's period was tied to the Belarusian government's willingness to allow the privatization of \$7 billion of the country's public assets to Russian companies. ¹⁰² By the end

¹⁰⁰ "Девальвация белорусской нацвалюты с начала года составила 189%," РИА Новости, 20111020T1458+0400Z, <https://ria.ru/economy/20111020/465390584.html>.

¹⁰¹ "Валютный Кризис в Белоруссии. Девальвация Белорусского Рубля," Финансовые новости. Обзоры рынков, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.financialblog.ru/2011/05/24/valyutnyj-krizis-v-belorussii-devalvaciya-belorusskogo-rublya.html>.

¹⁰² Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation, "Statements of Deputy Head of the Government of the Russian Federation – Finance Minister of the Russian Federation A. Kudrin," July 11, 2012, https://www.minfin.ru/en/search/?q_4=Belarus+loan+&source_id_4=6.

of 2011, Russian companies made big financial gains in important branches of Belarusian industry such as oil refineries, petroleum factories, banking and insurance, and cellular phone companies. One of the largest losses for Belarusian economy was the sale of the controlling number of shares of Beltransgaz (the major Belarusian factory responsible for transferring gas from Russia to Europe) to the Russian company Gazprom.¹⁰³ Thus, global economic crises and the deterioration in the relationship between Belarus and the European Union made Belarus become more economically and politically dependent on Russia.

In order to abstain from drifting into a deeper economic and political dependence on Russia after the global economic crises, Belarusian authorities had to look for ways to improve the country's relationship with the West. Free expression and speech are among the most important contributors to the democratic political system of most Western states. Thus, the government of Belarus understood the necessity of easing its pressure on foreign and non-state media with the aim of building stronger ties with the West. After the wave of "silent" protests in summer of 2011 the number of Belsat TV journalists detained and sentenced by the police for illegal journalistic work without official government accreditation decreased. Belsat TV freelancers living in Belarus, however, continued to receive occasional warning letters for cooperation with the foreign media channel.

The most adversarial period in the relationship between Lukashenko's government and Belsat TV took place as a result of the country's domestic socio-economic crises in 2017. After the global drop in prices for energy sources, Russia started to charge Belarus the same prices for its gas and oil as to the European Union countries. Thus, the Belarusian budget was deprived of a large Russian energy subsidy equal to the difference between the market price for energy sources

¹⁰³ Marples, "Between the EU and Russia: Geopolitical Games in Belarus," 50.

and the price of shipment to Belarus. In addition, the worsening economic situation in Russia caused by the energy crisis and Western sanctions, had a direct effect on the Belarusian economy, since Russia is the most important trade partner of Belarus. According to the data of National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, the country exported to Russia 44,1 %¹⁰⁴ of its goods in 2017, and its imports from Russia were 57, 2%¹⁰⁵ of its total imports in 2017.

Deteriorating economic conditions in Belarus, exacerbated by the Belarusian government's decision to tax unemployed citizens, induced social unrest in the country in the spring of 2017, which was brutally suppressed by the police right after its start. The deteriorating relationship between Belarus and Russia caused by the Ukrainian conflict and weakening of the Russian economy, pushed Lukashenko's administration to deploy stronger methods of persecution against opposition media organizations in the beginning of the protests. The most important goal for Lukashenko's government at that moment was to ensure that the present regime's power structure remained in place and intact in an effort to avoid, or at least delay, the president outright losing his office. However, being deprived of a large Russian energy subsidy, Belarusian authorities were determined to search for ways to become less economically dependent on Russia and understood the importance of strengthening its ties with the West. Thus, in the middle of spring, the government eased its repression of independent media and postponed the implementation of "Dekret Nomer 3". Such actions were incited by the Belarusian authorities' wariness of the condemnation of their violent tactics against the protesters and

¹⁰⁴ Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, "Распределение Экспорта Товаров По Странам – Основным Торговым Партнерам в 2017 Году," n.d., http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/makroekonomika-i-okruzhayushchaya-sreda/vneshnyaya-torgovlya_2/dannye-o-vneshnei-torgovle-respubliki-belarus-p_2/raspredelenie-eksporta-tovarov-po-stranam-osnovnym-torgovym-partneram/.

¹⁰⁵ Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, "Распределение Импорта Товаров По Странам – Основным Торговым Партнерам в 2017 Году," http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/makroekonomika-i-okruzhayushchaya-sreda/vneshnyaya-torgovlya_2/dannye-o-vneshnei-torgovle-respubliki-belarus-p_2/raspredelenie-importa-tovarov-po-stranam-osnovnym-torgovym-partneram/.

independent media in the West. While in the beginning of the protests, the government attempted to promptly subside them in an effort to avoid a threat to the present regime, by the end of spring, the country's authorities' goal was to abstain from falling into a deeper dependence on its Russian neighbor by looking for new political and economic partners in the West.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE GROWING POPULARITY OF BELSAT TV ON THE INTENSITY OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PERSECUTION OF THE CHANNEL

Over the course of its ten years in existence, 2017 was the hardest for Belsat TV's Belarus-based journalists in terms of all mentioned methods of government persecution. The total amount of fines paid by the channel reached \$24, 840 in this year. In addition, Belsat TV journalists spent more than 30 days in prison.¹⁰⁶ One of the main reasons for such deterioration in relationships between the Belarusian government and Belsat TV is the growth in popularity of the channel among the Belarusian people. Once the Belarusian government saw the growth in Belsat TV's popularity and influence, it started to look at the channel as a serious threat to the president's regime.

