



Presidential election 2020 BELARUS

Television & Social Media Media Monitoring

Interim report (29 April – 23 June 2020)

**3 August 2020
Bratislava, Minsk**

This project was supported by the Open Initiative Partnership

MEMO 98

INTRODUCTION

Between 29 April – 19 May (first monitoring period) and 3 – 23 June 2020 (second monitoring period), MEMO 98, a Slovak non-profit specialist media-monitoring organization, in cooperation with the Eurasian States in Transition Research Center (EAST Center), a Belarusian think-tank focusing on post-Soviet and East-European studies, and Linking Media, a Belarusian civil society organization focusing on media, monitored traditional¹ and social² media in the run-up to the 9 August presidential election.

The main purpose of the media monitoring is to determine if voters have ample information to make qualified choices at the ballot box and whether this information is sufficiently diverse, balanced and of adequate quality.³ While for most people, television is the primary source of information about politics, the growing relevance of social media⁴ has inspired us to include also Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and VK into our monitoring.⁵ We were interested to what extent are social media used in Belarus during elections and to what extent can nominated candidates overcome the previously documented state monopoly on information by using social media.

The monitoring of television and social media focused also on topics and issues discussed in the context of elections. When it comes to social media, we have focused on profiles of presidential nominees and other politicians, political parties as well as influential public figures and journalists. From a wider perspective, we also wanted to assess the overall role of television and social media in the elections and their potential impact on election integrity, and thus public trust and confidence in the process.

Around election day, MEMO 98 with its local partners (EAST Center and Linking Media) will issue a more comprehensive report covering the official campaign period.

¹ *Belarus 1*, state channel (news programme *Panorama* at 21:00) and *Belsat TV*, private channel (news programme *Abjektyu* at 20:00).

² The monitoring included 93 different actors (presidential nominees, politicians, parties, influencers and journalists) with accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and VK. Influencers and journalists were not monitored in the second monitoring period.

³ [2020 World Press Freedom Index](#) from Reporters Without Borders ranks Belarus as 153 (out of 179 countries), assessed as country with 'difficult situation' (there is only one worse category – 'very serious').

⁴ According to the *Digital 2020 (Belarus)*, a research conducted annually by We Are Social and Hootsuite, there is 41 per cent of social media users in the country.

⁵ Information Policy, [Data for 25th media week in Belarus](#)

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

- The media coverage of nominated candidates differed to a large extent given the state monopoly on information and very limited media freedom in the country. Similar to previous elections, the incumbent refrained from traditional campaigning, using state television to portray himself as a hard-working president, the only one capable of running the country. Alexander Lukashenka thus gained an undue advantage over his opponents who did not receive such coverage on state TV.
- Prior to the start of the official campaign, state TV demonstrated a clear preferential treatment of Alexander Lukashenka by allocating to him as much as 94 per cent its political news coverage. All of this coverage was in his capacity as president and was only neutral or positive. In sharp contrast, his opponents who were not registered, Viktor Babaryka, Uladzimir Tsapkala and Siarhei Tsikhanouski, received a joint total of only 6 per cent of the coverage which was predominantly negative. Furthermore, while Mr. Lukashenka's coverage was provided predominantly through the direct speech (out of the total coverage of 6 hours and 25 minutes devoted to Lukashenka, as much as 4.5 hours were in the form of direct speech), from among his main opponents, only Mr. Babaryka was given 30 seconds for a direct presentation.
- The incumbent on state TV news avoided calling his opponents by their names, instead using "*this person*" or "*that criminal*" (the second was applied in relation to Mr. Babaryka, ignoring presumption of innocence). The incumbent was shown on state TV, projecting himself as a "true leader" who takes care of daily needs of his people as opposed to the others (not named) who think only about elections; "*elections are coming and going, but we always need to harvest*". The global situation was presented as serious chaos which was the result of mass quarantines; the video footage of protests was presented in such a manner to create an impression of violence in many European capitals. Conversely, the coronavirus situation in Belarus was presented in an explicitly positive light from all possible angles.
- *Belsat* showed a different picture, covering to some extent as many as 12 potential candidates. This coverage was mainly neutral. While the president received almost half of *Belsat*'s political and election-focused coverage, most of it was either neutral or negative. Lukashenka's two main opponents, Mr. Babaryka and Mr. Tsikhanouski, received 23 and 18 percent of the coverage respectively which was mainly neutral.

- The vast majority of reports in Belsat complied with journalistic ethics and standards. The Covid-19-related coverage that dominated in the first monitoring period was versatile, attempting to involve both parties into conversation (the state and civic society). Also, a lot of attention was given to individuals, including medics or workers, who commented in an increasingly alarmed tone that “*body bags are finishing*” and “*people bodies are stored in sports palaces*”, reflecting on the information circulating in the society. As for the second monitoring period, the attention was given to repressions against bloggers and activists, trials, etc. There was no extensive airtime given to alternative candidates as compared to what state Belarus 1 would give to the incumbent.
- State TV devoted only 15 per cent of its news coverage to elections, instead focusing on international and other domestic topics, including Covid-19. By contrast, private *Belsat* devoted almost half of its news programme to elections and provided also extensive coverage of rallies and protests.
- Lacking regular access to state media - the dominant traditional information channels in Belarus - potential candidates, political parties, and independent journalists have relied on social media as a key vehicle to present their views. It should be mentioned, however, that many of them do not have public pages but only personal profiles (where some content might be accessible only to friends).⁶ The coordinated and targeted political marketing and communication is still only developing feature of election campaigning in Belarus.
- Political actors have used a variety of social media and messaging platforms in their political communication. In addition to more traditional platforms, like Facebook (FB) and VKontakte (VK) - the latter, however, used more for reposting from Facebook - influencers and some political actors widely employed Telegram (TE) (for instance, Mikalai Statkevich’s Telegram channel continued to frequently post even after he was arrested and his other social media profiles become largely inactive). Political actors have also used more actively and successfully live-streaming on FB and Instagram.
- The monitoring of social media revealed that the most active presidential nominee (on all four platforms together) was Mikalai Statkevich with 626 posts (with 459 out of them on Telegram). Quite active user of social media was also Andrei Dmitryeu with 516 posts (he was most active from all nominees on Facebook [179], on Instagram [146] and also on VK [144]). Others active users were Aliaksandr Tabolich (273 posts, divided comparably between VK and Facebook), Volha Kavalkova (153 posts, mostly on Facebook) and Serhei Cherechen (122, also mostly on Facebook).

⁶ President Aleksander Lukashenka does not have account on any of the monitored social platform.

