

## Analysis of the Image of Russia and Belarus Formed in The Union State Print Media (And Their Electronic Analogues)

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### Abstract

High-quality print press of Russia and Belarus is actively involved in the coverage of the communication process between these countries. At the present stage the legacy of the Soviet Union continues to influence on interaction between the countries. Both countries form their own identity on the basis of patriotism and love for their Homeland. These trends have a negative impact on the development of the Union State, as neither side is ready to sacrifice its identity, which will inevitably lead to a change in the format of relations. The aim of the study is to identify the image of Russia formed in the quality press of the Republic of Belarus, and the image of Belarus formed by the quality press of Russia. The author reveals the image of the country, which consists of a spatial image, the image of the population, the image of power and the image of the leader. The formation of the image is influenced by object, subject, spatial, temporal and communication factors. The analysis uses cognitive, behavioral, and emotional positions. Empirical base of research: during the study publications for the period 2015-2019 of three Russian newspapers – “Rossiyskaya Gazeta”, “Kommersant”, “Vedomosti” and three Belarusian newspapers – “Belarus today”, “Belgazeta”, “Belarusian business newspaper” were analyzed with method of qualitative and quantitative content analysis. For the quantitative analysis 11 462 messages in the qualitative press of the Union State were considered. Qualitative analysis showed the difference in the presentation of materials: in the communication space of the Republic of Belarus the image of Russia is shown neutrally, and in the Russian media the Republic of Belarus is presented positively and neutrally.

**Key words:** *Union State of Russia and Belarus, image of Russia and Belarus, spatial image, image of people, higher education*

### Introduction

Since the 1990s, civil society in the post-Soviet space has been divided into those who remember life in the Soviet Union and those who were born and formed as individuals after the collapse of the USSR. In Belarus, the older generation is focused on friendship and interaction with Russia by inertia; they do not need proof of the need for this friendship. The perception of the older generation of the country is built not only friendly, but also on equal.

With the younger generation the situation is more complicated – they need evidence of the need for cooperation with Russia. At the same time, there is a painful perception of any topics related

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to national identity. Patriotic young people are ready to do anything to defend their identity and independence. The reminder of the common historical past is perceived by them as an insult to their national feelings. Common history is not a criterion of economic and political choice of personal (individual) vector of development of citizens of Belarus, that is, if it is profitable to work and study in Europe, they will go to Europe, not to Russia.

The current Union State does not have the powerful unifying factor that it had in the Soviet era, when the identity of the republics was preserved, but the priority strategy was a single socialist community and the unity of the Soviet people (Kudryavtseva et al., 2020).

The legacy of the Soviet Union is preserved in Belarus – the economy is made up of enterprises of the Soviet economic model period (Prodanova et al., 2019). If in Russia all industry rose or was destroyed in the 1990s, in Belarus it was possible to keep it as the basis of modern development of the country. The same trend is observed in agriculture, medicine and education. Belarusians constantly feel it, which affects the positive perception of Russia as the heiress of the USSR. A typical example is cooperation in production processes: for example, a modern Belarusian tractor consists of 60% of Russian components. And Belarusian goods are focused on the Russian market. A.G. Lukashenko's line aimed at obtaining Russian energy carriers is built on the basis of the cooperation between the countries that has developed over the past 30 years.

This term defines the field of cooperation between Belarus and Russia in the Union state in the field of education. In recent years, we have made many steps towards each other – more than 300 agreements have been signed between our States in the educational field – at the government, departmental and University levels. (Uriadova, 2009). And yet many of them – so far only on paper.

The analysis of mutual perception of Russia and Belarus, formed with the help of publications in the media of the Union State, is based on the classical model of communication by G. Lasswell, the theory of political perception (Shestopal, 2012) and political identity (Semenenko, 2007). The first makes it possible to identify the role of the media in the communicative space of the Union State, the second – to identify the mechanisms of perception of images of Russia and Belarus, the third – makes it possible to identify the identity of the peoples of Russia and Belarus. Also, this study is based on the development of political geographers, which allow assessing the spatial factor of political perception of the country (Zamyatin, 2003).

