HUMAN RIGHTS VS AGGRESSIVE INFORMATION
(Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine)
This material is published in the framework of the project “Promotion of Democracy – independent information dissemination from the Human Rights perspective” (Promotion of Democracy). The project is implemented by The National LGBT* Rights Organization LGL (LGL) together with partner organizations Journalists for Tolerance and Cultural – Educational Institution DOTYK in Belarus and Auco FULCRUM in Ukraine and is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania.

The following material addresses issues of aggressive information, the relation media - politics - human rights activists as well as an overview of the legal framework.

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The content of this publication represents the views of the author only. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania does not accept any responsibility for the information it contains.
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**SCOPE OF THE PROJECT**

**About the project**

“Promotion of Democracy - Independent information dissemination from the Human Rights perspective”, is implemented by LGL, J4T, DOTYK and Auco FULCRUM and is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania through Lithuania’s Development Cooperation Programme.

The aim of the Project is to strengthen democracy and civil society in participating countries through production and publication of independent information from the Human Rights perspective, sharing Lithuania’s experience in European integration and building competencies of civil society, journalists, experts to respond to aggressive information, discrimination and intolerance relating to Human Rights and in particular LGBT* Rights in Eastern European countries. It also aims to reach members of vulnerable groups, as they are at the centre of the aggressive information and the discrimination.

**Partner organisations:**

**National LGBT Rights Organization LGL:** is a national non-profit, organisation uniting homosexual, bisexual and transgender persons. It is an advocacy organization dedicated to fighting homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Through education, support, and representation of the LGBT community, LGL promotes an inclusive social environment for LGBT* persons.

**Cultural – Educational Institution DOTYK:** It started as a film festival in 2015 but quickly extended its boundaries. Today DOTYK realizes various art and cultural projects, organizes the queer culture festival DOTYK and many exhibition projects, systematically engages in educational activities. At the end of 2016 they opened a community centre, meant to render assistance to the victims of discrimination on the basis of their gender identity and sexual orientation and the victims’ relatives.

**Journalists for Tolerance J4T:** The Human Rights Initiative “Journalists for Tolerance” is a non-profit civic association of media workers striving for equality and non-discrimination regardless of nationality, gender, age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and other traits. The initiative increases the visibility of vulnerable groups, provides a response to cases of hate speech and hate crime, promotes professional coverage of issues related vulnerable groups in Belarus.

**NGO FULCRUM UA:** Fulcrum was registered in 2009 as All-Ukrainian charitable organization, it was established in order to address the issue of HIV epidemics among MSM. In 2017 “Fulcrum” received a new legal status of non-governmental organization to respond more effectively to new challenges. It works to ensure that everyone in Ukraine has all the opportunities and advantages that exist in open and tolerant societies where diversity is perceived as a value.
• CPJ – Committee to Protect Journalists
• BAJ – Belarusian Association of Journalists
• EADaily – Eurasia Daily News Agency
• EU – European Union
• HRW – Human Rights Watch
• ILGA – International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
• KMIS – Kiev International Institute for Sociology
• LGBTI – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex
• LRT – Lithuanian Radio and Television
• NGO – Nongovernmental organization
• OIJE – Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics
• RSF – Reporters Without Borders
• RWB – Reporters Without Borders (RSF) RWB
• UN – United Nations (Human Rights Committee)
I. PICTURES

Picture 1. Aggressive information examples in Belarus
Examples of aggressive language regarding Belarus, used in several articles published by Russian media outlets such as Regnum and EADaily between August to November 2016. - Anti-Belarus disinformation in Russian media: Trends, features, countermeasures, EAST Media Review Issue No. 1, 2016

Picture 2. Protests for murdering of investigative journalist Pavel Sheremet
People taking part in a protest on July 20 - one year after the murder of journalist Pavel Sheremet in a car bomb explosion in central Kiev. Sheremet was known for his outspoken criticism of the leadership of his home country, Belarus. The board reads: “Who killed Pavel? A year has passed.” - Picture Valentyn Ogirenko/Reuters

II. GRAPHICS

Graphic 1. Victims of aggressive language in media
Presentation of some of the social group in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine that are more often victim of aggressive language. Data derived from the responses received by activists and journalists in the questionnaire created in the framework of thir research (about 20 to respondents).

Graphic 2. Killed journalists in Ukraine since 1992
Graphic that shows the number of killed journalists in Ukraine since 1992 (with motive confirmed). Many human rights and media organizations have criticized the lack of effective investigations and unpunishment for these incidents - Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), October 2018
Media industry has played a key role in the development of democratic societies by reporting human rights abuses and promoting respect. Information distributed from media plays a major role in influencing the interpretation of reality and this effect has been multiplied because of the internet, thus giving the media a new responsibility due to the political, social and cultural impact that news has not only in one country but also internationally.

The media can influence on the one hand, to move a society towards social inclusion and on the other hand deepening of the gap between the minorities and the majority of the population. The second can happen not only directly and deliberately by media professionals but also indirectly due to poor professional skills of media practitioners, or when media culture is still undeveloped. In such circumstances it is more likely that journalists promote discrimination or reinforce stereotypes by means of reporting, though their intentions may not necessarily be malicious.

