



ARTICLES IN ENGLISH

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THE POWER OF DETRACTION: BELARUSIAN REPORTING OF RUSSIAN SOCIAL PROBLEMS DURING "INFORMATION WAR"

The mass media play a prominent role in contemporary international relations. Foreign policy success is said to depend not on military or economic power alone, but on "whose story wins". Governments therefore construct "strategic narratives" to position, legitimize and characterize themselves in international affairs. In doing so, they tend to project negative characterizations of their rivals and adversaries. There has been less scholarly attention devoted to this "detractive" dimension of state-led efforts to persuade global audiences than to the "attractive" dimension, which is associated with the concept of soft power. However, the former has become increasingly salient, particularly in the post-Soviet region, where acrimonious "information wars" fought between Russia and some of its neighbours via the mass media are regular occurrences. This article contributes to the emerging literature on strategic narratives in international relations through a case study of the Belarusian state media and their reporting of Russian social problems. It focuses on the latter half of 2010, a period of heightened tension between Moscow and Minsk, when the Belarusian leadership was trying to legitimize its actions in the face of harsh criticism from the Kremlin. Empirically, the article is based on qualitative analysis of content from the leading state-controlled media in Belarus (three TV channels and one newspaper), plus interviews with editorial staff from those media outlets. The article demonstrates how reporting of Russian social policy in the Belarusian state-controlled media was carefully orchestrated to serve particular goals. By instructing editors to highlight instances of social neglect in Russia, the Belarusian leadership sought to undermine the public reputation of its critics in Moscow while simultaneously reaffirming close ties with Russia on the basis that

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bilateral discord was attributable to the Russian elite rather than any rifts with the ever "fraternal" Russian people. The research in this article provides a timely addition to scholarship that focuses exclusively on the positive-sum communication activities of governments in international relations.

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The mass media are today one of the principal arenas of international politics. Writing in 2004, Joseph Nye described politics as a "contest of competitive credibility" (Nye 2004: 106), in which different states and their governments vie with each other (and other actors) to frame how mass audiences interpret events. Leaders must play out and justify their domestic and foreign policy decisions in front of citizens at home and abroad, who increasingly have access to real-time media coverage of developments and the diverse commentaries that accompany them. Those who outperform their rivals in the contest for credibility can reap rewards such as the consolidation of domestic support and reduced international resistance to the pursuit of their foreign policy goals. Pride and prestige are at stake too, as a state's reputation and image hinge on how widely its actions are accepted as legitimate.

Nye discusses the mass media within the conceptual framework of "soft power" – a kind of power he associates with "eliciting positive attraction" (Nye 2011: 20). Soft power has become the dominant framework for studying non-coercive influence in international affairs. Many countries now include explicit references to soft power among their foreign policy objectives. Yet competition between national governments in the sphere of mass communication is often anything but soft or benign, because justifying the behaviour of one government frequently involves delegitimizing or criticizing the behaviour of another. Persuasion in international affairs is not just a matter of *attraction*; it also involves *detraction*, with governments drawing attention to the shortcomings of their rivals or adversaries as a means of communicative "self-defence". This can be observed in the so-called "information wars" (*informatsionnyye voyny*) which have accompanied tensions between Russia and its neighbours on multiple occasions since 1992.

The deliberately "detractive" side of persuasion in international affairs has been relatively neglected in the academic literature. This lacuna is addressed in the following pages through analysis of the Belarusian media's role during a period of tension with Russia. In 2010, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko and his policies were subjected to strong criticism by Russia's political leadership and the Russian federal media. In response, the Belarusian leadership encouraged Belarusian journalists to boost their coverage of Russian social problems and weaknesses in Russian social policy. This article argues that such coverage was not merely "tit-for-tat" retaliation, but rather, it was part of a strategic narrative (Miskimmon et al. 2013) that reflected and served goals of the Belarusian leadership. Reports emphasizing social neglect in Russia were intended to characterize the Russian leadership as lacking moral integrity. This, in turn, suggested that Bela-

rusian citizens need not consider Russia a legitimate source of criticism towards Belarus. At the same time, such reports emphasised distance between the critical Russian elite and "ordinary" Russian people, with whom Lukashenko has always been keen to promote "fraternal" relations.