### **Conceptual formation model of Russia and Belarus images**

At the heart of the conceptual model of the study is the G. Lasswell's communication model: communicator – message – channel – recipient – effect (feedback). This model was refined in accordance with the goals and objectives of the study. Psychologically, rational and unconscious components were analyzed, including cognitive, behavioral and emotional components. The parameters of attractiveness, strength and activity were also tracked in the psychological structure. Structurally, the image of the country is a spatial image (the image of territories), the image of the population, the image of power and the image of the leader.

Factors influencing the structure of the country's image: object, subject, temporal, spatial and communicative. The object factor is represented by political culture and event series. The subjective factor relating to the subject of perception is the values and identity of the representatives – citizens of Russia and Belarus. The temporal factor is represented by transitions from the past to the future, that is, reflects the development and change of images of countries in the dynamics. In this study, one of the main factors is the communicative factor. It is the process of broadcasting messages in print media has a direct impact on the formation of images of countries. The selected sources are high-quality media, oriented to the transmission of news and factual messages based on expert opinions (Shestopal & Smulkina, 2018).

### **Research Question**

The main question of the study was: Does the development vector of relations between the countries diverge?

### **Methods**

The method of content analysis was chosen for analytical activity. Content analysis – a research method of quantitative analysis of the documents content in order to identify or measure the various facts and trends reflected in these documents (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The peculiarity of content analysis is that it examines documents in their social context. It can be used as the main method of research (for example, content analysis of the text in the study of the newspaper political orientation), parallel, i.e. in combination with other methods (for example, in the study of the media effectiveness), auxiliary or control (for example, in the classification of answers to open questions of questionnaires).

The empirical base of the study was obtained as a result of content analysis of materials, stories presented in the reports of the leading Russian and Belarusian media for the period 2015-2019: “Rossiyskaya Gazeta”, “Kommersant”, “Vedomosti” and “Belarus today”, “Belgazeta”, “Belarusian business newspaper”.

The choice was based on the following criteria:

- main communication channels – leading printed publications and electronic analogues participate in the research;
- credibility – published for more than 30 years;
- audience – interested in international political and economic news;
- wide scope of audience;
- ability to access archives.

The analysis area – current news events that resonated in these media: political events reflected in the speeches of leading politicians: the President of the Russian Federation, Prime Minister of Russia, members of the Federation Council, deputies of the State Duma, experts, etc.

### Results

The image of a country is based on the spatial image (the image of the territories), the image of population, image of the government and the image of the leader. All components of the image of the country are independent entities and can also be analyzed. This study analyzes the components of the image of the country to identify the image of the country as a whole.

**Table 1**

*Quantitative calculation of references to the image of Russia and Belarus in media reports - in an approving, condemning, and neutral context*

Media name	Type of reference to Russia		
	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Russia			
Rossiyskaya Gazeta (5296)	1948	840	2508
Kommersant(1640)	804	212	624
Vedomosti (400)	120	40	240
Total (7336)	2872	1092	3372
Belarus			
Belarus today (3000)	564	1036	1400
Belgazeta (766)	401	285	80
Belarusian business newspaper (360)	78	92	190
Total (4126)	1043	1413	1670

According to the table, the reference to the image of Belarus in neutral terms is the majority – 45.96%, positive – 39.16%, negative – 14.88%. The analyzed mass media are focused on the Russian audience and publish information messages of the international character which strengthen patriotic relation of two brotherly peoples; in this regard mass media seek to show Republic of Belarus positively. The media often focuses on the common roots of the Russian and Belarusian people, the words of the President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko are quoted in a favorable context, and mainly attention is paid to his positive statements. It is important to note that the positive and neutral characteristics are almost equal, the difference is 6.8%. Negative characteristics are too small and represent mainly news related to scandals.

Also from the data of the table it follows that the reference to the image of Russia in the Belarusian media in a neutral way is the majority of reports – 40.47%, negative messages – 34.24% and positive – 25.27%. The analyzed media are focused on the Belarusian audience and tell about the events important for Belarusians, in this regard, the media tend to show their own country positively, so the image of Russia is presented in a negative and neutral context.