This paper aims to present a general overview of the situation of aggressive information in Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian media towards different social groups as well as to have a look at the legal framework and civil society environment in each country. This research is divided into two sections. The first section is based on a desk research in order to have a mutual understanding on aggressive information, to present the legal framework and the media – human rights activists relation.

The second part is focused on the role the media plays today in eradicating or reinforcing discriminatory perceptions in society as well as the more common forms of aggressive speech that we face in the media towards LGBTI people, women, Roma, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged social groups. It is based on the views of journalists and activists in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine gathered from an online questionnaire (please see Annex 1).
I. Defining Aggression and Violence

Aggression can be defined as any behavior intended to harm other persons who are motivated to avoid that harm. A definition of aggression serves to distinguish it from other actions. First, aggression is not limited to behavior which includes only physical actions. Different forms of aggression have been identified by social psychologists which are often divided into two major categories:

- **Physical Aggression**
  An act of violence taken with the intention to cause harm to the recipient, including injuries and death, by using weapons, body or any other object. Physical violence includes also intoxication, self-mutilation and violence turned against oneself.

- **Nonphysical aggression**
  Every form of aggression that does not involve physical harm. Nonphysical aggression includes acts as yelling, screaming, swearing, name calling, intimidating which fall under the category of **Verbal Aggression**. **Relational or Social Aggression** is another form, defined as intentionally harming other person’s social relationships, excluding others from social interactions. Nonphysical aggression also involves forms of **sexual, racial, homophobic discriminatory behavior** which are designed to cause harm to individuals or social groups.

II. Types of Nonphysical aggression

The following list presents forms of nonphysical aggression, adapted from Archer & Coyne, 2005. Four typical behaviors of indirect, relational, and social aggression whose aim is to socially exclude or harm the status of a victim, alongside a psychological definition.

- **Gossiping** – A malicious form of attacking persons in a situation where he/she/them are not present. Gossip can also be defined as “sharing detrimental information with others who are neither part of the problem nor part of the solution. Social scientists categorize gossiping as a form of passive aggressive behavior.

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• **Bullying** – Alannah & Madeline National Centre Against Bullying defines\(^3\) this behavior as: “Bullying is when an individual or a group of people with more power, repeatedly and intentionally cause hurt or harm to another person or group of people who feel helpless to respond. Bullying can continue over time, is often hidden from adults, and will probably continue if no action is taken”.

• **Ostracism** – Defined in Psychology\(^4\) as: “Being deliberately left out of a group or social setting by exclusion and rejection. Groups and individuals alike can ostracize others and be ostracized themselves. Although social rejection is an inevitable part of human existence, prolonged or unreasonable ostracism can lead to loneliness, depression, and/or aggression. An example of ostracism is a student deliberately not inviting a particular person to their party although they invited everyone else in their class.

• **Discrimination**\(^5\) - In human social affairs, discrimination is treatment or consideration of, or making a distinction towards, a person based on the group, class, or category to which the person is perceived to belong. These include age, color, convictions for which a pardon has been granted or a record suspended, disability, ethnicity, family status, gender identity, genetic characteristics, marital status, nationality, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation. Discrimination consists of treatment of an individual or group, based on their actual or perceived membership in a certain group or social category, “in a way that is worse than the way people are usually treated”. It involves the group’s initial reaction or interaction going on to influence the individual’s actual behavior towards the group leader or the group, restricting members of one group from opportunities or privileges that are available to another group, leading to the exclusion of the individual or entities based on illogical or irrational decision making.

### III. What is aggressive speech and how is it spread?

Revolution on communication technology, the World Wide Web and quick rise of electronic media usage has made it very easy for individuals to consume media anywhere and at any time by accessing portable devices. More than 300 studies involving 50,000 subjects have been conducted in the last five decades on the relation between violence in the media and the increase of aggression.

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Aggressive content in online media and social networks is categorized in certain behaviors listed below:

1. **Trolling** - creating discord on the Internet by starting quarrels or upsetting people by posting inflammatory or off-topic messages in an online community. Basically, a social media troll is someone who purposely says something controversial in order to get a rise out of other users⁶.

2. **Cyberbullying** - bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. Cyberbullying can occur through SMS, Text, and apps, or online in social media, forums, or gaming where people can view, participate in, or share content. Cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else. It can include sharing personal or private information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation. Some cyberbullying crosses the line into unlawful or criminal behavior.⁷

3. **Flaming/insults** – “The online act of posting insults, often laced with profanity or other offensive language on social networking sites. These insults may turn into flame wars where two or more individuals unite to exchange or unite against a third party with verbal attacks. Many attribute the emergence of flaming to the anonymity that internet forums provide. Anonymity can lead to disinhibition, which results in the swearing, offensive and hostile language characteristic of flaming. More than just anonymity contributes to the offensive behaviors of flaming such as lack of social cues, less accountability of face-to-face communications, textual mediation and deindividuation are also probable factors.”⁸

4. **Hate Speech** – “Any communication that disparages a person or a group on the basis of some characteristics (to be referred to as types of hate or hate classes) such as race, colour, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or other characteristics.”⁹

5. **Online youth radicalization** is the process of by which an young individual, or group of people comes to adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations that reject or undermine the status quo or undermine contemporary ideas and expressions of the nation. As for radicalization, online youth radicalization can be both violent or non-violent. The phenomenon often referred to as "incitement to radicalization towards violent extremism" (or "violent radicalization") has grown in recent years.