This article begins with an overview of the literature on governments' use of mass media in pursuit and support of foreign policy objectives. The background to the 2010 Russian-Belarusian "information war" is then outlined and the Belarusian media's role during that period is examined. Based on analysis of Belarusian news bulletins and newspapers and interviews with editorial staff, the article demonstrates how Russian social policy and social problems were incorporated into the Belarusian strategic narrative with particular goals in mind. The article concludes by reflecting on questions raised by the Belarusian case and its implications for future research.

Conceptualizing governmental use of mass media in foreign affairs

There is almost a century of Western scholarly research about how governments use mass media in pursuit of their foreign policy aims. Among the earliest studies are those dealing with government communication during World War I (e.g., Lippman 1922; Lasswell 1927; Ponsonby 1928). This war gave impetus to "propaganda analysis" and prompted, in the words of Sproule (1987: 62), a "revolution in thinking about how communication worked in society", as awareness spread that depictions of the war were not solely the product of objective information and rational argument. Propaganda was understood as "the management of collective attitudes" by propagandists wanting to "intensify the attitudes favourable to [their] purpose, to reverse the attitudes hostile to it, and to attract the indifferent, or, at the worst, to prevent them from assuming a hostile bent" (Lasswell 1927: 629). During the 1920s and 1930s, scholars wrote about propaganda from a critical perspective to shed light on "the role of institutions in colouring communications given to the public" and to publicize "the problems that modern communication posed for democratic life" (Sproule 1989: 226, 229), including, although not exclusively, in foreign relations.

Towards the end of the 1930s the paradigm of propaganda analysis began to be supplanted by a newer paradigm of "communication research", which focused on assessing persuasive effects through statistical-experimental methods instead of interrogating the persuader's intent and techniques from a normative standpoint. Sproule (1987) attributes the gradual displacement of propaganda analysis in the United States to the weakness of its theoretical underpinnings, the preferences of funders and rising hostility towards critical analysis of society at a time of intensifying external threats. As Graham (2014) argues, World War II and the Cold War brought acceptance of the view that even democracies sometimes needed to defend their interests through propaganda or something like it. The con-

cept of propaganda did not disappear (Lee 1952; Kumata, Schramm 1955; Lindhal 1983; Herman, Chomsky 1988; Parry-Giles 1994), but in the 1960s a less pejorative term – "public diplomacy" – was devised to describe US efforts to cultivate public opinion abroad (Cull 2008; Graham 2014). Public diplomacy was initially understood as "direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking and, ultimately, that of their governments" (Malone 1985: 199). More recent definitions of public diplomacy have made room for the activity of non-state actors and two-way communication between the "sending" state and "receiving" public (Gilboa 2008). Whereas the concept of propaganda had been closely associated with distortion or obfuscation of the truth, public diplomacy suggests a more honest, positive-sum approach.

In the post-Cold-War period, public diplomacy (Melissen 2005; Entman 2008; Sheaffer, Gabay 2009) and the related concept of "soft power" (Nye 1990; 2004) have become pillars of the dominant framework for studying governments' attempts to utilize the mass media in the realm of international relations. There is a substantial body of literature addressing the soft power and public diplomacy efforts of both Western and non-Western countries, in which the media (particularly international broadcasters) feature strongly. However, it is problematic to view the instrumentalization of the media for foreign policy purposes exclusively through the prism of public diplomacy and soft power. Even leaving aside the theoretical inconsistencies in Nye's writing (see Mattern 2005; Lock 2010; Szostek 2014), this framework is inadequate for studying certain aspects of public persuasion in international affairs.