Translation of the image of Belarus in Russia and the image of Russia and Belarus is very different. Russian media publish news about the Republic of Belarus in a neutral and positive manner; Belarusian media provide information about Russia in a neutral and negative way.

### **Discussion**

*Object factors* are primarily understood as the political context of perception, which includes both a changing event context and a stable political culture. This study analyzes the event context. Political culture is a constant background and is not raised in media reports.

For the period under review the following event context that had resonance in the Russian mass media was highlighted: 15.03.2011 – to the present – conflict in Syria; 16.03.2014 – to the present – conflict in the Ukraine; 16.03.2014 – to the present – sanctions against Russia and Russian counter-sanctions; 09.2015 – to the present – constant conflicts in connection with the export of products from Belarus to Russia; 01.01.2015 – to the present – cooperation with the EAEU countries; 08.11.2016 – charges of Russia meddling in the US presidential election; 18.03.2018 – to the present – election of the President of the Russian Federation; 15.12.2015 – to the present – political, economic and social reforms in Russia; 01.01.2015 – to the present – emergencies in the Russian Federation; 01.01.2015 – to the present – emergencies in the Republic of Belarus;

25.12.2019 – to the present – gradual zeroing of export duties on oil; 19.04. 2019 – to the present – oil and gas conflict with Belarus.

The presented event series goes beyond the analysis (2015-2019). Most events have a long resonance. It is impractical to consider events without analytics of the initial period, as the development vector of the event is most often specified at the beginning of the event.

Basically, all the media broadcast the current series of events. The image of the country in time perspective, *temporal factor*, is formed around significant historical events. The topics related to the Crimea, relations with the Ukraine, the EU, the USA, Belarus, the military conflict in Syria, emergencies in Russia and Belarus are the most vivid and constant in the print media. The modern context has expanded from the current moment for several years and decades. There are references to the historical past, to the era of the USSR, while references are used as an example for comparison; the Belarusian media emphasize that they are more successful as an independent state, the Russian media – on the future reunification.

*The subjective factors* are focused on the socio-demographic portrait of citizens and their psychological characteristics. In this study, the subjective factor is represented by the image of the population. The image of the population is formed by thematic reports through public events and raising socially significant topics.

*The spatial factor* of the media of both states is revealed through geographical characteristics, neighborly relations and relations with the international community. In many ways, the spatial component of the image of the country is formed, based on discussions or references to topics such as: frequent disputes about the state border (the collapse of the USSR, the separation of the Crimea from the Ukraine and accession to Russia (Belarus Today, Donbass no longer has anything in common with Kiev, 2019), the separation of the LPR and DPR from the Ukraine (Belarus Today, Whether the Ukraine can go west without Donbass, 2019), discussion of NATO actions on the deployment of weapons complexes in the EU countries bordering Russia and Belarus (Borisov, 2018), the Nord stream 2 issue (Belarus Today, Munich security conference is over, 2019) and references in different contexts to state territories and natural resources.

*The communicative factor* can be traced in all aspects of the analysis, as the image of Belarus in Russia and the image of Russia in Belarus are analyzed in media reports. It is the media that broadcasts the current agenda, sets the tone for analysis and shapes public opinion by attracting experts.

### **Meaningful image of Belarus**

Russian media, such as “Rossiyskaya Gazeta”, “Kommersant”, “Vedomosti”, seek to generate and maintain readers’ interest in the geopolitical and economic state of Belarus, focusing on Belarus’ dependence on the natural resources of the Russian Federation, as well as publishing news about the participation of the Republic of Belarus in the peaceful settlement of foreign policy conflicts between Russia and the West. The image of territories (spatial image) is built cognitively complex and clear, as the media often mentions various Belarusian cities, news reports tell about the historical significance of a city. It is also important to note that the Russian media shaping the news about Belarus, but rather show an image of your own state of clear and challenging, as the focus is on Russia’s natural resources, but topics related to military subjects, transmit the total power, the emphasis is on protection of territories of the Slavic people and of the peoples of Russia and Belarus.