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⁶ https://unlcms.unl.edu/engineering/james-hanson/trolls-and-their-impact-social-media  
⁷ https://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying/what-is-it/index.html  
⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flaming_(Internet)  
⁹ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323723036_Hate_Speech_Detection_A_Solved_Problem_The_Challenging_Case_of_Long_Tail_on_Twitter
Online spreading of Aggressive Language

Aggressive language is typically spread online by hate groups that support Nazism, racism, sexism or homophobia. A guide published by CNN Staff sheds light on five of the most common ways these messages are being spread on the media using social networks, video platforms, online funding and the dark web.

I. Social Networks

Big social network platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in the recent years have been struggling with how to manage the spread of aggressive information and hate speech. Massive data sharing comes with an ongoing struggle on balancing the responsibility and obligation on protecting society against aggression and attacks on one side and on the other side the right to share and debate ideas. Social media companies have recently stated that they will pay closer attention to content that promotes or celebrates hate. In April 2018, Facebook decided to update and make public its Community Standards, presenting 25 pages of detailed criteria of the mechanisms used to remove the presence of organizations and individuals engaged in terrorist activity, organized hate, mass murders, human trafficking and organized violence\(^\text{10}\).

In 2017 Twitter also announced that it is expanding efforts to protect users from abuse and harassment. A new “safe search” feature is created and new policies on stopping banned users from creating new accounts have been adopted. Twitter Rules prohibit violent threats, harassment, hateful conduct, and multiple account abuse, and we will take action on accounts violating those policies.” The company also lists Hateful Conduct among its banable offenses. That section of the terms and conditions prohibits conduct that will “promote violence against or directly attack or threaten other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or disease\(^\text{11}\).

2. Video Platforms

Video Platforms are another tool used by hate groups on posting countless messages of hate worldwide. YouTube has recently been accused for not only providing a platform for hate speech but also providing financial resources to organizations who share hate speech. Videos that promote hate are often monetized, meaning that individuals or groups are profiting from it. In 2017 YouTube also clarified its rules on hate speech saying “it will not allow adverts to appear alongside ‘hateful’ or discriminatory content.

\(^\text{10}\) https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/violence_criminal_behavior
YouTube describes "hateful" content as any video that promotes discrimination or "disparages or humiliates" people on the basis of their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability, age, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or "other characteristic associated with systematic discrimination". YouTube also stated in March 2017 that it will refuse to place ads next to videos using "gratuitously disrespectful language that shames or insults an individual or group".

3. Online Funding
Hate groups are using online funding platforms to raise funds for their events. A CNN report shows that individuals attending Charlottesville rally last year used PayPal and GoFundMe to fund it. In August 2017, PayPal published a Blog post saying that the company is working to make sure its services aren't used for payments and donations that promote hate, violence or racial intolerance. "If we become aware of a website or organization using our services that may violate our policies, our highly trained team of experts addresses each case individually and carefully evaluates the website itself, any associated organizations, and their adherence to our policy".

GoFundMe, another fundraising platform has declared that they it will not support activity related to hate groups “White nationalists and neo-nazis cannot use GoFundMe to promote hatred, racism, or intolerance, and if a campaign violates GoFundMe's terms of service, we'll remove it from the platform,” a spokesman told CNN Tech on August 2017. The company's Terms and Conditions deem campaigns in support of, or for the legal defense of alleged crimes associated with hate, violence, harassment, bullying, discrimination, terrorism, or intolerance of any kind relating to race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, sex, gender or gender identity, or serious disabilities or diseases.

4. The dark web
Techopedia defines the Dark Web as “websites that are visible to the public, but their IP address details are intentionally hidden. These websites can be visited by anyone on Internet, but it is not easy to find the server details on which the corresponding site is running, and it is difficult to track the one hosting the site”. The dark Web concept is achievable with the help of anonymity tools. Some popular tools are Tor and I2P.

Hate groups websites are often banned by search engines and web hosting platforms where they can be accessed through standard web browsers. They often use the dark web where there are less policies, but the audience is relatively small.

15. https://www.gofundme.com/terms
According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), more professional journalists were killed worldwide in connection with their work in the first nine months of 2018 than in all of 2017. Just over half were killed in war zones, chief amongst them being Afghanistan and Yemen. In addition to emerging torture targeting journalists in war zones, increasingly shrinking space for journalists in other countries, especially those prone to cyber attacks and propagandist influence from Russia, is significantly alarming. According to the Freedom House 2017 ranking, the three countries in question differ significantly with regards to level of press freedom: whilst Lithuania is considered “free”, Ukraine is only “party free” and Belarus “not free”.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union—of which all three states were part of—liberation of freedom of speech and freedom of expression took place; decentralization of media outlets and the promotion of independent voices were encouraged, with numerous laws being passed to counterweight half-a-century-long censorship and a total control over both private and public life. Whilst Belarus remained under significant influence of the Russian regime and is considered among worst countries for freedom of speech and expression to date, there were notable improvements in in both judicial, political as well as societal spheres within Lithuania and Ukraine.

However, in the face of Kremlin-sponsored propaganda and the emerging populist discourse in Europe, shrinking civil space with regards to the protection of journalists, freedom of expression of minorities and bias-motivated speech from the national authorities all exemplify the struggles of journalists in Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania today that will be further explored.