- Political parties and candidates have frequently posted about political repressions that were the single most presented ‘topic’ on parties’ social media accounts, overall.⁷ In general, the number of posts on social media has visibly increased during and in connection with the significant political events, mainly protests and arrests.
- Political actors have used social media to comment on domestic political events (non-inclusive process of candidate registration, protests, and intimidation), rather than to present their own political platforms. However, it has to be noted that this finding originates in the period before the nomination of candidates was finalized and long before the start of the official campaign period (which recently showed some strong statements, like Svetlana Tsikhanouvska’s address when she stated her intention to call a new, free and fair elections, if elected).
- The coverage of the election has been to a large degree influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, its denial by the president has turned it into a prominent election issue that has been frequently discussed especially by some social media influencers, mainly criticizing the failures of the authorities in dealing with the epidemic.
- The events related to May 1 and the Victory Day sparked a lot of social media activities - the issue of WWII was actively covered both by the opposition as well as by pro-government social pages. At the same time, it was in most of the cases discussed in the context of the pandemic or within the wider political context of the country's independence.
- While in general the monitored social media posts were neutral, the monitoring team came across posts that were very critical of the ruling authorities as well as posts that heavily criticised the opposition. In a limited number of cases, political actors used polarising language.
- Instances of manipulation and disinformation could be found in the messages of the pro-Russian political actors who promoted anti-EU/anti-US/anti-NATO messages.

⁷ There are currently three initial nominees in prison, arrested for various reasons, seen as politically motivated – Mr. Tsikhanouski since 29 May, Mr. Statkevich since 31 May and Mr. Babaryka since 18 June 2020.

CHARTS

a. TELEVISION

Chart 1 | BELARUS 1 – The Coverage of Political actors

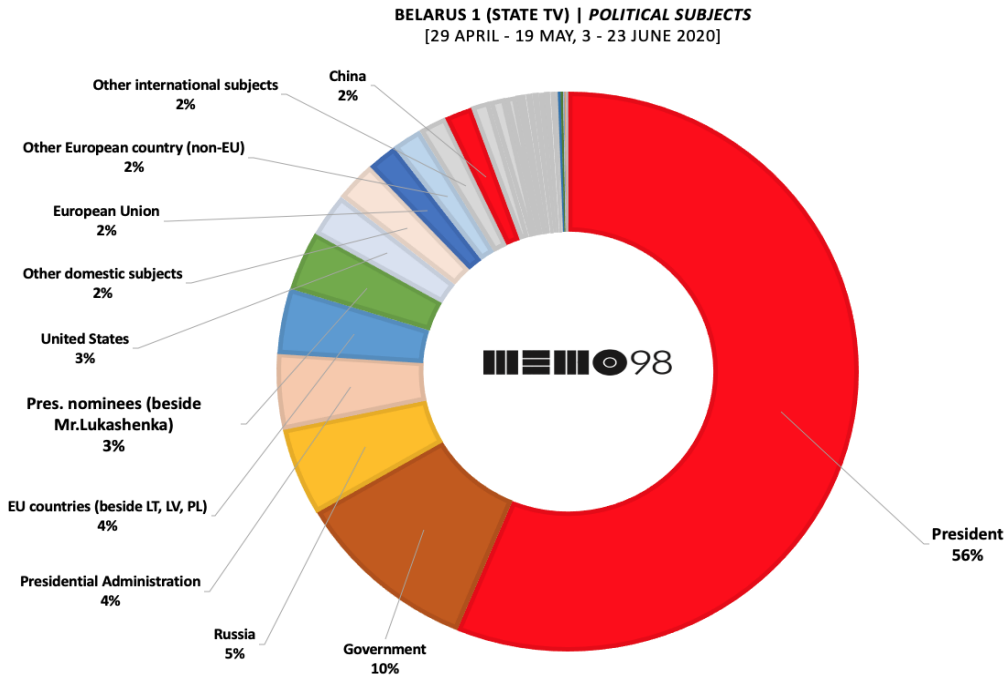


Chart 2 | BELARUS 1 – The Coverage of Nominated Candidates

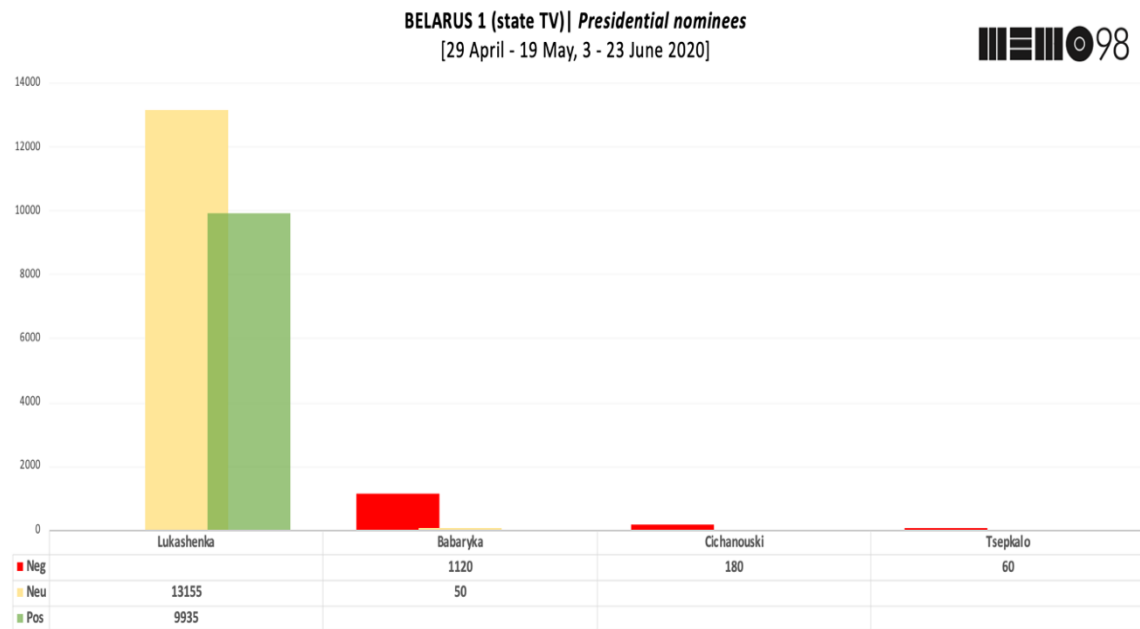


Chart 3 | BELARUS 1 – the issues and themes that received most attention

BELARUS 1 (state TV) | *Top affairs*
[29 April - 19 May, 3 - 23 June 2020]

