

## Narrative Report

### "17 September - People's Unity Day"

In 2021 - at the beginning of the period of violent reaction after the events of 2020 - Lukashenko [decides](#) to declare the Year of National Unity. In June, a decision was announced to **designate a new public holiday, People's Unity Day**, to be celebrated on 17 September, the day of "reunification" of Western Belarus with its eastern part, which was part of the USSR.

"People's Unity Day" should not only create the illusion of something that does not exist largely due to the constant and purposeful actions of the regime, but also lay the foundation for the development of Soviet ideology, adjusting it to the goals of holding on to power. Since then, every year in September, the main section of the state media has been "People's Unity Day".

What narratives does the state media promote in doing so?

Our sample covers 9 media outlets, including the main state-owned media, as well as two regional state-owned media outlets. These are BelTA news agency, specialised multimedia portal videobel.by, official websites of TV channels Belarus 1, ONT, STV, as well as the publishing house "Belarus Today", regional news agency "Minsk Prauda", regional edition "Gomelskaya Prauda" (news portal "Pravda Gomel") and regional newspaper "Astravetskaya Prauda".

In September, 35 media texts were selected for the sample. This is not a complete list of publications devoted to this topic, but it is sufficient for obtaining representative data. Using the information occasion "17 September - People's Unity Day", state media promoted about 20 main narratives. We grouped these narratives into five groups.

**The first group of narratives** concerns the historical justification of the chosen date not only as important for Belarusian history and the future of the Belarusian people, but, first of all, **carrying a message about how badly the Belarusians had it "under the Polish oppression" and - on the contrast - how much better life was for the Belarusians who turned out to be a part of the USSR**. In spite of the fact that we are talking about hours long past, the "historical experience" should push the Belarusians to correctly define their present friends (the Russian Federation) and foes (the countries of the "collective West", first of all, Poland).

The state media work on convincing the audience that part of Belarusian territory was ceded to Poland in 1921 under the Riga Peace Treaty **as a result of a compromise between the invasive plans of the Polish Republic and their containment by the forces of Soviet Russia**. Poland, wishing to acquire the status of a "great power" in place of the disintegrated Russian Empire, planned to annex the lands of Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine on the terms of a federation, but in reality this federation would rely solely on Polish superiority and strength. Soviet Russia offered the Belarusians to join *"as a federation of socialist republics, but with an important difference: the Soviet plan lacked any hint of national advantage"* [2]. As a result of the compromise decision that stopped the hostilities, *"the Belarusian nation and its ethnic territory were divided into parts after the Peace of Riga"* [2]. *"The conflict exposed the **imperial ambitions of Poland**, where they began to dream again about the renaissance of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, utopian borders from the Baltic to the Black Sea... To the east of the Pans stretched Soviet Russia, which had not yet extinguished the fires of the Revolution and the Civil War. The Soviet-Polish war only added to the problems of the unstrengthened state. **Negotiations with the Pans** dragged on for many months, and ended in Riga, where the division of ethnic Belarusian lands into two approximately equal parts was formalised"* [27].

The state media promote the narrative that being a part of the Polish Republic **hindered the socio-economic development of Belarusian lands, and Belarusians were deprived of the right to national culture and national identity**: *"Western Belarus played the role of an agrarian and raw materials appendage, was a backward suburb where Poles drew raw materials for their food and light industry, and also found a source of cheap labour force"* [2]. *"A cash cow and a labourer - this is how the **Polish masters** saw Western Belarus"* [2]. *"He recalled the repressions and pressures to which the Belarusian population, which came **under Polish rule**, was subjected, the policy of Polishisation, which was imposed through coercion and sometimes terror..."* [3]. *"Myths about the prosperous life in Western Belarus are completely shattered when familiarising yourself with documents and statistical data.*

*By the beginning of the 1930s 230 industrial enterprises were liquidated, the number of workers decreased by 46%, the amount of production was almost halved. The West Belarusian voivodships were regarded as raw material appendages for the industry of central Poland"* [5]. *"Our country **turned into a colony**, from which they tried to squeeze the maximum out of"* [13]. *"This city was Polish for almost two decades. There are still **barracks** here, **where units of the army of the oppressors of the Belarusian people were stationed"*** [14]. *"The 85th anniversary is especially honoured and celebrated in the western regions of our country, because it is here that people, Belarusians felt all that was in the interwar period, all that oppression, discrimination and **ethnocide, which was carried out by the***