The Russian media seek to show Belarus with clear data on the geographical, political and economic state of the country, which increases the cognitive clarity of the Russian population – the recipient of the formed image. However, the Russian media present the image of Belarus as economically weak: “In August, the Russian government approved a draft agreement on a ten-year state loan to Belarus in the amount of \$700 million” (Vedomosti, the Belarusian Government approved an agreement with Russia on a state loan of \$700 million, 2017) – while the image of Russia appears economically strong.

The emotional position of the spatial image of Belarus is presented vividly. Reports have a clear color, the image of the country is presented as positive because of the connection with the USSR, and the friendly relationship between the two states is emphasized.

The complexity of the spatial component of the image of Belarus in the domestic media is in military cooperation, references to common sources – the unity of peoples are offered.

The image of the population is presented in a positive and neutral character. In news reports, the image of the Belarusian people is presented clearly; Belarusians are often mentioned, for example, schoolchildren – winners of international competitions (Brizgalova, 2018). There are often references to the historical community and the principle of indivisibility of the Slavic people.

The image of the government is positioned cognitive clearly, the news often refers to various departments of Belarus: for example, news headlines show this “The Ministry of Agriculture of Belarus interested in the Kuban selection and seed-growing” (Miheenko, 2018), “The Foreign

Ministers of Russia and Belarus will hold talks in Moscow” (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, The Foreign Ministers of Russia and Belarus will hold talks in Moscow, 2019), “Belarus will toughen anti-smoking law”, (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Anti-Smoking legislation to be toughened in Belarus, 2019). The Russian media often mentions events in which certain authorities are involved, such reports are not subject to emotional overtones. In a number of reports, the image of the authorities is unclear, as the reports are factual.

The image of the leader is personified by the image of the President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko. In the domestic media image of the Belarusian leader emerged as a strong and reliable partner for Russia, and the strict head in the internal matters – to the population of the country: “Lukashenko confirmed the role of Russia in preserving the sovereignty of Belarus” (Samognev, 2019), “Lukashenko: Belarus and Russia need to be together” (Sizov, 2019). It is also worth quoting: “Our peoples made a great feat, defended their freedom and independence in that war, because they were together. Today, we must also jointly preserve the common history; prevent the revision and falsification of the heroic past...” (Sizov, 2019) – Russian media often focus on the patriotic statements of the Belarusian leader. Thus, we can say that the Russian media has created an attractive image of A. Lukashenko – the President of the Republic of Belarus.

### **Meaningful image of Russia**

Belarusian mass media, such as “Belarus today”, “Belgazeta” and “Belarusian business newspaper”, also seek to create and maintain interest in the geopolitical and economic state of Russia among the citizens of their country, focusing on the partnership between Russia and Belarus in the field of natural resources. News reports often comment on the position of Western countries in relation to the state borders of some federal districts of Russia. Belarusian media broadcast both the opinion of the West on this issue and the opinion of the Russian side. *Image of territories – spatial image* – is cognitive simple and clear. Russia is presented as a resource rich, militarily powerful country, focusing on an alliance with a strong state (Belarus Today, Russian armored vehicles “trying on” a more powerful caliber, 2019).

At the same time, the image of Russia is presented in the Belarusian media unclear, as the emphasis is on the economy of Belarus itself. Basically, the media can be traced to negative material supply of spatial image, the negative supply is connected with restriction of trade in Russia: “The Director of the Center for Strategic and Foreign Political Studies Arseniy Sivitsky in interview to “Belgazeta” suggested that the compromise with the Kremlin, allowing to maintain the status quo



is impossible. Therefore, it is necessary to take urgent measures to reform the economy, diversify foreign policy, change the very structure of power, making it less vulnerable to the impact of Russia” (Sivitsky, 2019).

The simplicity of the spatial component of the image of Russia in the Belarusian media is due to the unity of the two peoples, Russia is shown as a neighbor and “elder brother”.

*The image of the population* is presented ambiguously. Positive news is published: “Russian hockey players beat the Americans and reached the semifinals of the world championship” (Sundalov, 2019). It should be noted that the population of Russia is not shown as multinational.