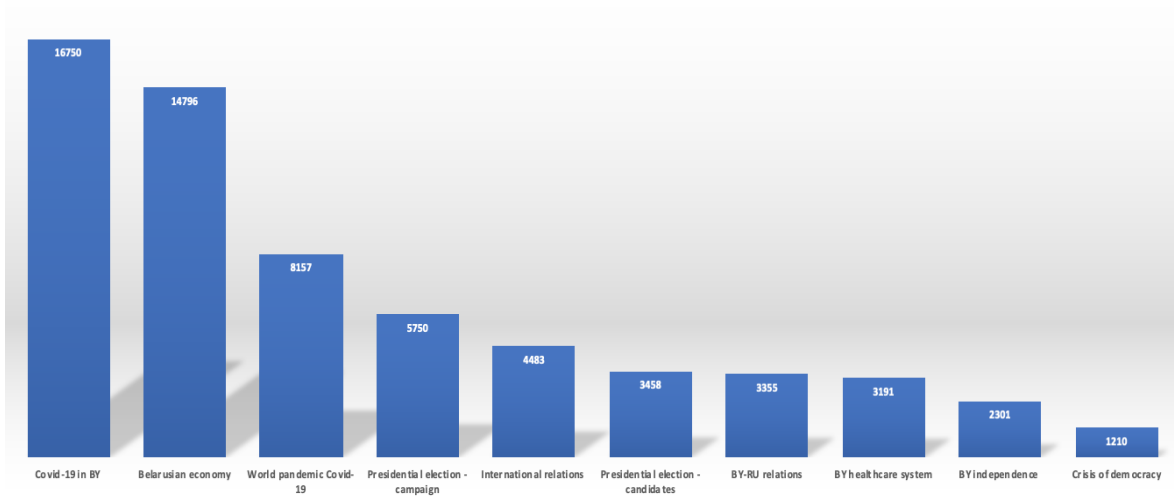


Chart 4 | BELSAT TV - the issues and themes that received most attention

BELSAT TV | *Top affairs*
[29 April - 19 May, 3 - 23 June 2020]

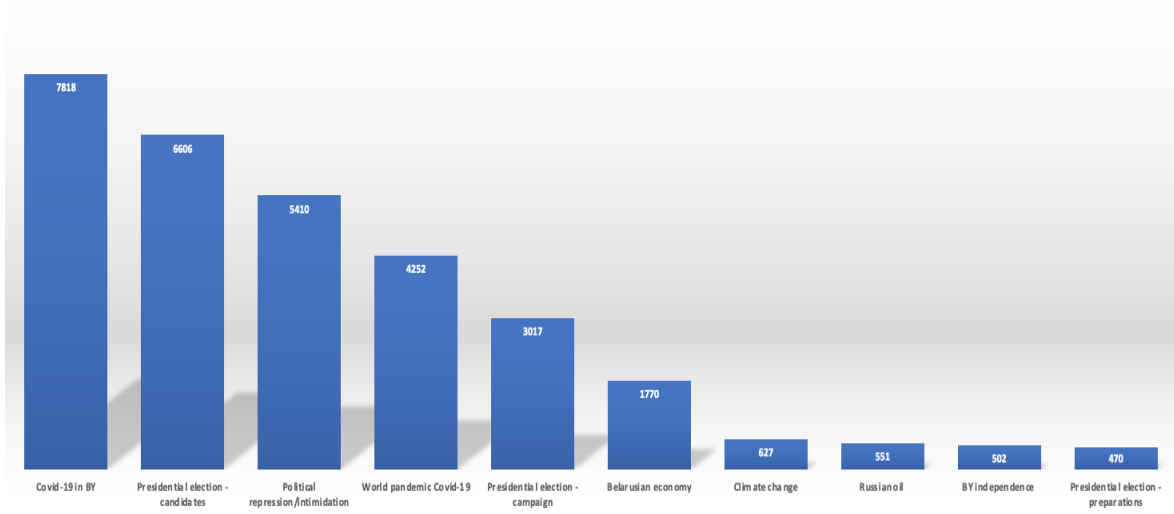


Chart 5 | BELSAT TV – the coverage of *Political actors*

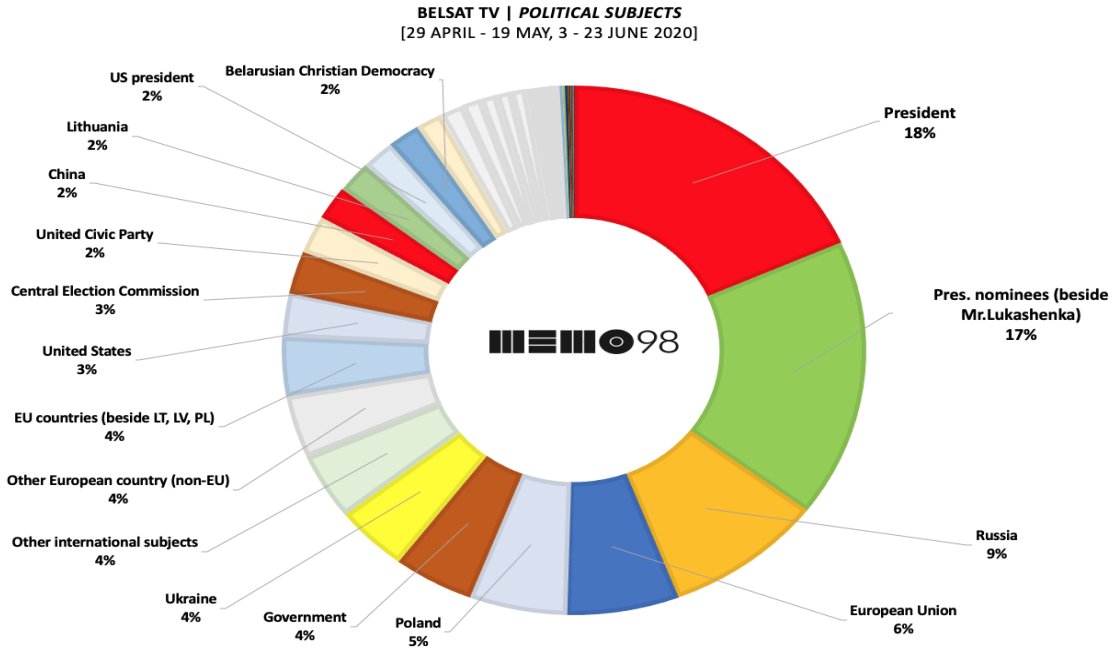
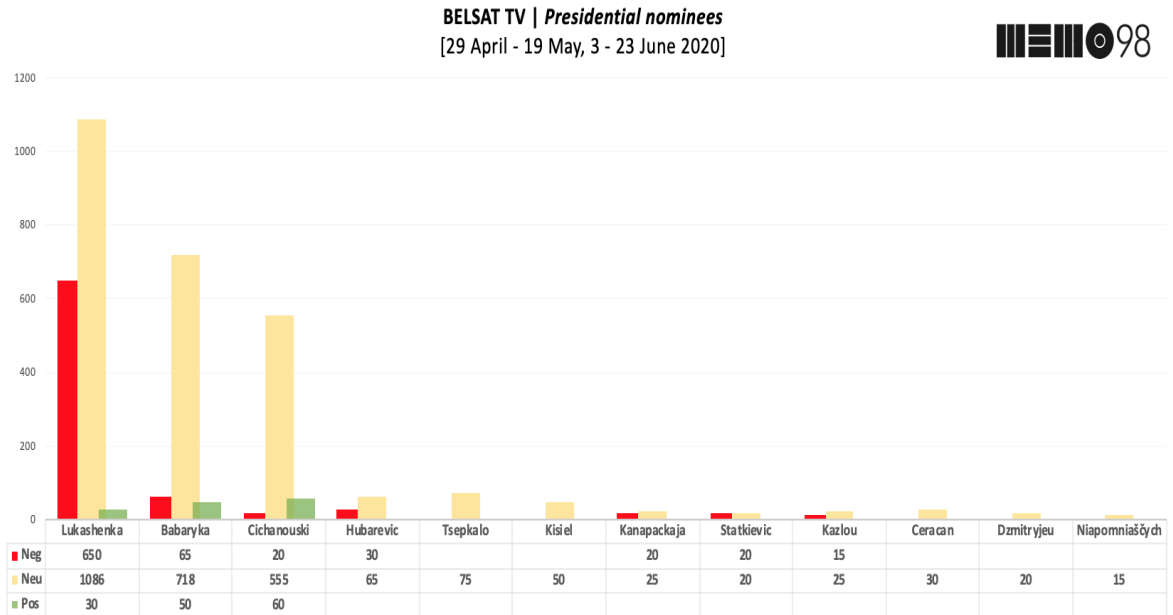