*Polish authorities in relation to Belarusians, to their language, culture, religion. All that they promised at the conclusion of the Peace of Riga was not fulfilled. Such **myths and legends, which we read from Polish pseudo-sources** about how people of all nationalities lived in wealth and prosperity and were not oppressed, are debunked by simple facts. Statistics on the number of Belarusian schools, cultural institutions, and the places of detention of Belarusians who did not want to speak Polish and convert to Catholicism. Bereza-Kartuzskaya and many such places in our country, where such ethnocide was practically carried out, was long before the appearance of **other fascist manifestations on our land**" [31]. "In the lands of Western Belarus, which the Poles **disparagingly called "kresy wschodnie"** - "eastern periphery", a purposeful cruel policy of exploitation of the local population, plundering of natural resources, export and destruction of cultural and material values was carried out" [35].*

*"Formally, the Belarusians, like other national communities within Poland, received the right to their culture, language, and religious rites. This right was enshrined in numerous legislative acts, but was not respected. In addition, a **policy of national assimilation was forcibly pursued** in the West Belarusian lands. Belarusian schools, publishing houses, libraries and reading centres were closed under far-fetched pretexts" [2]. "The health of Belarusians, from whom **Polish landlords made slaves**, was obviously not of interest. Education was also unimportant for them: why read books if you have to work 24/7 for free? But even in these conditions, the Cage residents were able to open a Belarusian-language gymnasium, which worked for eight years" [22]. "'Za polskim czasem" on the "kresy wschodnie" there were no Belarusian theatres, clubs and libraries were closed. In state institutions it was not allowed to use the Belarusian language. Obviously, the policy of polonisation in the sphere of education, which aimed to tear the young generation of Belarusians away from their national roots, led to the actual liquidation of the system of Belarusian schools in Western Belarus (if before the annexation of the region there were about four hundred of them, then already in 1938/1939 academic year there was not a single one left). Due to high tuition fees, poverty, and obstacles on the part of the Polish authorities, the access of Belarusian children to secondary schools was sharply restricted. Universities were practically inaccessible for them" [34].*

One of the main narratives of the state media in this group is that **Poland was striving to turn Belarusians into Poles, and just a little more, and it would have succeeded:** "Forced assimilation had **as its ultimate goal irreversible ethno-transformation changes, which in the very near future should have led to the disappearance of Belarusians as an independent nation,**" summarised the leading researcher of the Institute of History Valentin Mazets. [2]. "According to the agreement, the Polish side was to ensure the sovereignty of the annexed

*Belarusian lands. However, it turned out differently. Even then it was not hidden that **Belarusians wanted to destroy as a nation**. Everything was done for this purpose - from forced polonisation to assimilation" [5]. **"Discrimination and assimilation** - these are two words that fit what happened in the territory of Western Belarus from 1921 to 1939. The Poles pathos-guaranteed both in Riga and in the small Treaty of Versailles that they were obliged to preserve the rights of national minorities. Everything was beautiful on paper. At first these papers were at least somehow adhered to. At the time of partition there were hundreds of Belarusian schools, two gymnasiums. After the partition there was Belarusian political activity in the 1920s. But all this disappeared in the 1930s. If it was so good, why from 1921 to 1925 there was an armed struggle, a partisan war from Nalibokskaya Pushcha to Bialystok? Here the **most brutal regime of pacification** was established. In the border villages it was forbidden to light up in the evening! Men were not supposed to walk in groups. It was a volcano for the Polish state. Western Belarusians under Polish occupation for the first time in their history felt themselves as white negroes" [6].*

**The second group of narratives**, closely related to the previous one, are the narratives **that Belarusians constantly resisted the "policy of polonisation" and met the Red Army as liberators in 1939**.

*According to the Belarusian state mass media, it is very important for the present generations to remember "how the Belarusian people did not want to put up with oppression and disenfranchisement, resisted the policy of forced assimilation for almost 20 years, fought for social equality and national liberation" [3]. "And we were happy to meet the Red Army-liberator. The Belarusian people never put up with their servitude. By 1923 the number of partisans was almost 6000 people. The patriots struck at police stations, burnt the estates of Polish landlords and the farms of the Polish besiegers. Uprisings, strikes, strikes and demonstrations became frequent. The Polish authorities responded by unleashing the most real terror. At the end of 1923 there were about 1300 political prisoners in the prison walls of Western Belorussia, in the same year 109 people were sentenced to death. From June 1934 to 17 September 1939, a concentration camp for opponents of the ruling regime was established in Bereza-Kartuzskaya, Polesie Voivodeship, through which more than 10 thousand prisoners passed during the five years of its existence. The first commandant of the concentration camp, B. Greffner said, "There are only two roads out of the camp: to the hospital or to the grave." In fact, this ominous place became identical to the subsequently created Trostenets, Auschwitz, Majdanek and other death camps" [20].*