According to the data collected by the statistical agency Civitta Group SATIO during of April 20-31, 2017, every third Belarusian knows about Belsat TV, more than 750, 000 of Belarusians (10% of the country's population) watch it regularly, and the audience of the channel has doubled in two years.¹⁰⁷ Since Belsat TV is only included in cable networks in Poland and Ukraine, and is prohibited from Belarusian cable networks, the majority of its audience gets access to the channel online. Growth of internet access in Belarus during the last five years had a large impact on the growth of the audience of Belsat TV. From 2011 to 2017, Belarus's internet penetration rate has increased by 55 percent. By January 2017, more than 5 million Belarusians

¹⁰⁶ Belarusian Association of Journalists, "Mass Media in Belarus 2017," annual report, 2018, https://baj.by/sites/default/files/analytics/files/media_monitoring_2017_eng.pdf.

¹⁰⁷ "Нашыя гледачы," accessed November 26, 2018, <https://belsat.eu/about/nashyya-gledachy/>.

from the ages of 15 to 74 (70 percent of the country's population) were going online regularly. The growth of the availability and the accessibility of the internet in Belarus has made it one of the leading countries in Eastern Europe in online audience growth.¹⁰⁸

Table 6 shows the data, that compares the popularity of Belsat TV's official website with other Belarusian state and non-state news outlets' websites. Belsat TV is the third most visited online news platform among the ones represented in Table 6.

Table 6: Online popularity of Belsat TV and other Belarusian state and non-state news outlets in April 2017¹⁰⁹

Page	Total Page Likes	From Last Week	Posts this week	Engagement this week (number of online visitors)
Radio Liberty	77 400	0.1 %	108	18 400
Tut.by	60 200	0.6 %	149	30 300
Belarus 24	42 400	0 %	53	1 900
Charter97.org	35 300	0.4 %	76	9 700
CityDog.by	26 000	0.3 %	85	1 500
Belsat TV	23 000	0.4 %	90	10 700

Since the majority of Belarusians prefer to speak Russian in their everyday life, Russian news and entertainment websites used to dominate Belarus's online media space. This trend

¹⁰⁸ "Belarus Country Report. Freedom on the Net 2017," Freedom House, November 14, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/belarus>.

¹⁰⁹ "Нашыя глядачы."

started to change recently. In 2009, almost 94 percent of internet traffic in Belarus was occupied by sources based in Russia. However, in 2016, the percentage of sources from Russia and from the West in the country's online media environment was almost equal.¹¹⁰ One of the goals of Belsat TV is a promotion of Belarusian language and culture by providing its audience with news and programs in the Belarusian language. Therefore, the increase of media sources from the West in the Belarusian online media landscape, as well as growing popularity of Belsat TV, can create a favorable environment for popularization and development of Belarusian language and culture in the country.

¹¹⁰ "Belarus Country Report. Freedom on the Net 2017."

Chapter 5: Conclusion

After more than ten years of Belsat TV's operation, the channel's team in Poland and Belarus was able to reach many goals established at the beginning of its broadcasting. The journalists of Belsat TV were able to bring the attention of Belarusian population to socio-economic and political problems in the country through effective coverage of the events where the violations of civil, human and political rights of Belarusians were found in full display. Due to the growth of the popularity of Belsat TV among the Belarusian audience over ten years, the channel was able to mobilize a larger number of people to participate in the protests against the fraudulent results of the 2010 Presidential election and the establishment of a tax on the unofficially unemployed part of the Belarusian population.

The second objective of the channel is the development of national pride, and nationalistic sentiments in the Belarusian people through the broadcasting of the programming focused on promoting Belarusian language, culture, and history. This goal also complies with the motives of the Polish government to strengthen the cultural ties between Belarus and Poland and promote the image of common past between the neighboring countries to the Belarusian population. Furthermore, since Belarusian and Polish histories and languages have been intertwined for many centuries and had a lot of common features, the second goal of Belsat TV can also be viewed as an attempt of Polish official elite to promote Poland's democratic political image in Belarus and bring it closer into the sphere of Poland's political control. Over the ten years of Belsat TV's broadcasting its journalists worked on reaching this goal. The growth of amount of content in the Belarusian language in main state television channels and government's advertising projects focused on the promotion of Belarusian language prove it. Besides, the

efforts of the channel to revive national pride in Belarusians have had a large impact on country's civil society and educated younger population, which currently stigmatizes the lack of knowledge of Belarusian in its native speakers. One of the founders of independent Belarusian language public courses, currently popular across Belarus, says "It is hard to be distinct when you are constantly reminded your nation is Russia's younger brother, and anything Belarusian is boring and provincial. We aim at making the Belarusian language and culture look cool again."¹¹¹

The increasing influence of Belsat TV on the minds of Belarusians could not stay unnoticed by the Belarusian government authorities. Despite the government's general disapproval of the channel's motives since the first days of its broadcasting, its tactics towards persecution of Belsat TV's journalists usually became more violent when the stability of Lukashenko's autocratic regime was placed under threat. The evolution of the measures of Belarusian government's persecution of Belsat TV was majorly influenced by the geopolitical position of Belarus and its domestic socio-economic woes, which were further exacerbated by the global economic crisis and the growing popularity of the channel.