Chart 6 | BELSAT TV - Coverage of *Nominees*



b. SOCIAL MEDIA

Chart 7 | Facebook, Instagram, Telegram VK (together) - Posts of *All monitored actors*

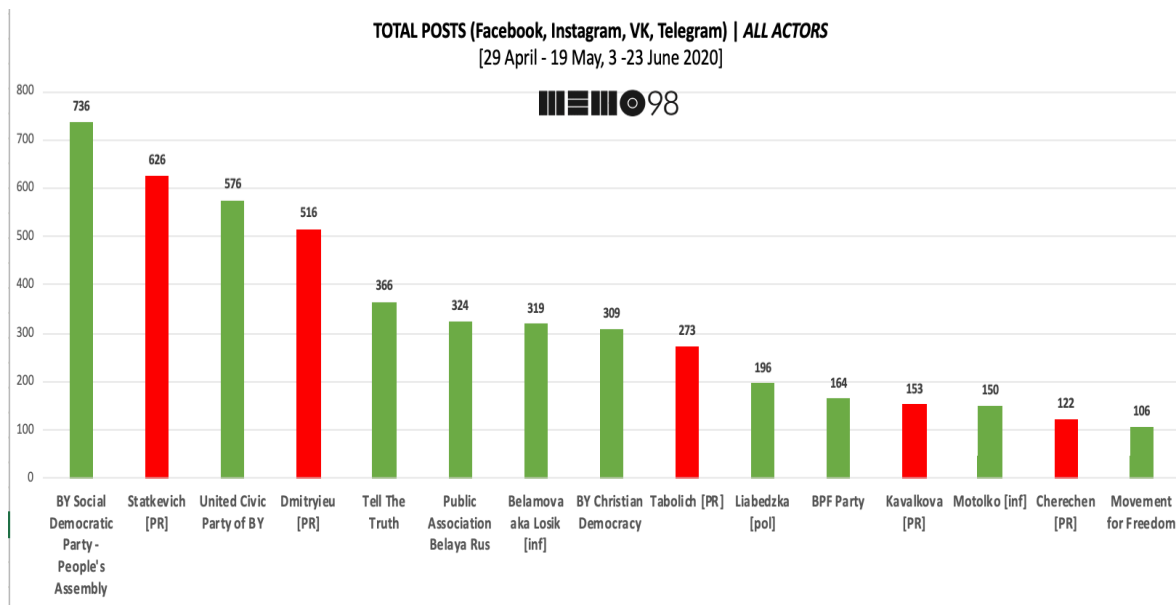