One weakness of the soft power/public diplomacy framework is its tendency to discuss governments' (self-)promotional activities without paying sufficient attention to the fact that deprecation of others can be an equally salient and a necessary corollary. For example, international promotion of secular democracy via the media or educational material inevitably goes hand in hand with implicit or explicit criticism of authoritarian leaders, their supporters, and certain religious worldviews. As Price notes, so-called soft power approaches can be "surprisingly aggressive" and perceived as a "hostile, debilitating intrusion" among the elites and wider societies of target states (Price 2015: loc. 3331). Price examines the case of Iran, where tools that Western policy-makers describe as soft are perceived by Iranian elites as malign tools of disintegration. Whether or not such perceptions are accurate, they matter "because of the nature of counter-strategies that are triggered and angers that are fostered" (Price 2015: loc. 3673).

Another weakness of the soft power/public diplomacy framework is the overly sharp division it imposes between domestic and international media audiences. Although policies and practices labelled as "public diplomacy" and "soft power" are indeed aimed at publics abroad, modern communication cannot be contained within national borders. Governments must interact with domestic and foreign journalists simultaneously; the messages they deliver locally will be reported internationally and vice versa. The soft power/public diplomacy framework seems excessively rooted in

medium rather than *message*, even though persuasive success may depend as much on the latter as the former. The work of Entman (2004) makes clear that all kinds of mass media – not just purpose-built international broadcasters – are affected by governmental efforts to get their preferred messages across in international affairs. He observes that the White House and other parts of the U.S. elite engage in "strategic manipulation" (including word choice, timing and the distribution and withholding of information) to frame news events, with their choices based on calculations of potential domestic political advantages *and* international diplomatic benefits and risks (Entman 2004: 91). An analytical approach that separates the international and domestic dimensions therefore makes little sense. Elsewhere, research by Entman (1991) and Baysha and Calabrese (2011) demonstrates how heavy reliance on elite sources and the constraints of cognitive habit have, on occasion, led the U.S. media to adopt and reinforce news frames propagated by U.S. governments which portray foreign "others" in a very negative light.

A conceptual innovation which overcomes the weaknesses of soft power is the idea of "strategic narrative" proposed by Miskimmon et al. (2013). Strategic narrative is defined as

a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors <...>. They are narratives about both states and the system itself, both about who we are and what kind of order we want (Miskimmon et al.: 2).

Governments project narratives which frame their own character as well as the character of others and understandings of the international system. The narratives are "strategic" when they are formulated to serve particular goals, such as legitimation, diversion of attention, raising popularity or mobilization of support. The strategic narrative framework neither assumes nor implies that communication in international affairs is soft, diplomatic or otherwise benign; it allows for the reality of contestation. It makes no attempt to artificially compartmentalize foreign and domestic audiences, although it does recognise that the impact of any strategic narrative will depend partly on the media ecology and cultural context inhabited by those on the "receiving" end.

The framework of strategic narrative is therefore well suited to study the phenomenon of post-Soviet "information wars", which entail persuasive efforts that are very much adversarial and transnational. The following sections consider an episode when the Russian and Belarusian narratives were deeply at odds: the "information war" that erupted between Moscow and Minsk in 2010.

The 2010 "information war": context and origins

Ever since Aleksandr Lukashenko became Belarusian president in 1994, Belarus has been among Russia's most enthusiastic partners. Official backing for a close union with Russia extends to the media sector. In 2008 Belarusian

Minister of Information Vladimir Rusakevich said that creating a "single information space" with Russia was an important strategic objective for both sides (Embassy of Belarus in the Russian Federation 2008). The authorities in Minsk facilitate Russian involvement in their country's media environment in some respects. For example, three of the main state-owned TV channels in Belarus (*ONT*, *RTR-Belarus*, *NTV-Belarus*) base their line-ups wholly or substantially on shows from Russia. Belarusian editions of Russian tabloids (*Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii*, *Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii*) are widely available and popular. The Union State of Russia and Belarus has media of its own, including the TV channel *TRO Soyuz* and newspaper supplement *Soyuz*. Yet official endorsement of the single information space is offset by Lukashenko's policy of controlling the Belarusian media environment to prevent criticism of himself and his administration. Although Russian participation in the Belarusian media market is allowed and even encouraged, there are mechanisms in place to restrict what Russian-owned media can say. For instance, Belarusian cable networks are not allowed to carry the standard international versions of Russia's main channels (*Pervyy Kanal Vsemirnaya set*, *RTR-Planeta*, *NTV-Mir*). Instead, programmes from these channels are primarily viewed in Belarus as rebroadcasts on channels controlled by the Belarusian state. This makes it easier for the authorities in Minsk to cut out, prior to broadcast, content they would prefer Belarusian citizens not to see. Meanwhile, journalists and editors at the Russian-owned tabloid newspapers work in the knowledge that their publications could risk closure if their content were considered hostile to the Belarusian president. This motivates them to steer clear of any kind of controversy.