*Image of power* is positioned strong – in connection with the fact that the news often publishes reports about economic cooperation or conflicts, which involved various members of the Russian elite: “Rosselkhoznadzor took under special control 18 Belarusian enterprises” (BG – Business newspaper, Rosselkhoznadzor took under special control 18 Belarusian enterprises, 2019); “The Prosecutor’s office of Russia is confident in Kokorin and Mamaev’s collusion, and requests to change the sentence” (Bacerenko, 2019); “As a result of negotiations between Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus Igor Lyashenko and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak, steps were outlined to clean up the pipeline system in our country, necessary for the resumption of oil transit to Poland and Germany” (Bacerenko, 2019). There is a wide range of information reports, which indicate the different types of Russian authorities that regulate both Russia’s foreign policy and national one.

It should be noted that the image of the power is broadcast in a negative way – most of the negative messages fall on the image of the authorities: “On the eve the Rosselkhoznadzor took under enhanced control 18 Belarusian enterprises. “Bellakt”, Volkovysk and Grodno meat processing plants, Turov dairy plant, “Smolevichi broiler” were in the list. And this is after the head of the Russian Ministry of Agriculture Dmitry Patrushev at a joint meeting of the boards of agricultural departments of the two countries said that all restrictions in trade relations between the two fraternal peoples should be removed. And a little later said roughness in the relationship – it is normal. The main thing – there should be no difficulties. I do not think that the reputation of 18 Belarusian enterprises put at risk falls under the definition of an ordinary working moment. In addition, the mind does not fit the situation that two dozen processors overnight, synchronously stalled and messed up all the work. Previously, for some reason there were no claims to them. Now

are all indiscriminately under close monitoring?” (Belarus today, Restrictions on the supply of Belarusian agricultural products are associated with lobbying interests of the Russian side, 2019). *The image of the leader* is personified by the image of the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin. In the media, the image of the leader is broadcast as tough and ambitious in foreign policy towards the West, but in relation to neighboring countries, the image of V. Putin is presented in a softer, “brotherly” way.

“Congratulating Belarusians and Russians on the day of unity, Vladimir Putin noted that over the past period, our countries have made significant progress on the path of mutually beneficial cooperation and integration: “Large-scale joint projects are being implemented in trade and economic, humanitarian, scientific and technical and other sectors, interregional cooperation is expanding. Coordination of efforts in the spheres of foreign policy and defense contributes to strengthening the international positions of Russia and Belarus, ensuring the security of our citizens”. Vladimir Putin praised the achieved level of allied relations, which allows discussing in detail the most complex issues on the bilateral agenda, finding solutions that best meet the interests of the fraternal peoples of the two countries” (Isaenok & Vasyanin, 2019). Thus, in the Belarusian media, the image of the Russian leader V. Putin is created attractive and the emphasis is on the unity of the two peoples.

### **Conclusion**

As a result, answering the main question of the study, does the development vector of relations between the countries diverge? It became clear that the spiritual bonds that unite the Union State weaken. Quantitative results suggest that the image of Russia is presented in a neutral and negative way, but qualitative analysis of the study shows that most of the reports with a negative color are mainly on the image of the Russian Federation authorities, and the image of the leader is presented rather in a neutral and positive way.

The image of Belarus in the Russian media is presented exclusively in a positive context – this is evidenced by both quantitative and qualitative results; Russian reports often mention such a thing as the unity of the people, which obviously has a positive impact on the formation of a positive image of the state. The international community considers the countries of the former USSR not as countries with their own identity, but as Russians or representatives of the Russian world.

Western society considers citizens of Belarus as Russians. The Belarusian community strives for self-identification and painfully perceives this fact.

Russians are patriots of Russia, Belarusians are patriots of Belarus; the Russians are Eurasian, the Belarusians are Europeans, with the development of these vectors, there is a high probability of divergence of countries. It is more likely that Belarus will become a part of the European Union. In the minds of Belarusian youth there is no place for the unification of the peoples of Russia and Belarus. The economy of Belarus works in the vector of the Russian economy development, but as a result of the policy of import substitution in Russia, Belarusian goods are presented as imported. Import substitution measures to support Russian businesses do not apply to Belarusian producers. Russian economic preferences do not apply to the Union State.

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