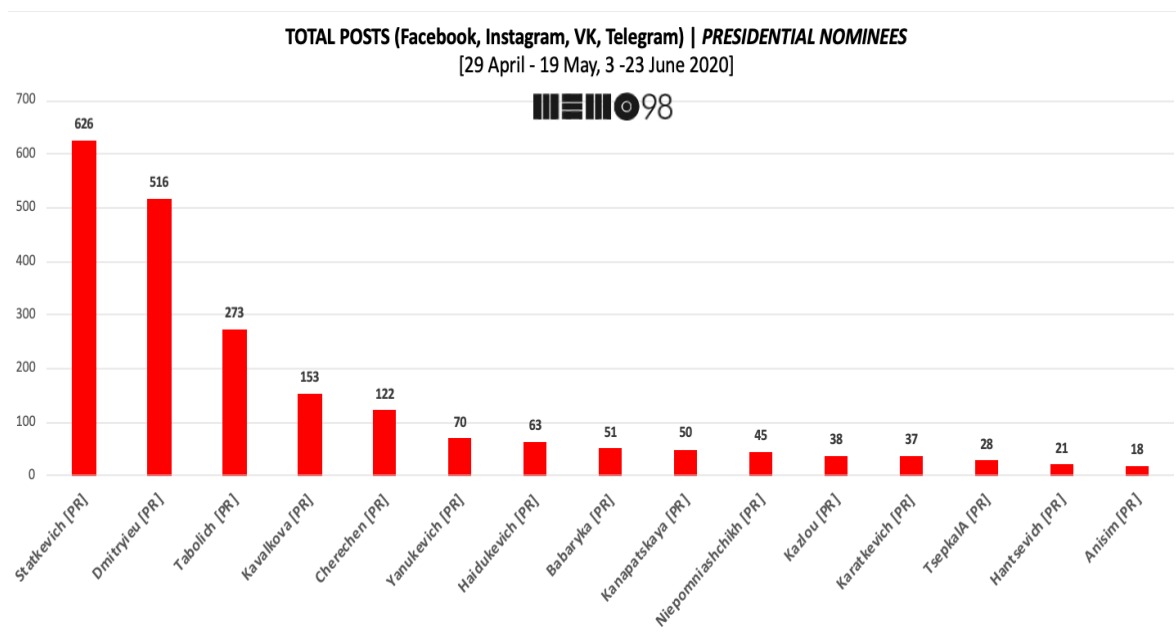
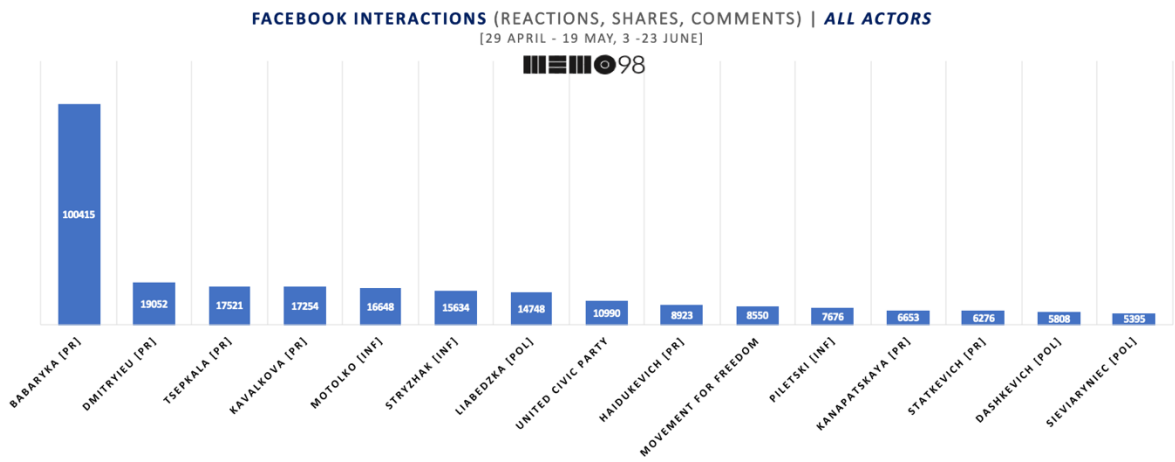
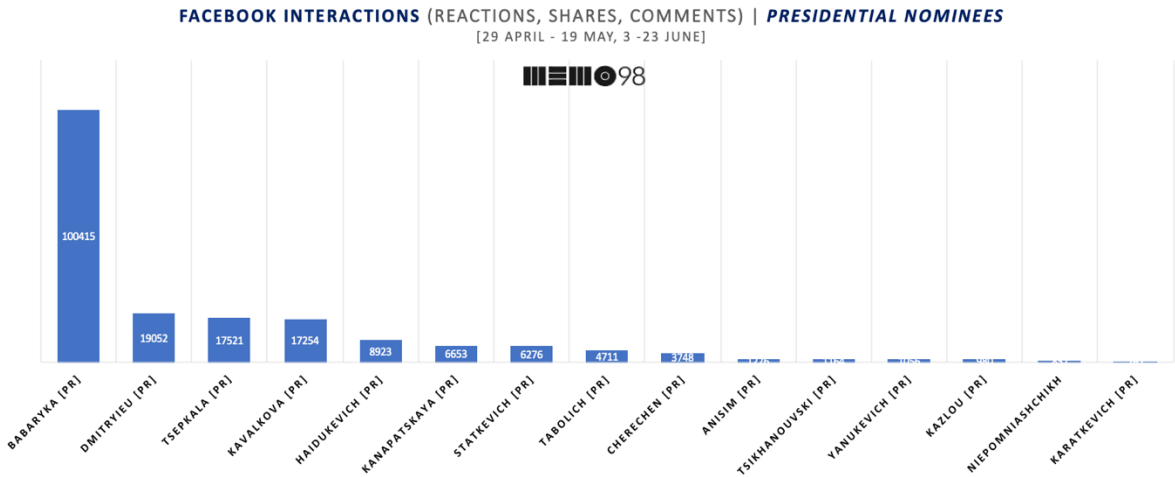
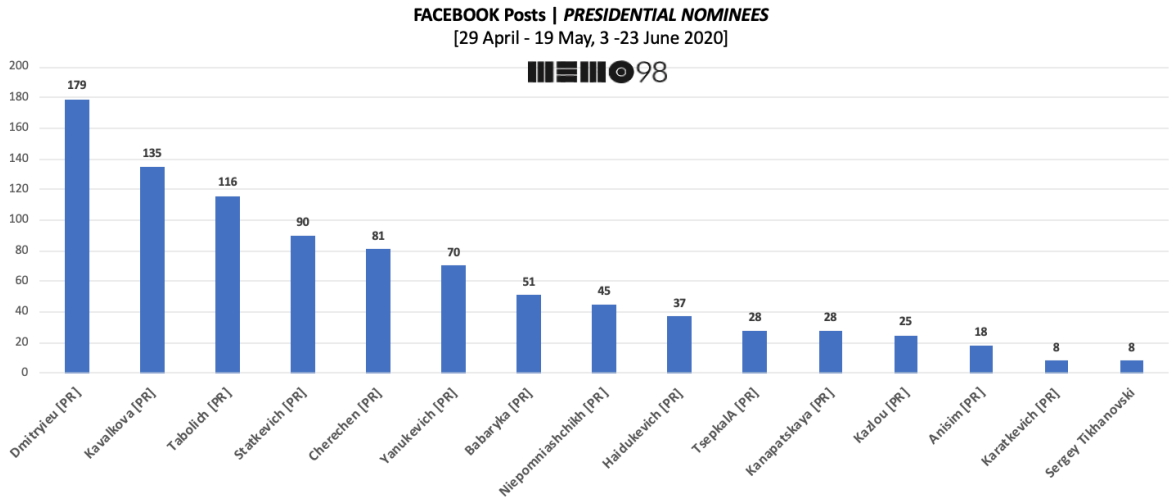