Such technical and legal mechanisms offer Belarus a degree of protection against inflows of critical Russian media coverage during periods of bilateral tension. Nevertheless, there is an overlap between the Belarusian and Russian media environments and any criticism of Belarus in the Russian media does still resonate strongly within Belarus. The Belarusian authorities can censor Russian content from the main state-controlled channels but they cannot easily stop their citizens accessing Russian content via the internet or satellite broadcasts. Post-Soviet borders are very porous when it comes to Russian-language information. This situation somewhat resembles a communal apartment with thin walls: whenever Russia talks about its neighbours it tends to be overheard and the neighbours inevitably react – sometimes trying to block off the noise next door, sometimes shouting back. These are the conditions in which so-called "information wars" have erupted, when negative Russian media coverage of neighbouring states has been interpreted as "attacks" on those countries (even when the primary target audience was probably the domestic Russian one). "Information war" has been a major theme of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, but it is not a new phenomenon.

The roots of the tensions between Moscow and Minsk in 2010 were primarily economic (Szostek 2015). Russia had begun to insist that Belarus pay the full export duty on any Russian oil that it refined and sold to other countries. This

threatened an important revenue source of the Belarusian government. Belarus complained that Russia's demands contravened the spirit of the new Customs Union (which was due to be launched on 1 July) and the Belarusian president threatened not to proceed with Customs Union agreements unless the duties on oil were abolished (Belapan 2010). Subsequently, a dispute broke out over gas supplies, with Russian state company Gazprom subsequently reducing its deliveries to Belarus due to "unpaid debts". President Lukashenko perceived this as blackmail aimed at securing his signature on Customs Union agreements, and vocally condemned Moscow's "unfriendly" approach (Yezhednevnik 2010).

In the context of these disputes and some personal antipathy, the "information war" escalated to a new level when Russian channel *NTV* began broadcasting a four-part series of documentaries, *Krestnyy Batka* ("Godfather Lukashenko"). The documentaries, which went out on 4 July, 16 July, 15 August and 8 October 2010, portrayed Lukashenko as a despot and accused him of complicity in the disappearance of his opponents. Another major "information strike" from Moscow came on 3 October, when President Dmitriy Medvedev devoted a highly critical video blog to the subject of Belarus, accusing Lukashenko of breaking "elementary rules of behaviour" (BBC 2010).

The *Krestnyy Batka* series and Russian news reports about Medvedev's video blog were censored from the TV channels rebroadcasting Russian programmes in Belarus. However, large numbers of Belarusians still managed to view them, most likely via the internet, satellite or in recorded form. One survey found that around 40 per cent of Belarusians had watched one or more of the *Krestnyy Batka* documentaries by October 2010 (IISEPS 2010). In this situation it would have been difficult for the Belarusian president and his administration to ignore or hush up what the Russian media were saying. Instead, they responded with their own narratives about the bilateral tensions, aimed at neutralizing the impact of the Russian messages.

The Belarusian narrative of Russia during the "information war"

To demonstrate how the Belarusian leadership used narrative strategically in its attempt to counteract the potential impact of Russian criticism, this section presents analysis of content samples from three TV news bulletins and one newspaper, all owned and controlled by structures of the Belarusian state. The news bulletins are *Panorama*, which is broadcast nightly by Belarusian state channel *Belarus 1*; *Nashi Novosti*, which is the flagship evening bulletin on state channel *ONT*; and *24 Chasa*, which is shown on *STV*, originally the channel of the Minsk municipal authorities. The newspaper is *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, also known as *Belarus Segodnya*, which is the official organ of the Belarusian presidential administration and one of the most widely-circulated publications in Belarus.

