

AN ANALOG CAMPAIGN IN A DIGITAL AGE: LUKASHENKO FALTERS IN THE FACE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

President Lukashenko has tried to play down the upcoming election as an unnecessary distraction from business as usual, but an active social media movement has shown the public is no longer prepared to go along with an alternate reality, according to a new report analysing media and social media in the build-up to Presidential elections on 9th August.

The interim report, produced by MEMO 98, EAST Center and Linking Media, examines media and social media in Belarus from the end of April until 23rd June. The study found:

- In line with previous elections, President Lukashenko has refrained from traditional campaigning, using state TV to portray himself as a hard-working President taking care of the needs of the people, while unnamed opponents are distracting him from the running of the country: “Elections are coming and going, but everyone wants to eat. Elections are secondary while the bread is always necessary”, as the President said on 27 July.
- The elections received limited coverage on state TV, accounting for only 15% of programming. Instead, the channel focused on other domestic topics and international news, including COVID-19, which portrayed a world in chaos while Belarus was unaffected.
- Prior to the start of official campaign period, President Lukashenko dominated political news on state TV, accounting for 94% of coverage. Of the almost six and half hours of coverage devoted to Lukashenko, close to 70% was direct broadcast of the President’s speeches. Among his opponents, only Viktor Babaryka was directly broadcast, for a total of 30 seconds.
- Faced with these limitations, opposition figures have relied on social media and messaging platforms, neglected by the state information efforts. This included ‘traditional’ platforms such as Facebook, often re-posted on VKontakte, but also Telegram and Instagram. The most active Presidential candidate has been Mikalai Statkevich with 626 posts, 459 (73%) of them on Telegram.
- Opposition social media efforts have not been highly professional or structured, with limited evidence of advanced digital campaigning techniques. The efforts have primarily focused on highlighting ongoing political repression and protests, rather than articulating an alternative political vision.

Ivan Godársky, co-author of the report, commented: “Belarusian authorities have tried to follow a familiar playbook, with Lukashenko dominating TV coverage as he goes about his daily business, and limited discussion of elections, let alone alternative candidates. But his analog campaign is failing in the face of a genuine, organic digital movement taking place across the platforms he ignores. It’s not professionalised or well-structured political campaigning from opposition figures – it’s a diverse movement driven by citizens no longer prepared to accept Lukashenko’s alternative reality, with the poor response to COVID-19 being an important catalyst.”

A full report and statement covering the whole campaign will be released later this week.

MEMO 98

Notes to Editors

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MEMO 98 is 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 is 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 implemented dozens of projects focused on empowering civic society.