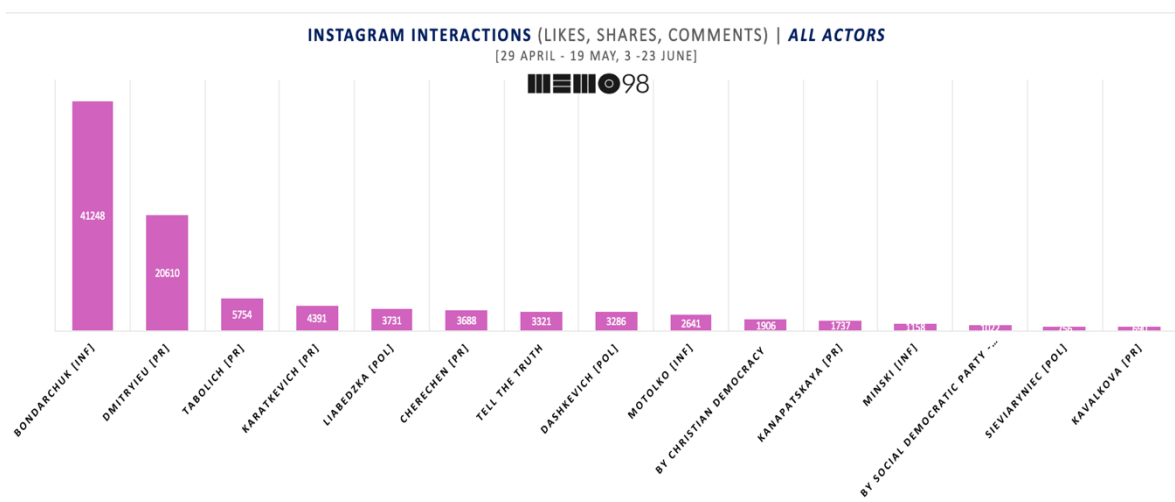
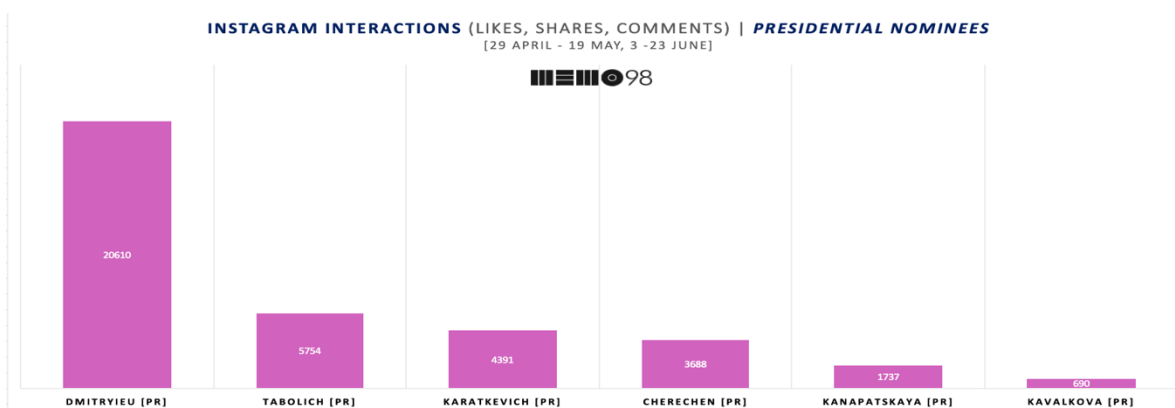
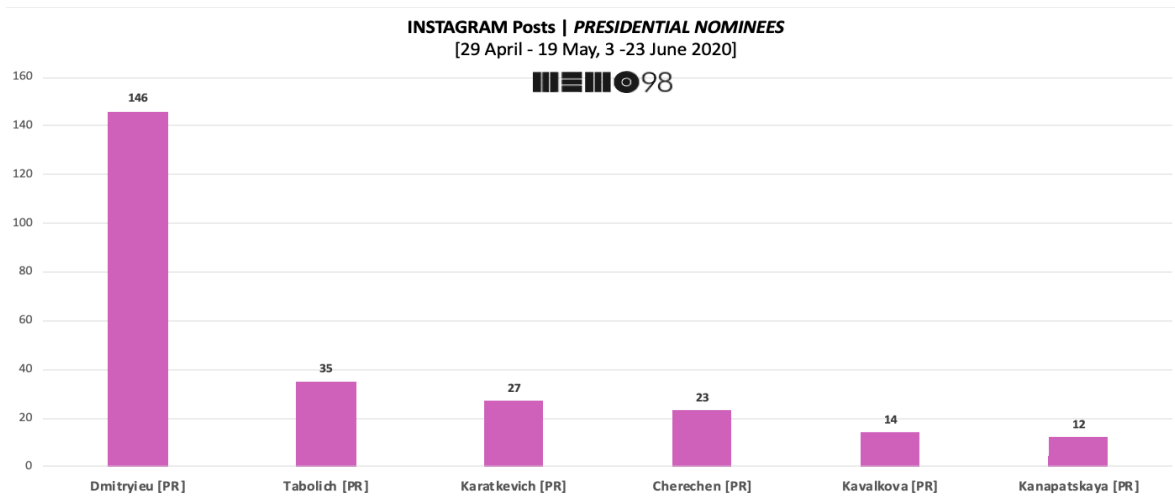
Chart 8 | Facebook, Instagram, Telegram VK (together) - Posts of *Nominees*



FACEBOOK | Charts 9-11 (Posts of Nominees, Interactions of Nominees, All actors)

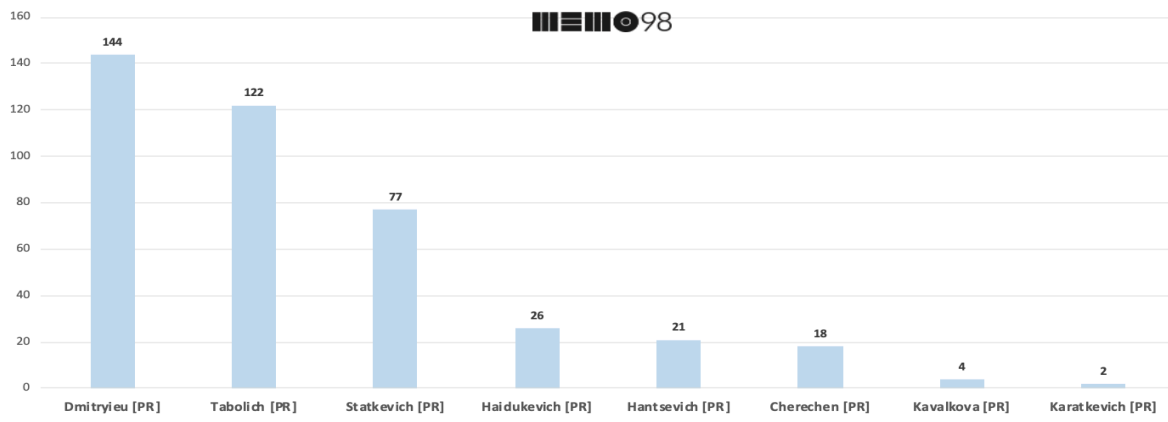


INSTAGRAM | Charts 12-14 (Posts of Nominees, Interactions of Nominees, All actors)