I. LITHUANIA

According to Freedom House report of 2017, Lithuania enjoys 81% of freedom of the press. Characterized by the rapid accession to the European Union following the restoration of independence as well as a swift recovery from the 2008 economic crisis resulting in the development of one of the fastest internet speed, the development of digital media had a significant impact on journalism and democracy in the 21st century Lithuania. Internet penetration skyrocketed in subscriptions ranging from 34.3 percent of the population in 2005 to 60.5 percent in 2010, resulting in the transition of traditional media outlets online.

Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics has been established as a state-sponsored authority to regulate, monitor and implement journalist ethics online and beyond. As such, it
also promotes arguably discriminatory legislation to prevent information that is considered detrimental for minors.

**Anti-gay propaganda law**

In 2010, an infamous Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information (i.e. “anti-gay propaganda” legislation) has been introduced, outlawing positive public portrayal of LGBTI issues. According to the Article 4.2.16 of the Law in question, information that’s considered of having a detrimental effect on minors (below 18 years old) is that “which expresses contempt for family values, encourages the concept of entry into a marriage and creation of a family other than stipulated in the Constitution and the Civil Code of the Republic of Lithuania”.17

On October 19, 2017 the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania proposed the law on strengthening the notion of family exclusively based on a marriage between a man and a woman.18 By doing so, it further justified the so-called ‘anti-gay propaganda’ law. According to Lithuanian authorities, such discriminatory interference with the right to freedom of expression is necessary to protect “emotional, spiritual, psychological development and health of the minors”, thus creating a chilling effect on public portrayal of LGBTI issues in the Lithuanian society. During the Third Periodic Report at the UN Human Rights Committee, Lithuanian authorities clearly stated that "it is not the depiction of gender diversity that has detrimental effect on minors and is therefore restricted (not prohibited), but rather encouraging of family relationship between people of the same sex."19

While the law does not explicitly outlaw positive imagery of LGBTI, the implementation of the law speaks the contrary. For instance, in the period between 2013 and 2014 alone, the Law was applied on three different occasions with the view of censoring LGBTI-related public information thus directly interfered with the right to freedom of expression of LGBTI persons. In 2013, public broadcast of the promotional videos for Baltic Pride 2013 was limited by state-run Lithuanian Radio and Television (LRT) board. The decision which, as a state-sponsored Lithuanian Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics (IJE) ruled to have not been in violation of any laws, was grounded in the protection of minors and the airing of the ads was limited to late-evening hours only.

Similarly in 2014, the publishing of a fairytale book Amber Heart by Neringa Dangvyde has been suspended for “purposeful homosexual propaganda”.20 A book included a series of

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17. Law on Minors
fairytales, one of which involved a story about a homosexual couple therefore, according to the Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics, is “harmful for children younger than 14 years old” and should be labelled appropriately.

Despite growing pressure from international community, Lithuania remains one of the few jurisdictions in the European Union without any legal recognition of same-sex relationships. In fact, it rests as one of the most hostile societies towards LGBTI people as 61% of the members of the local LGBTI community felt discriminated or harassed on grounds of their sexual orientation in the course of the last twelve months (i.e. the highest indicator in the EU).21 As such, the Law on the Protection of Minors further exuberates negative attitudes normalizing derogatory discourse within the media and the political sphere.

II. BELARUS

Based on the 2017 report by Freedom House, Belarus enjoys only 17% of freedom of press hence considered “not free”. The government of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has held the presidency since 1994, dominates Belarus’s print and broadcast sectors and exercises control over private media through restrictive laws and regulations. Country’s independent journalists name “absurd” mass media law, a biased judicial system and the repressive regime of President Lukashenka as the most notable obstacles in their everyday life.

According to annual reports by Freedom House, Belarus remains among the worst countries in the world in the field of freedom of speech. The authorities have often subjected journalists to violence, arbitrary detention, and politically motivated prosecution, most prominently since spring 2017 when the country’s economic woes fueled widespread social unrest. Around that time, President Aleksandar Lukashenka introduced a so-called “parasite tax” on those who are not employed full-time in an attempt to boost the country’s faltering, Soviet-era economy. Rarely seen anti-government protests filled streets and town squares across the country. The authorities responded with a heavy-handed crackdown against protesters, arresting hundreds of people, temporarily restricting mobile internet and arresting activists live streaming the events. 101 journalists were detained in 2017, according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), most of them during protests in March and April. 69 journalists were fined for working “illegally” in 2017, more than in the years 2014 to 2016 combined. Since the beginning of 2018, Belsat TV has already been involved in 10 legal proceedings.

Increased persecution, roundups and detentions of independent journalists is perceived as a way to deteriorate any Western influence in the country’s public sphere, often resulting in scapegoating for alleged spying or defamation.

**Bias-motivated speech**

Bias-motivated speech is wide-spread not only amongst the general population but also entrenched in the political discourse. In March 2012, the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, said “it is better to be a dictator than gay”. Seen as an attack on Germany’s openly gay Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, the remark was made after the EU leaders called for new measures to pressure Lukashenko over human rights abuses. A similar incident occurred in 2010 during a meeting with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Poland and Germany when the Belarus President had told Mr Westerwelle to lead a “normal life”. According to Rainbow Map 2018 by the International Lesbian and Gay Association ILGA-Europe, Belarus stands as least inclusive when it comes to LGBT rights. Despite the fact that homosexual behavior is decriminalized since 1994, in cases of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, the law provides no protection to LGBT victims in Belarus.