The content sample is drawn from a sampling population of 11 consecutive weeks from 23 August to 5 November 2010. The sample comprises all bulletins and issues from the weeks (excluding weekends) beginning 23 August, 6 September,

20 September, 4 October and 1 November 2010. The timing of this sample was dictated by the start date of the doctoral research on which this study is based (a sample period had to be arranged in advance rather chosen retrospectively, because the required content is not available in archives). Alternative weeks were sampled as a way to cover a broader time period while keeping the amount of content to be analysed feasible. The TV news bulletins were recorded to DVDs and newspapers were collected in their paper versions. Analysis was conducted qualitatively, by the author, to identify recurring patterns and trace how Russian social policy and social problems featured within the state's narrative.

The following narrative plotlines could be observed across all the news providers during the period under study: (1) The Russian leadership neglects the social needs of ordinary Russians, who admire/envy Belarus and her superior social conditions; (2) Russia's media attacks on Belarus are backfiring as ordinary Russians disagree with their leaders; (3) ordinary Russians and Belarusians are continuing to work together – they have always been fraternal peoples and there can be no quarrel between them.

The first plotline was conveyed emotively by Belarusian correspondents reporting on "ordinary people's problems in Russia. One example was a report by *Nashi Novosti* correspondent Svetlana Karul'skaya on 10 September. Karul'skaya described how a small group of villagers from Russia's Kabarda-Balkar Republic had been on hunger strike outside the Kremlin for several months, „awaiting a response from the Russian leadership to their request to support their right to land“ (Nashi Novosti 2010a). In her account, she explained that the local authorities were taking the villagers' land away and giving it to oligarchs. She told viewers:

It appears nobody notices the elders, although they are passed every day by journalists of the federal channels filming the work of the State Duma and Kremlin protocol. So far only ordinary people are responding. (Nashi Novosti 2010a)

The above quotation clearly distinguishes between caring "ordinary" Russians on one hand and uncaring Russian journalists and politicians on the other. Such reporting serves the Belarusian leadership's goal of discrediting Russian journalists and politicians as sources of criticism, while preserving a close relationship between the two countries and their "fraternal" peoples.

Allegations of the Russian leadership's neglect of its people featured again in a *Nashi Novosti* report on 3 November, when the bulletin informed viewers about the Russian Finance Ministry's intention to raise the retirement age. A correspondent in Moscow told viewers:

Russians have started saying they are being invited to die at work <...> Pensions have remained at the level of one subsistence minimum instead of the promised three; the increase in the single social tax has brought nothing; the savings programme is not working. (Nashi Novosti 2010b)

Such a report again serves to discredit the Russian state and its policies, aiming to persuade Belarusian viewers that Russian criticisms of Belarus do not merit attention.

Nashi Novosti was not alone in highlighting the suffering of the Russian people at the hands of an incompetent and corrupt state; *Panorama* did likewise. On 23 September *Panorama* ran a report on the poor harvest in Russia and subsequent food price inflation, in which the correspondent asserted that people were still awaiting a "more or less coherent" policy response from the Kremlin (Panorama 2010a). Then on 6 October *Panorama* announced:

The Russian government intends to economize on social projects. This concerns the ill, children, and pregnant women<...> The Russian government is counting on saving over 48 billion roubles at the expense of pregnant and ill people. (Panorama 2010b)

Often, poor social conditions in Russia were contrasted against a much better situation in Belarus. On 24 August, for instance, *24 Chasa* reported that more and more Russian citizens were moving to settle in Belarus. The presenter claimed that it was easy to explain their actions, because Belarus was "*more stable*" and all conditions had been created "*for a calm and peaceful life.*" In the report, individuals who had moved from Russia to Belarus were shown saying: "*[i]n Russia people have to rely only on themselves<...> there is no question of the state helping*" (24 Chasa 2010).