Belarusians, who found themselves on the territory of the Polish Republic, welcomed the Red Army as liberators: "Rumours about the liberation march of the Red Army on 17

*September 1939 spread lightning fast, says Anna Bajraszewskaia: Kletchans told the joyful news to the villagers, and they met them in festive costumes. They hugged the soldiers, sang songs. In general, like relatives. And in the evening, in honour of such an event, the golden collection of Soviet cinema was shown in the square. Can you imagine what happiness is for the people!". [22]. "The Red Army **corrected the historical injustice of the Soviet-Polish war of 1919-1921, because of which a significant part of the Belarusian (and Ukrainian) peoples lived in a country alien to them for almost two decades"** [26]. [26].*

**The third group of narratives** answers the question why, if this date is so important for the Belarusian people and means exactly what the media tell about, it was not celebrated earlier.

Thus, the state media inform their audiences that although the "Day of National Unity" was not celebrated, **nobody forgot about this date**: *"Yes, it was not celebrated, but it was not forgotten either. Only in the names of Belarusian streets this significant event is mentioned 167 times" [3]. [3]. "It should be remembered that in every city of Western Belarus, in the western regions of our country, there is a street on 17 September" [3]. [7]. "Here, in the western regions, there are many streets, squares named 17 September" [31].*

**Belarusan historians and Belarusan intelligentsia in general wanted to revive this holiday all the time**: *"At the same time, Belarusan intelligentsia and Belarusan historians constantly raised the question about the necessity for us to celebrate this holiday as a holiday" [6]. [6].*

**Alexander Lukashenko made a fateful decision on this crucial issue**: *"The Day of National Unity returned to the calendar of public holidays of Belarus on the initiative of the President in response to the demand of the time, the time of global redistribution of the world" [3]. [3].*

**The main reason why People's Unity Day was stopped to be celebrated in independent Belarus is the unwillingness to spoil relations with the neighbouring country Poland. It did not appreciate it and behaved defiantly and aggressively**: *"People's Unity Day returned to the calendar of state holidays of Belarus on the initiative of the President in response to the demand of the time, the time of global redistribution of the world. I say "returned" because on 17 September 1940, a year after the reunification, the republic solemnly celebrated the Day of Liberation of the workers of Western Belarus **from the Pan-Belarusian oppression**. That was the name of this holiday then. The Belarusians did not forget about the memorable date even after the Great Patriotic War. However, in the new historical realities, in order to maintain good-neighborly Soviet-Polish relations, the important historical date was not celebrated". [3]. "It is a holiday with a history. This day was celebrated until the 40s. Then slowly, in order not to anger the Polish People's Republic,*

it began to go away" [6].

The state media insist that **National Unity Day is by no means an anti-Polish holiday, however...** *"If the Polish government in 2020 would not try to make some moves..."* [8]. Without stating anything concrete, the media broadcast vague hints and accusations: *"From a political point of view, from a journalistic point of view, when Polish flags on poles appeared in Hrodna in 2020 in August, there was a feeling: "What for?" <...> Polack maps. For something the Polish authorities were trying to crack down on something. Thank God, our Belarusian Poles, as the president says, were on the president's side. But it could have been otherwise, couldn't it? <...> Especially lately, the Polish state, the Polish government has been handing out Pole cards left and right in order to somehow give preferences to Belarusian citizens in order to have their own man".* [8]. *"By the way, this tradition of Belarusian to look for compromises, to look for harmony, it is generally traced for decades and even centuries. But the world, it is harsh. It is cruel. And in this connection we had to remember about this holiday (nobody forgot about it)..."*. [9]. *"Since 2021 we celebrate the Day of People's Unity. We remember that earlier not everyone was in agreement, including in the authorities, to celebrate this day. So as not to offend the Poles, someone else. But we were offended in 2020. We were shown how the states really treat each other, that they didn't give a damn about peaceful good-neighbourly relations. Polish flags were raised in Hrodna. Polish agents tried to ruin the country here. In response, we celebrate the Day of People's Unity. As Batka said, we threw off our shackles in 1939. And there will never be any more shackles on us".* [16]. **"Since the famous Telegram channel worked from the territory of Poland, since migrant centres were formed there. That is, Poland did just everything for us to introduce such a holiday afterwards. That is, they burned a certain bridge with their actions. But even at the time of the holiday's establishment, i.e. after 2020, there were certain discussions. Should we break dishes with the Poles? No. Maybe we should do it somehow later, not now. Maybe everything will normalise. That is, those who said that there would be no normalisation with Poland, that it would be a dead end, were right. That's how it turned out. It does not matter that Morawiecki has already left, they have a new prime minister. But nevertheless, the Poles are solving the same problems. There is a national consensus on Ukraine, on Russia and on us. The two ruling parties, it does not matter, former or current, we are for them a type of opponent"** [16].