In move that echoed the law that Vladimir Putin signed against gay propaganda and the one for the protection of minors in Lithuania, Belarus passed legislation in 2016 banning information that “discredits the institution of the family and marriage”. “Belarus is based on the foundation of the traditional institutes of the family and marriage,” said the Minister of the Interior calling LGBT relationships “fake”. As 95% of the Belarusian media market is owned by the state, publications on LGBT issues are rare in state-owned newspapers, as well as in independent.

**The prevalence of disinformation by the Russian media**

Russian media have a considerable impact on Belarusian public opinion. A recent national poll conducted by Belarusian Analytical Workroom discovered that two-thirds of Belarusians watch Russian TV channels on either regular or occasional basis. Furthermore, Russian media enjoy a higher level of trust among Belarusians than both state and independent Belarusian media. In fact, 70.5% of respondents fully or partly trust messages in Russian media, whereas both Belarusian official and independent media enjoy lesser trust ratings. This makes Belarus very sensitive to probable Belarus-related disinformation campaigns in Russian media.

A growing number of chauvinistic materials containing degrading statements about Belarusian state, Belarusian people, language, and culture also appear on Russian online media.
Oftentimes, a series of articles openly question sovereignty and territorial integrity of Belarus. These media often label many national policies in Belarus as nationalistic and anti-Russian, distorting and manipulating facts. The following is a list of most preposterous claims regarding Belarus published in Russian media outlets such as Regnum and EADaily between August to November 2016:


Belarus may become a naval power by adding Lithuania’s and Latvia’s territories. President Lukashenka should discuss with Putin an inevitable partition of Ukraine and the Baltics as soon as possible.


The Belarusian nation does not exist. Belarusians are a Western / Polish project aimed at dismembering Russian people.  


Eastern Partnership was invented by Polish chauvinistic circles in order to annex Belarus and to crusade Moscow.  


Lukashenka runs Belarusization policy, which is characterized by de-Russification and revisionism. As a result, Belarusians has become anti-Russian.  


Belarusian is either an artificial language or a dialect of Russian. It was invented with the aim to turn Russians into Poles. Speaking Belarusian deteriorates ability to speak proper Russian, which in turn points to a person’s low origin and hinders social development.  

Such statements did not go unnoticed. On suspicion of inciting national or social enmity or discord enshrined in Article 130 of the Belarusian Criminal Code, in December 2016 Belarusian authorities detained three Belarusian citizens who previously were contributors of Regnum and EADaily. While Russian media outlet considers the arrested contributors to be political prisoners, Belarusian authorities view them as “destructive forces” trying to bring discord into Belarus - Russia relations.
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III. UKRAINE

Twenty-five years after the break-up of the Soviet Union independent Ukraine's media landscape is still closely intertwined with the Russian media market. Ever since the country first gained independence the strong influence of the dominant media in its big neighbour Russia, whose media almost all Ukrainians understand, has led to an asymmetric competition situation and for many years hindered the establishment of independent media in Ukraine. Statistics published by the Kiev International Institute for Sociology (KMIS) show that 72 percent of Ukrainians mainly use Ukrainian television and online media to stay informed. Only a fifth of the population regularly uses Ukrainian and Russian information sources, whereby a high level of distrust of Russian media prevails.

After Euromaidan protests in 2013/2014 during which a high degree of politicisation and a surge in the public's desire to stay informed emerged, media experts now observe that interest in politics and journalistic content has waned considerably. However, economic stagnation and political instability prevents a rapid development of independent media outlets in the country.

Linguistic quarrels
In 2012, under the infamous “Kivalov-Kolesnichenko language law”, Ukraine granted Russian the status of a “regional language”. The law resulted in a heated public discussion as to many it was a political gesture aimed at dividing Ukrainian society. Soon after the then-President Viktor Yanukovych fled the country following the Euromaidan protests and accusations, the law was abolished. By Russia, it was perceived as an aggressive gesture against the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine and later used as a pretext to justify the annexation of Crimea and military aggression in the Donbas. However, it was not until February this year, that the law was recognized as unconstitutional, meaning a new law has to pass on the official state language.

While 68 percent of Ukrainians consider Ukrainian their mother tongue, only 50 percent speak it at home, and only 39 percent use it at work. Thus, there is little room for Ukrainian in the public domain. Several laws aimed to sustain Ukrainian were adopted in 2016-2017, including the law introducing language quotas in the media. For example, the Rada introduced a minimum 75 percent quota for Ukrainian-language shows on television. However, the legislation is imperfect, and the actual share of Ukrainian-language content on TV is only 39 percent. The rest is mostly in Russian, despite the fact that 64 percent of citizens think the state should support the Ukrainian language above all.
Impunity for Crimes against Journalists in the Post-Truth Era

In the aftermath of Euromaidan, the choice of the Ukrainian people in favor of the western civilization model caused a strong resistance of Russia and those Ukrainian citizens who support the eastern vector of development thus resulting in an open conflict which exer-uberated in the most excruciating form during the annexation of Crimea. The war in the East led not only to significant human and territorial losses, but, alas, tolerating the violations of fundamental freedoms and human rights, in particular freedom of expression. The main points regarding the freedom of expression decrease in Ukraine include:

- the restriction of access to information channels (Russian books, TV channels, films, social networks, mail servers, etc.);
- persecution, in particular the detention and imprisonment of citizens expressing separatist views in social networks;
- a mass prohibition on Russian journalists entering Ukraine, and those who were on temporarily uncontrolled territory (Crimea and Donbas).