The plotline of Russian media attacks "backfiring" was conveyed in multiple reports emphasising the difference in opinion between Russia's ordinary people and its elite. For example, both *Panorama* on 22 September and *Nashi Novosti* on 24 September told viewers that the Belarusian Presidential Administration had been receiving "floods" of letters from Russian citizens in support of Lukashenko, despite the critical allegations made in the Russian state media. Examples of such letters were displayed on screen. One, from "a resident of Moscow Region", read:

Now we can say for sure that the Russian elites are motivated not only by hate, but by fear above all. A person with accurate information about the state of affairs in Belarus can compare his life with the life of his Slavic neighbours; this is what our authorities fear. (Panorama 2010c)

Much the same message was conveyed by *Nashi Novosti*. On 24 September it shared with viewers the words of an "Afghan war veteran from Russia", who was reported saying:

I have formed a wonderful impression of the Belarusian state, about its people and its successes <...> I wish people were treated the same way in our state, here in Russia, that the state flourished in the same way... (Nashi Novosti 2010c)

The day after Medvedev criticized Lukashenko in his video blog, *Nashi Novosti* continued to emphasise that the discord between Russia and Belarus was

limited to the elite level. It showed a clip of Belarusian MP Gennadiy Davydko on 4 October, saying:

All these fights take place at the level of the highest echelon, not at the level of ordinary people. After all, oil and gas in Russia belong to the oligarchs, not the Russian people. (Nashi Novosti 2010d)

This plotline reflects the Belarusian leadership's desire to limit the long-term damage of its fall-out with the Kremlin. Maintaining a close relationship with Russia is a central objective of Belarusian foreign policy, given the Belarusian economy's high level of dependence on Russia. Therefore, a narrative was constructed to suggest that the bilateral disputes had shallow roots.

Reports about Russia in the newspaper *Sovetskaya Belarussiya* were on the whole less emotive and prominent than the television reports. Nevertheless, Russian social problems were highlighted regularly. For example, on 22 September the paper reprinted an article from Poland's *Gazeta Wyborcza* titled "Baghdad on Prospekt Mira", which described rubbish lying around on Moscow streets and the impossibility of buying good meat because of a public health official "*who, on orders from above, can find harmful substances in any goods imported from countries that have fallen out of grace with the Kremlin*" (Radziwinowicz 2010: 5). The same day, another article was reprinted from Russian website *gazeta.ru*. Prompted by the withdrawal from circulation of Russian one-kopeck coins, it described the kopeck's demise as the "*sad metaphorical result of the Putin decade*" which had been characterised by rising prices. "*Such is Russian political life: as senseless as a kopeck and as merciless as double-digit inflation,*" it concluded (Kolesnikov 2010: 5).

Sovetskaya Belarussiya relied extensively on foreign and particularly Russian sources when reporting on shortcomings in Russia's social policy. It has a column called *Daydzhest* (Digest) which provides a daily selection of material from Russian newspapers and websites. Topics which came up in this column during the period under study included the Russian authorities' failure to provide war veterans with housing; the deficit of buckwheat in Russia; high food prices (mentioned repeatedly); Russia's demographic decline; high levels of corruption; high levels of inequality; and terrorism. These small reports did not go so far as the TV bulletins in explicit criticism of the Russian government, but they fitted neatly into the overall characterization of the Russian leadership as neglectful, removed from and indifferent to its own populace – and thus lacking the right or justification to criticize the (implicitly better) situation in neighbouring Belarus.

Coordinating the narrative

Interviews with representatives of the Belarusian media provide an insight into how the state's narrative was coordinated during the "information war". The interviews were conducted by the author in Minsk during October 2012 and are presented here in anonymous form. All the cited interviews were conducted with current or

former employees of the news providers included in the content analysis (i.e. *Belarus 1*, *ONT*, *STV* and *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*). Most interviewees were recruited by cold-calls to editorial/press offices (i.e. formal interview requests), although personal contacts were also utilized. All the interviewees occupied or had previously occupied quite senior positions in their respective news organizations.