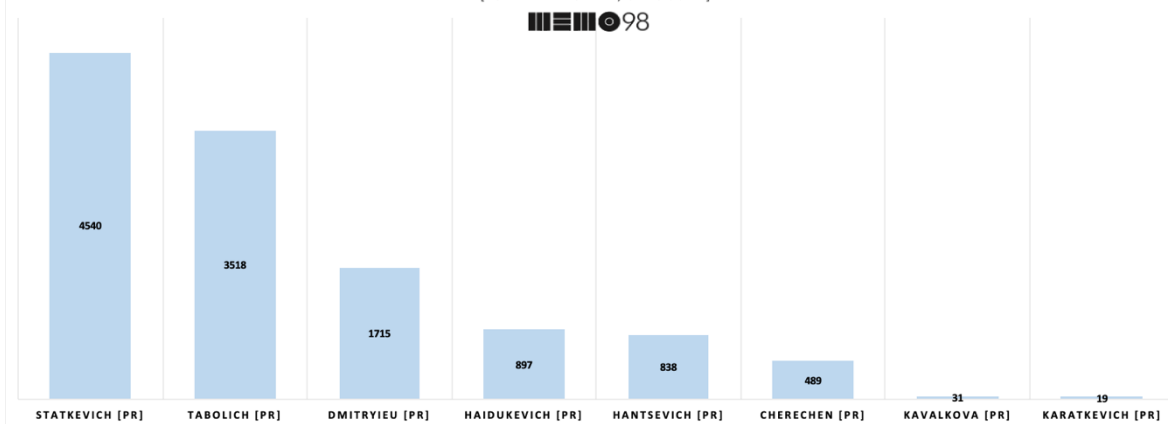
VK | Charts 15-17 (Posts of Nominees, Interactions of Nominees, All actors)

VK Posts | **PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEES**
[29 April - 19 May, 3 -23 June 2020]



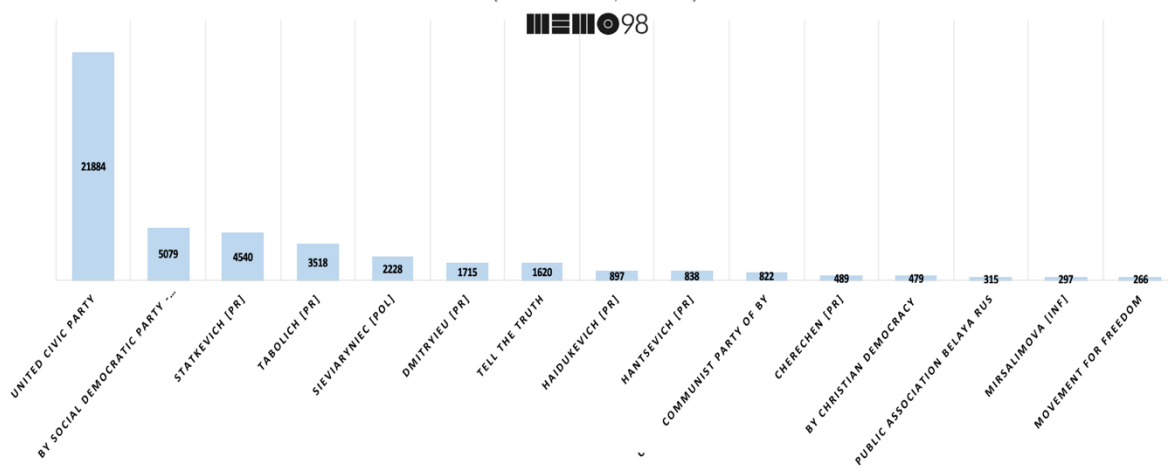
VK INTERACTIONS (LIKES, SHARES, COMMENTS) | **PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEES**

[29 APRIL - 19 MAY, 3 -23 JUNE]

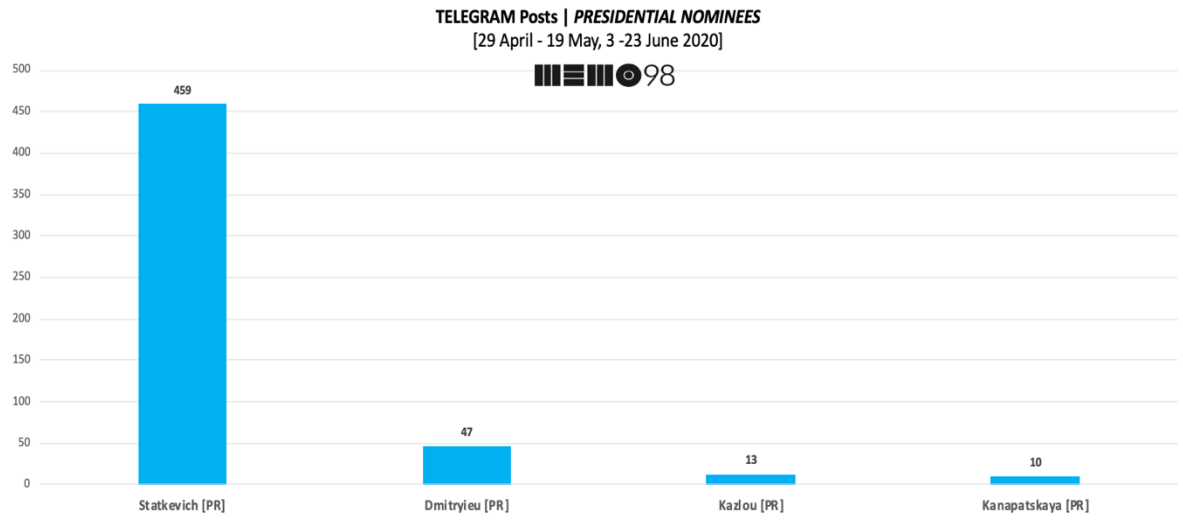


VK INTERACTIONS (LIKES, SHARES, COMMENTS) | **ALL ACTORS**

[29 APRIL - 19 MAY, 3 -23 JUNE]



TELEGRAM | Charts 18 (Posts of Nominees)



METHODOLOGY

The applied methodology consists of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the selected media content.

Quantitative analysis focuses on the amount of time (in television) and amount of posts (in social media) allocated to selected political subjects, presidential nominees or other monitored entities and the tone of the coverage in which these subjects are portrayed – positive, neutral and negative. The monitoring also focused on thematic structure of the news, evaluating its diversity by measuring the time/space devoted to different topics. In addition, the monitoring focused on top stories.