This is especially true for those who arrived in the area from the Russian Federation. In addition to this, so-called “patriotic” or loyalty-journalism became active as some journalists believe that in terms of war it is more important to participate in the information war against the enemy than just to be non-biased. Here also belong the calls not to criticize the authorities during war period, and the prolonged understatement of crimes committed by individual fighters of volunteer battalions. This led to a rapid fall of trust to Ukrainian media. According to the Institute of Sociology, the National Academy of Science of Ukraine, in 2016, only 21% of Ukrainian citizens trusted domestic media, while 51% did not.

At the end of 2017 the International Federation of Journalists called Ukraine among those countries where journalists are at risk and where

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the worst impunity for crimes against them can be observed. In 13 cases—out of a total of 80 incidents of physical violence against journalists recorded during the first 10 months of 2017—the attackers were officials or Members of Parliament; in 7 cases journalists were attacked by police or State Protection Office. No one within the aforementioned structures were punished.

For more, cases of beatings and assassinations of journalists during “Euromaidan” remain undiscovered, the killers of Viacheslav Veremiia, Pavel Sheremet, and those who ordered the murder of Georgiy Gongadze have not been punished yet. It can be argued that violence against journalists is allowed, as for the cases who do reach to the court, the perpetrators receive a minimum penalty.

Between shades of war
Since the introduction of internet, cyber attacks, informational offensives, propaganda practices and manipulative messages became a part of daily life for Ukrainians. Ukraine remains Russia’s primary target in the so-called “hybrid war” even after the annexation of the Crimea and occupation of a part of Donbas. Attempting to answer the outer challenges, Ukrainian government chose the tactics of managing the Internet space. Russia admittedly continues impacting the Ukrainian segment of the Internet for the latter developed in the once shared informational space in the 1990s and 2000s.

In May 2017 presidential decree № 133/2017 applied economic sanctions to hundreds of Russian businesses including media and television-communicational ones. Consequently, most of Ukrainian Internet-providing companies limited the access to Russian social networks Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki as well as to the Yandex.ru and Mail.ru resources. In June of 2017 the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine addressed the Security Service of Ukraine with the recommendation of blocking 20 “separatist” news websites. In July the law drafts (№ 6688, № 6676) allowing pre-trial blocking of websites for periods ranging from 24 hours up to 2 months were introduced to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.

Ukrainian civil society dubbed these drafts as dangerous and incomplete. All initiatives targeting the limitations of users’ rights are normally justified by the defense purposes determined by the war against Russia, yet they seem to be rash and are generated disregarding the expert and civil society’s opinions. No wonder, the said initiatives are opposed by IT businesses and a number of media and civil organizations. In 2017 the freedom of the Internet in Ukraine was questioned for the first time while the civil society is now facing yet another challenge in the interactions with the state institutions.
Information received from mainstream and online media is the dominant source through which we learn about others and their world, develop attitudes and beliefs and formulate our sense of identity. The same media may become source of discrimination through images that perpetuate generalizing and stereotyping representations on various social groups, contain discriminatory content and share hate speech.

Through the questionnaire prepared on the framework of this research, local stakeholders admitted that the language used in the media has changed in recent years, but there are still major shortcomings in specific terminology and "thirst" for clicks, and the sensationalism of news in the new media has led to the aggressive information. Some major setbacks in the last five years regarding media environment are related to:

- **Violation of freedom of speech and freedom of information** including cyber-attacks against online journalists and bloggers, limited access to quality media outside the capital, fake news, no moderation of comments on the news portals etc.
- **Lack of professionalism and knowledge of journalists** including media coverage with personal opinion instead of facts, value judgement, discriminative language and hate speech.
- **Influence of politics in media** which often includes expression of nationalistic positions of politicians, diffusion of aggressive speeches against vulnerable groups as well as politics influence through legal framework (ex. Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information in Lithuania; National Media Law that prohibits journalists from contributing to any foreign media in Belarus etc.).

However, media self-awareness on human rights issues (positive coverage of Kyiv Pride and coverage of other LGBT related events as well as improvements in the use of the correct terminology) independent journalists and bloggers (media practitioner have started to write in national languages) as well as social movements ("Me too" movement, visibility of hate crimes in the public sphere etc.) have brought positive changes in the three countries.

**Stop Fake initiative in Ukraine**

On March 2, 2014 Kyiv Mohyla Journalism School lecturers, graduates and students along with the KMA Digital Future of Journalism project launched the Stopfake.org fact checking site. Initially the goal of the project was to verify and refute disinformation and propaganda about events in Ukraine being circulated in the media, now it has turned into an information hub where we examine and analyze all aspects of Kremlin propaganda. This initiative looks at how propaganda influences Ukraine and try to investigate how propaganda impacts on other countries and regions, from the European

Union to countries which once made up the Soviet Union.

**Freelance journalists and bloggers** – The voice of freelance journalists and bloggers who sharply criticize political actions, is increased and becoming more powerful, even though in Belarus the freelance journalists are being prosecuted and cannot operate freely in the country, as the state routinely refuses accreditation to independent journalists and harasses those who work with foreign media.