None of the interviewees made any claim to impartiality in reporting of Russian-Belarusian relations. As employees of state-controlled media, each considered it their duty to support their country and its leadership. A *Panorama* journalist stated, "Of course we have to defend the interests of the state", while an editor at *ONT* said *Nashi Novosti's* task was to "display the arguments of the Belarusian side" during periods of conflict in Russian-Belarusian relations. Similarly, a senior representative at *STV* observed: "In such situations [information wars] it's probably a matter of honour to stand up for oneself, right?"

Journalists and editors working for the Belarusian state media follow instructions issued by the Presidential Administration. A *Panorama* journalist explained:

It happens at the level of the Presidential Administration, of course, certain aspects are conveyed to us, which it would be desirable to report. And of course, we take them into account in our work.

A clear chain of command exists, by which officials instruct editors and the editors in turn control the work of their journalists. One interviewee with experience working at *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* described how this process begins with weekly meetings at the Presidential Administration:

Usually the editor-in-chief goes there, or his first deputy. These meetings take place every Monday. And afterwards, each Monday, it becomes more or less clear what the tone of reporting about Russian-Belarusian relations is going to be.

Instructions received from the Presidential Administration include responding "appropriately" to any criticism from Moscow. As the interviewee from *Nashi Novosti* put it:

In line with the recommendations of our leadership, it is necessary to respond to any "made to order" [Russian] report or whatever you want to call it, let it be on their conscience... We have to react to their report.

During the "information war" period, the expected response was to discredit those sources from which criticism of the Belarusian president was emanating – the Russian leadership and federal media. An interviewee recalled the approach adopted at *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*:

I remember that the top management proposed that we should not hold back <...> That is, we could be forthright in expressing things. It was a period when tasks were even set to write more aggressively [*napisat pozhestche*]. Irony, sarcasm, a touch of scandal – it was all OK.

The same interviewee continued by describing the aim of their endeavours:

It was all necessary to demonstrate that those films [the *Krestnyy Batka* series] were a lie. In order to expose the mendacity of the Russian government and the Russian authorities, any topic could be used – culture, sport, whatever.

The interviews strongly suggested that the substantial coverage devoted to Russian social policy and problems during 2010 was unusual and would not have occurred without the bilateral tensions. During calmer periods Belarusian news bulletins prefer to focus on stories about Belarus, since viewers can watch rebroadcasts of Russian news bulletins to follow developments in Russia. The *ONT* interviewee said: "If they are purely domestic Russian problems we leave it to the conscience of *Pervyy Kanal*", while the *Panorama* journalist stated:

Of course, our viewers can get the fullest picture of Russia directly from the Russian news <...> So if certain events happen in Russia, purely Russian domestic matters, in principle we don't pay much attention to it unless it's something big, for example a terrorist attack or an explosion.

There can thus be little doubt that the prominence of Russian social problems in the Belarusian media during 2010 had a strategic purpose: it was intended to shape audience reactions to the fallout with the Kremlin rather than to meet any public need or desire for information on the topic.

Conclusion

Reporting of Russian social policy and social problems in the Belarusian media during 2010 is a clear example of how the leadership of one country may actively deprecate the leadership of another for strategic purposes. The Belarusian presidential administration projected a strategic narrative that was oriented towards resuming "fraternal", economically beneficial relations with Russia, as well as the preservation of Lukashenko's firm grip on domestic power. This study of Belarus provides a useful corrective to the focus of recent scholarship about the way governments deploy mass media in international relations, which has tended to emphasize positive-sum communication activities.

Belarus is far from being the only state to incorporate "detraction" as well as "attraction" into its approach to the mass media as an instrument of foreign policy. Belarusian efforts to discredit the critical Russian elite were particularly overt and orchestrated, but in fact any government that engages in persuasion in international affairs is likely to deprecate its rivals to some degree. Future studies of strategic narrative might explore how democratic governments formulate and project negative characterizations of other international actors, in conditions where the media enjoy a higher level of independence from the state. Questions of reception and response also require investigation. A strategic narrative that incorporates negative characterizations may prompt a range of different reactions – from scept-

ticism, anger and counter-narratives to credence and support. One goal of future research would be to explain this variation and consider its implications for the way persuasion operates in international affairs.

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