Qualitative analysis assessed the performance of selected media outlets against ethical and professional standards of journalism, such as balance, accuracy, timeliness, relevance, variety, transparency, choice of issues, omission of information, advantage of incumbency, positioning of items, comprehensible processing of the topic inflammatory language and others.

List of monitored parameters

Political subjects

International (TV)

International countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, USA, other EU/non-EU country)

International organisations (CIS, EU, Eurasian Union, NATO, OSCE, UN, V4)

International parties (from Poland, Russia, Ukraine)

Other international subjects

Institutions (TV)

PRES	President
PA	Presidential administration
PM	Prime minister
GOV	Government
CEC	Central Election Commission
BYR	Belaya Rus Public Association
BRU	Belarusian Republican Union of Youth
OTH	Other subjects

Ruling parties (TV, social media)

CPB	Communist Party of Belarus
LDPB	Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus
BPP	Belarusian Patriotic Party
RPLJ	Republican Party of Labour and Justice
BAP	Belrusian Agrarian Party
BSSP	Belarusian Social Sport Party
BRP	Belarusian Republican Party
BPPA	Belarusian Party of the Popular Accord

Opposition (TV, social media)

LPW	Left Party of a Just World
SDA	Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly
SDPA	Belarusian Social Democratic Party Assembly
SDPPA	Belarusian Social Democratic Party People's Assembly
UCP	United Civic Party
BPF	Belarusian Popular Front
BCD	Belarusian Christian Democracy
CBPF	Conservative Christian Party - Belarusian Popular Front

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MF	Movement for Freedom
TTT	Tell the Truth
BGP	Belarusian Green Party
LPPF	Belarusian Liberal Party of Freedom and Progress

Prospective candidates (TV, social media)

Anisim Alena
Babaryka Viktor
Dmitryieu Andrei
Hantsevich Yury
Haidukevich Aleh
Hubarevich Yury
Cherachen Siarhei
Kanapatskaya Hanna
Karatkevich Tatsiana
Kavalkova Volha
Kazlou Mikalai
Kisel Natallia
Lukashenka Aliaksandar
Niepomniaschikh Uladzimir
Skrabets Siarhei
Statkevich Mikalai
Tabolich Aliaksandr
Tsapkala Uladzimir
Tsikhanouskaya Sviatlana
Tsikhanouski Siarhei
Yanukevich Aliaksei
All other presidential nominees (except the incumbent)

Politicians (social media)

Barysau Ihar
Dashkevich Zmitser
Davydzka Henadz
Kaliakin Siarhei
Kastusiu Ryhor
Kuchuk Dmitry
Liabedzka Anatol
Pazniak Zianon
Rymasheuski Vital
Sannikau Andrei
Sieviaryniec Paval
Zadnepriany Vasiliy

Influencers

Blišč Dzianis
Bondarchuk Anna (Bond Anna)
Bykouski Paulyuk
Dynko Andrei
Filipovich Maksim
Harbatsevich Artsiom
Kabanau Aliaksandr
Kabuskou Ihar

Karbalevich Valer
Klaskouski Aliaksandr
Khalezin Mikalai
Lebiadok Yahor
Losik Ihar
Lusch Sergei
Minski Marat
Mirsalimova Elvira
Motolko Anton
Navumchyk Siarhei
Palchys Eduard
Piatruchin Siarhei
Piletski Ales
Rudy Kiril
Shraibman Artsiom
Sieviarynec Hanna
Stryzhak Andrei
Sviatlou Sciapan
Viacorka Franak
Zisser Yuri
Znak Max

Journalists

Aliaksandrau Andrei
Dynko Aliaksandra
Gushtyn Adaria
Haretski Barys
Hurnievic Dzmitry
Korovenkova Tanya
Loyko Olga
Lukashuk Zmicier
Matsevilov Alexey
Pauluchenka Fiodar
Satsuk Siarhei
Trafimovich Anton
Tsyhankou Vitali
Zolatava Maryna

Topics

Agriculture
Army/military
Business, economy
Culture
Catastrophes, incidents, accidents
Charity
Corruption
Crime
Civil society
Education, science
Environment
Foreign Affairs (no relevance to Belarus)
Foreign Affairs (related to Belarus)
Health care

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IT, digitalisation
Judiciary
Media
Minorities
Politics
Religion
Social issues (Unemployment, Poverty and Social Inequality)
Sport
Transport, infrastructure
Others

Top affairs

Migration policy of Belarus
Migrants to Europe
Islam
Gender (LGBTI, related)
International relations
Belarus-EU relations
Belarus-Poland relations
Belarus-Russia relations
Belarus-Ukraine relations
Belarus-USA relations
Presidential election – preparations
Presidential election – candidates
Presidential election – campaign
BY economy
BY healthcare system
BY education
Eastern Partnership Initiative
US administration
Nord-Stream 2
War in Ukraine
Crimea
Territories annexed by Russia (in Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia)
Belarus as non-existent country, part of ‘Russian’ family
Sanctions against Russia
Russian disinformation efforts during elections
Russian oil
Integration with Russia
Traditional Christian values
Decadent Western values
George Soros and his activities in Europe
Crisis of liberalism and global capitalism
Crisis of democracy
Crisis of European Union
Crisis of NATO
Deployment of NATO troops in Eastern Europe and Baltics
Biased media
Misuse of EU funds
Visa liberalization with EU
Rise of fascism in Europe

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Climate change
World pandemic COVID-19
COVID-19 in Belarus
Chernobyl
Chernobyl in context of COVID-19
Chernobyl in context of Astraviec station
Belarusian independence
Political repression/intimidation



ABOUT

MEMO 98

An internationally recognized, independent, and non-profit specialist media institution, with 22 year-long experience of conducting media monitoring and research and assisting civil society groups. Using tested and approved methodologies and tools, we provide media analysis and media monitoring with tangible results, in particular during election periods. Having participated in more than 120 election observation missions and about 150 media & election related projects and trainings in more than 55 countries (in the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Balkan countries, but also in Africa, Asia, South America and Middle East), our experts provide assistance on media & electoral and other democratic arrangements.

EAST Center

The Eurasian States in Transition Research Center, launched in 2016, is an independent, interdisciplinary think-tank focused on post-Soviet and east European studies. The EAST Center's mission is to produce high quality research on disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe, domestic and foreign policies in the eastern European countries, and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Linking Media

A Polish-based non-profit organization specialising in journalism training, media monitoring and analysis in Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine. It was founded by Alexey Leonchik in 2015, and has since then implemented dozens of projects on empowering civic society.

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