

INTRODUCTION

Journalists for Tolerance carry out a yearly monitoring of hate speech directed at marginalized groups in Belarusian media, including specifically monitoring hate speech directed at the LGBTQ+ community.

We consider hate speech to be one method by which social norms and practices promoting social inequality are constructed, and hold the belief that negative rhetoric can strengthen (and to some extent even generate) discriminatory practices. We also hold the opposite to be true: correct use of rhetoric can help representatives of various social groups build relations based on principles of equality and mutual respect.

In the context of this monitoring, we include a wide spectrum of linguistic constructions based in social inequality in our definition of hate speech, from direct incitements to violence, to use of derogatory slurs. This understanding of hate speech is wider than the interpretation which lawyers use to qualify journalistic material as extremist. We would like to direct particular attention to this difference. The inclusion of a publication in this monitoring does not mean that the publication contains explicitly aggressive rhetoric. Moreover, we suggest that even widespread use and social acceptance of mild hate speech is capable of supporting existing discriminatory conditions. Therefore, we strive to devote attention to all expressions of hate speech, regardless of severity.

The objective of this monitoring is to produce an overview of manifestations of hate speech in Belarusian media, dedicating particular attention to the following questions:

1. Which types of media are most likely to disseminate hate speech (and, accordingly, which authors should be the main target group of further educational endeavours)?
2. Which social groups are most frequently targeted by hate speech (and, accordingly, efforts to defend which groups interests must be strengthened)?
3. Which negative rhetorical strategies appear to be the most widespread (and, accordingly, what should comprise the content of educational seminars, resources, etc. for journalists)?

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This research is based on a clustered, stratified sample determined to represent Belarusian online media outlets. The sample included media sites stratified by criteria such as scale of audience (state/regional) and political leaning (pro-government/independent).

We identified 212 media outlets meeting these criteria. During each month of the monitoring period (April-September 2017), 92 of the total outlets were randomly selected (with an equal split between state/regional and pro-government/independent publications) and their materials were examined for key words. In total, over the course of six random selections, altogether 184 media outlets appeared in the monitoring.

For every publication identified to contain mentions of LGBTQ+ issues, the study focused attention on what kind of information appeared in the publication (which key words were encountered, which forms of HS appeared in the material, to what degree HS was prevalent in the material). For every manifestation of hate speech identified in the material, a score was assigned (3 for severe HS, 2 for moderate severity, and 1 for mild), and after the scores were added up, amendments were made based on the prevalence of HS in the material and the author's position. The final score is a score of severity of the HS in the publication, allowing for comparison of the aggressiveness of the rhetoric in various materials.

OVERALL RESULTS

Out of 184 media outlets included in the monitoring, we identified 901 publications from 62 media outlets containing mentions of LGBTQ+ issues (732 original articles or first publications, and 169 republications), either with or without instances of hate speech. 479 publications from 52 media outlets contained hate speech of varying levels of severity. Out of these 479 publications, 160 contained material constituting either very mild hate speech (for example, the expression “sexual minorities” also found in material concerned with human rights) or hate speech marked as unacceptable (for example, illustrative homophobic quotes in a LGBT-friendly article). The remaining 319 articles contained more serious harmful rhetoric.

Translating absolute numbers into percentages, the monitoring team examined 65% of all materials published on Belarusian media outlets’ websites from April-September 2017, and only 0.25% of the materials examined contained mentions of LGBTQ+ topics. Of these, slightly less than half (47%) contained no trace of hate speech. The remaining 53% could be divided into the following groups: 1/3 contained minimal expressions of hate speech (for example, that marked by the article as unacceptable), with 2/3 being more serious.

MAIN THEMES AND DYNAMIC OF QUANTITY OF PUBLICATIONS DURING MONITORING PERIOD

The top 10 themes most reflected in materials mentioning LGBTQ+ issues during the monitoring period included the persecution of gay men in Chechnya, the pride parade in Kiev, and the ban on transgender military service members in the US, among others. During this six-month period, as well as on a month-by-month basis, international news dominated. Particularly Belarusian news could be found in the top 10 roughly 20% of the time. If one judges solely by these popular topics, LGBTQ+-related phenomena in Belarusian media appear “non-local” or “foreign”, with little connection to the territory of the country.