In order to project the future of Belsat TV's broadcasting and the future of the methods of its persecution by the Belarusian government, predictions about geopolitical, socio-economic, and technological developments in Belarus in the next years should be made.

Since 2017 Belarus's relationship with the European Union and Western states did not go through any noticeable changes. While the suppression of the wave of the 2017 protests against "Dekret number 3" by the Belarusian government forces was not approved by the European Union and other Western states, it did not have an impact on their willingness to improve dialogue with Belarusian authorities and civil society activists aimed at improvements in three

¹¹¹ Barushka, "After Decades of Russian Dominance, Belarus Reclaims Its Language."

essential conditions: democratic elections, a free media, and free assembly. Even though current EU policy towards Belarus centers around the continuation of a dialogue about improvements in the main democratic freedoms in the country, the EU has not systematically deployed stiffer measures of economic or political pressure when the government disregards such freedoms. On the one hand, such non-intrusive character of the EU policy towards Belarus could diminish the Belarusian authorities' fears of becoming more politically dependent on Russia and could help Belarus to become a more independent country. On the other hand, a focus on a democratic dialogue without application of more powerful methods of pressure could halt the development of substantial socio-economic and political reforms in Belarus.

In the face of upcoming Presidential elections in Belarus in 2020, Lukashenko's authorities might revert to the deployment of violent measures against the journalists of Belsat TV and other foreign media companies in the future. Since the European Union did not come up with a strong response to the government persecution of foreign media during the protests against Dekret Nomer 3" in 2017, Lukashenko may revert to the same course of repressive measures in the future again to keep his regime afloat. In addition, the invisibility to the majority of Western politicians of economic measures of repression of Belsat TV journalists, such as fines and Internet control, could push the Belarusian government to increase their use in the future.

Determination of the Belarusian government to build closer ties with the West and the European Union angers the Russian government. Russian authorities are wary of Lukashenko's balancing approach between the West and Russia. However, they understand that a continuous period of stagnation in Belarusian economy and strong economic dependence of Belarus on Russia will keep Belarus in the sphere of Russian political influence in the future. While Russian state media has large popularity among Belarusian population, increasing popularity of media

sources from the West in Belarus's online media space since 2016 could decrease the influence of Russian media propaganda on Belarusians. Moreover, the cooperation between Belsat TV and the BBC could improve the quality of Belsat TV's programming and make it even more popular among Belarusian people interested in getting more knowledge about Western democratic political values and life abroad. Since Belarus is one of the most important political and cultural allies of Russia in the West, Russian authorities may put a lot of effort in the future into strengthening the influence of Russian media on the Belarusian population and combating the increasing popularity of Western online media sources.

Increasing popularity of Belsat TV online, developments in the informational and communications technologies and the growth of the availability and the accessibility of the internet in Belarus in the future might push the government to make amendments in the Media Law and establish a stricter level of government control over the online media environment. Despite the fact that Belsat TV uses the domain server .eu, and the government cannot legally block access to its official website or pages in social media, it might tighten its control over the users of Belsat TV website in Belarus. Moreover, since a large part of the Belarusian population expresses a high level of trust in the government media, the government might attempt to enhance the popularity of the main government news portal online to compete with the informational influence of non-government online news portals.

Belsat TV's impact on socio-economic, democratic, and cultural changes in Belarus should be analyzed closely by policymakers of the countries interested in building stronger ties with Belarus in the future. Even though freedom of speech in Belarus is still currently under strict control by the Belarusian government, Belsat TV journalists are constantly willing to take risks to provide Belarusians with alternative news about political and cultural life in Belarus,

Poland, and abroad. By avoiding direct interference with the Belarusian government and focusing on building a stronger connection with a part of Belarusian population, which aspires to reforms in the current political system in Belarus, Belsat TV was able to mobilize Belarusians to take steps towards political changes in their country. Since it is almost impossible for many Western policymakers to engage in an open official dialogue with the Belarusian authorities, their approach to bringing about socio-economic and democratic reforms in the country should focus on creating more media and educational projects that can provide a large part of Belarusian population with the knowledge about Western democratic values and political assistance. In addition, creating channels of cooperation with Belsat TV and bolstering the channel's influence on Belarusians could give the West a chance to push democratic changes in Belarus in a very financially efficient and non-invasive way.

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