**#MeToo movement in Lithuania** – The global movement on addressing sexual harassment in the workplace trembled public opinion in Lithuania with stories of harassment by artists, students etc. The Labour Code applicable as of 1 July 2017 states that every company with over 50 employees must adopt and announce principles for supervising and implementing an equal opportunities policy. This means that the company must introduce methods that will be applied in particular situations or as a preventive tool.

According to the respondents, for the majority of society media is the most important resource to understand what is happening in the country and world. The traditional media outlets, such as TV and printed press are more influential to people of age, while social media and online news portals are mostly used by young people and mid-aged people.

The role of media nowadays is estimated powerful and influential for shaping the attitudes in society according to the activists in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. Media is also seen as a tool that can be used in order to decrease aggressive language of hatred, but is also agreed that this can only happen if media is independent from external factors. The social groups that are more often victims of aggressive information in media (not necessarily by media) according to the respondents are:

![Graphic 1. Victims of aggressive language in media](image-url)
According to the Freedom House 2017 ranking, we are dealing with three countries with different level of press freedom - Free (Lithuania), Partly free (Ukraine) and Not free (Belarus). However, in all the three countries there is a tendency by media, groups or individuals to give preferential treatment to an individual or a group when they are perceived to be in the same in-group of the society and use bias, stereotypically or even aggressive language against others that either implies a direct physical threat against them, or is seen as an indirect call for others to use it.

Often the victims of this situation created because of a hostile media environment, are vulnerable social groups belonging to another race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity or ethnicity / national origin which differs from that of the members of the society. This leads us to a violation of human rights and the media as a distributor of the message, has the power to improve or promote even more conflict due to the language and information it uses.

Internal and external actors may affect in the agenda of media in a country. According to the respondents from Belarus and Ukraine, the foreign policies of Russia have impact in terms of human rights and drafting the laws (ex. after the anti-LGBT legislation was adopted in Russia, similar drafts of the law were proposed in Ukrainian parliament, Law for Protection of Minors in Lithuania etc.). In Lithuania there is a clear sense of trying to minimize the effects of Russian propaganda.

As for the internal politics, there is still a strong belief that media is being used as a tool for manipulation of public opinion. In Ukraine, many politicians tend to own media sources, online news platforms to use them for their own purpose – to spread a positive image of themselves and aggressive information about the opponents. Meanwhile in Lithuania journalists are quite independent. The freedom of speech is valued and usually all the misdoings and corruptions are being immediately exposed.

Journalists work environment

I. LITHUANIA

Lithuania is considered a country with “free press” according to Freedom House and is ranked the 36 in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index from Reporters Without Borders (RWB). In the 28 years since Lithuania gained independence, the country’s media has generally enjoyed high levels of freedom. Dainius Radzevicius, chairman of Lithuania’s Journal-
ists Union in an interview says that even though there are few violations cases, some go unreported. With 28 years as an independent state, the majority of the ruling coalitions have understood the importance of media freedom to democracy and to the checking of legislative, judicial and governmental powers in the country.²⁹

RWB calls Lithuania “insecure” because of ownership issues in local medias as well as the issue of “fake news” allegedly spread by the Kremlin. The country’s constitution guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and those protections have been respected by successive governments.

The current situation regarding human rights legislation is mixed. In the last years the country made important progress in some areas but there has been also some critical stagnation in other areas of Human Rights. The relationship between the Catholic Church and the state continues to raise questions about the guarantee of Human Rights and freedoms in Lithuania, especially regarding reproductive rights and the right to family life. Many concerns are raised especially regarding the rights of children and domestic violence. Victim blaming and lack of investigations are still pressing issues regarding this right.

II. BELARUS

Belarus continues to remain the only European country that applies death penalty (with no intention to abolish it) and the situation of Human Rights activists and journalists appears quite difficult. Belarus Criminal Code criminalize involvement in an unregistered organization but, at the same time, authorities deny registration to non-governmental groups and political parties so a restrictive legislation prevents human rights groups from operating freely and no political party has been able to register since 2000. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that there has been a big wave of repression against peaceful protesters. Police detained at least 700 people in connection with the protests, including journalists and human rights activists.

Neither freelance journalists can operate freely in the country, the state routinely refuses accreditation to independent journalists and harasses those who work with foreign media.³⁰ In 2017 a total of 69 fines were issued to freelance journalists. There have taken place

more than 76 trials on administrative cases against freelance journalists since the beginning of 2018. The harassment of journalists and internet censorship has reached unprecedented levels. This destabilization has been shown in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index from RWB, where Belarus is ranked 155 (i.e. has fallen two places compared to 2017 when was ranked the 153).

III. UKRAINE

The human rights situation in Ukraine is difficult especially with the ongoing war. The new government measures restricted media pluralism, freedom of expression and association. Statistics published by the Kiev International Institute for Sociology (KIIS) show that television continues to be the most important and influential information medium in Ukraine, 72% of Ukrainians mainly use Ukrainian television and online media to stay informed. According to Freedom House, ownership of private channels remains a big problem as they are concentrated in the hands of a few oligarchs who use them for their own political and business interests.