Moving beyond topical themes, we also counted a category of publications described as “personal histories” in the publication. These are texts published by local media outlets illustrating gay and bi people’s lives, work, friendships and family relationships, as well as those of transgender people in the process of transition. 34 of these such stories were identified, making up 4% of total publications mentioning LGBTQ+ issues. Even this comparatively small percentage of materials with stories about LGBTQ+ people’s lives in Belarus play an important role: they help “anchor” the topic and bring it closer to the local reader, showing that violations of LGBTQ+ rights do not only harm an abstract participant in a gay parade in a distant country, but make life more difficult for the readers’ neighbors, colleagues and acquaintances.

MOST WIDESPREAD TYPES OF HATE SPEECH IN TYPICAL PUBLICATIONS

The following examples of hate speech constructions were found to be most common in the examined materials covering LGBTQ+ issues:

- using reductionist vocabulary (oversimplifying issues);
- creating a negative image of a social group by accusing of an attempt to seize power, expansion, domination, an indication of the negative influence of “them”;
- accusing social groups of negative influence on society;
- quoting clearly homophobic and / or transphobic statements and texts without comment, which determines the disengagement between the position of the interviewee and the position of the journalist;
- mentioning a social group or its representatives in a humiliating or insulting context;

- disguised (indirect) appeals to discrimination or mistreatment of social group.

In most cases the materials that contained hate speech, would also contain more than one form or construction of hate speech.

CONCLUSIONS

1. LGBTQ+ themes are found in barely a quarter of a percent of publications released on Belarusian online media outlets, and this study encompasses not only articles devoted to LGBTQ+ themes, but also those containing only a cursory mention. Articles entirely focused on LGBTQ+ themes are at least twice as rare (making up approximately every eight-hundredth article.)
2. When reprinting other outlets' materials, the tendency is to use "lighter" material, which has a slight influence over the correct rhetoric's towards LGBTQ+ topics
3. The LGBTQ+ group most visible in the media is undoubtedly gay men. They are frequently presented as representation for the entire community. Another group given distinct prevalence by mass media is that of transgender people. Lesbians and bisexual people are both overlooked in media content. Therefore, the severity of rhetoric against particular groups has a tendency to correlate with the group's visibility: material mentioning gay men is, on average, harsher than material mentioning bisexuals. But this rule could not be applied to lesbians due to the inclusion of a few texts containing severe hate speech, which strongly influenced the average score in a small pool of articles mentioning lesbians.
4. Most LGBTQ+-related information proliferated by Belarusian media consisted of international news, such as the persecution of gay men in Chechnya, the pride parade in Kiev, and transgender people's opportunities to serve in the US military.
5. The most prevalent type of hate speech that could be found in Belarusian media was incorrect use of terms and expressions, such as "homosexualist", "sexual minority", and "non-traditional orientation". These were regularly encountered even in publications concerned with human rights. Another incorrect expression, often used without quotation marks, was "homosexual propaganda". 16% of materials included in the monitoring contained no evidence of hate speech other than these incorrect terms.
6. Pro-government media avoids LGBTQ+ themes, including references to them in materials on other topics. At the same time, their materials are often more harsh, and the articles on LGBTQ+ topics display significant harsher opinions than the counterparts from the independent media. Comparing to the pro-government regional media, which is not covering LGBTQ+ topics, the independent media in the regions are found to be slightly better at correct portrayal and rhetoric's concerning of LGBTQ+ people when their counterparts in the capital.
7. The analysis across different mass media groups coverage of LGBTQ+ topics revealed that 1/3 contained minimal expressions of hate speech, 2/3 being more serious and approximately half of the material analyzed did not contain hate speech.
8. The editorial practices in «Комсомольской правда», «Белновости» и «Движения активных людей» are raising serious concerns regarding the portrayal LGBTQ+ topics. Meanwhile the independent portals "tut.by", "citydog.by" and "21.by" demonstrated what could be called LGBTQ friendly information practices.