Journalists killed in Ukraine since 1992

Many attacks on human rights defenders and journalists in Ukraine have been recorded by Human Rights organizations in the last years. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 12 journalists (motive confirmed) have been killed in Ukraine between 1992 - 2018, with the last case of investigative journalist Pavel Sheremet’s murder in 2016.31 The organizations criticized the lack of effective investigations and unpunishment for these incidents. Post-Maidan Ukraine has been in the spotlight of world news as it struggles to balance the war in its eastern parts with its proclaimed aspiration to find a rightful place in the European family of nations.32

31. https://cpj.org/data/killed/europe/ukraine/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&cc_fips%5B%5D=UP&start_year=1992&end_year=2018&group_by=location
THE ERA OF ONLINE MEDIA

Internet and the rise of Mass Digitalization has fundamentally changed the way both media outlets and audience, create and consume information. With technology costs dropping fast and media getting more user generated, the audience is continuously getting a more influential role. With users taking the lead, personalization of content is growing in the media and news outlets are more and more becoming tailored to the interests of every user, segregating everyone into “social media bubbles”.

**Social media bubbles** - is a state of intellectual isolation that can result from personalized searches when a website algorithm selectively guesses what information a user would like to see based on information about the user, such as location, past click-behavior and search history. As a result, users become separated from information that disagrees with their viewpoints, effectively isolating them in their own cultural or ideological bubbles.33

An increasingly discussed issue is that instead of uniting the world by breaking distances and barriers of communication, the internet is dividing the world into groups of like-minded people, who share the same opinions despite living anywhere in the world. The good side about filter bubbles is that they have made it easier to access personalized content. On the other side, studies show that algorithm selectivity is hiding opposing views from people.

This is creating the so called “Echo Chambers” of information, where beliefs are amplified or reinforced by repetition inside a closed system which may lead to the political and social polarization and the rise of extremism. This virtual environments can be used by extremists to recruit, radicalize and spread hate speech throughout people. Social networks like Facebook and Twitter are places where users can constantly find “Echo Chambers” of Anti-Muslim, Anti-Semitic, racist and homophobic groups. Closed groups in social networks can be hidden from anyone except their members and be moderated, what gives users the possibility to remove critics and opposing views, risking to normalize hateful content. This groups can provide a context of de individualization and anonymity, making users loose self-awareness and do things that people might never do when acting alone.

Recent studies show that the link between social media and hate crimes can be true. Authors Karsten Müller from Princeton University Carlo Schwarz analyzed the presence of right-wing anti-refugee sentiment on Facebook predicts violent crimes against refugees. Social media can act as a propagation mechanism between online hate speech and real-life violent crime.

Media plays an important role in the development of a society. In hostile media environments there is a tendency of individuals with a strong preexisting attitude to perceive media coverage as biased against their side and in favor of their antagonists’ point of view. These actions lead to reinforcing of stereotypes and discrimination of disadvantaged social groups. The language used in reporting, the use of incorrect terms, the negative portrayal of marginalized groups etc., are the main tools of media that may reinforce the effect. The aggressive language often comes from popular public figures (politicians, media people, opinion leaders etc.) and through sharing the messages without having a filter, media amplifies their statements. The direct consequences of these attitudes fall on the life of certain individuals, as well as in reinforcing stereotypes and negative attitudes towards certain groups. The media informs and misinforms, forms individuals’ views on others, and may increase tensions or promote understanding. This is why there is need for interventions to support for development of professional media and respect of human rights.

**Journalists / Media agencies**

- To increase human resource capacities through training journalists on terminology and language to be used for specific communities (ex. peer-to-peer training). Despite technology developments, it is ultimately the journalist’s ethics that determines the quality of reporting. Improving the technical components or media materials does not improve the message itself.
- To promote and embrace diversity in work environments. In order to know a community is important to understand their realities in our societies. It is important to work with members of certain social groups and local NGOs to help them get involved in the media.

**Human rights NGOs**

- Continuous monitoring of media behavior in order to identify the indicators described above so that appropriate interventions can take place as well as co-operation between the relevant structures to follow-up the denunciation of a case of discrimination in the media.
- To strengthen the relationship with journalists in order the media to be used as a tool to support human rights and promote equality. To involve media practitioners in awareness raising and educational programs related to the use of specific terminology for LGBTI, people with disabillities, people of color and other social groups.
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Aggressive Information VS Human Rights Questionnaire

1. What is your work engagement?
   - Human Rights Activist
   - Mainstream media Journalist (TV, Newspaper/ Magazine, Radio)
   - Online media Journalist
   - Other

2. In what country do you work?
   - Lithuania
   - Belarus
   - Ukraine
   - Other

3. How do you estimate the role of media nowadays? Does it contribute to the increase or reduction of aggressive language and stereotypes against vulnerable groups of the society?

4. List 3 major vulnerable groups in your society that you think are more often victims of aggressive language in media (not necessarily used by media)

5. List 3 major positive changes regarding media environment in your country during the last 5 years.

6. List 3 major setbacks/problems regarding media environment in your country during the last 5 years.

7. How do you estimate the impact of other countries foreign policies in the agenda of media in your country? What countries has the most impact?

8. How do you estimate the relation between media – politics in your country?

9. How do you estimate the relation media – human rights activists/ NGOs in your country?

10. During your work, have you encountered cases of concrete discrimination in the media that have affected the person’s life? If yes, please explain in 2-3 sentence the case (include links if possible).

11. In what forms do you find the human rights-based aggressive information shared more often in the media?