However, according to the state media, the **way official Poland (=Polish power elites) behaves harms it first of all:** *"The main threat to Poland and the Polish people comes from the so-called Polish elites. They are not sovereign, they are not independent, they cannot take responsibility... They are not trying to play a stabilising role, but an active, offensive role, which will inevitably lead to conflict in the region. This is a tragedy. We are talking about the*

*Day of National Unity, although we do not slip that, having freed ourselves from Polish occupation, we harbor a grudge, want to take revenge. On the contrary, we have done everything to bring our relations with the Polish people, with "our" Poles, to the level of a common home. A common thinking about security. We have always suggested that the Polish side, the Polish state, should think in this way. But on the other side, these unexpressed **grievances, the attempt to take revenge and, at the same time, to use the most despicable methods... and, most importantly, to become a tool in the hands of others for the sake of some imaginary revenge...** This is a very dangerous path. Understandably, for us too. But above all for the Polish state itself" [10]. "The people of Poland are treated normally in Belarus, the Head of State has repeatedly emphasised this. The Polish authorities, in turn, today use any reason to aggravate relations with our country" [21].*

**The fourth group of narratives** about "National Unity Day" describes the **"collective West" and its malicious thoughts and actions, especially attempts to "rewrite history"**: *"Individual voices abroad, lulling or gaining power, are fond of mangling facts and substituting concepts, assembling a picture of the past from disparate events, one-sided and loosely related to each other, in the hope of attracting the attention of the not too thoughtful listener/viewer with loud and dangerous slogans. The goals are clear. But the Belarusians today are not the same as they were a century or more ago. Today they are a united proud self-sufficient nation, which has suffered the legitimate right to independence and its own historical way, and what was gained with great difficulty is valued a hundredfold. History has taught: every inch of Belarusian land has its own price, and it has already been paid". [2]. "The more rapidly we move away from the events of those years, the more efforts are required to protect the historical truth from the influence of political conjuncture. Some people try to speculate with facts, giving them different shades depending on the imposed rhetoric. We see that there are attempts to divide our nation again, to draw a border of hatred and misunderstanding, rejection and anger between Belarusians" [5].*

The People's Unity Day **serves to create a new historiography of Belarus and is associated with the day of liberation of Belarus**: *"17 September is the most important date in the calendar of state holidays. In terms of significance it is on a par with Victory Day and Independence Day" [5]. "This holiday is a worthy response to our enemies. We will not allow it to erase our historical memory and make Belarusians hostages of alien geopolitical interests" [4].*

Although **Belarus is surrounded by enemies who are hatching insidious plans, Belarusians have a powerful weapon against these plans - it is the people's unity.** *"Thanks to our unity, we have been living without war for 80 years. Thanks to consolidation around our President we live in a strong, prosperous and independent country. Thanks to our unity, we can be masters of our land."* [5].

The main narrative in this group is that **People's Unity Day is a triumph of historical justice.** *"Justice has triumphed - historical, ethnic, human. From now on, and no Belarusian should doubt it, we are united and indivisible."* [27]. *"...the date was not chosen by chance: this day became an act of historical justice towards the Belarusian people. On 17 September 1939 the Polish ambassador in Moscow was handed a note of the USSR government. It said that the Polish-German war revealed the **internal insolvency of the Polish state**. Because of this situation, the Soviet government ordered the Red Army troops to cross the border and take the population of Western Belarus under its protection"* [29].

Finally, the **fifth group of narratives** addresses the present of the nation-state and tells that **only those who celebrate the Day of National Unity on 17 September are true patriots of Belarus:** *"An important historical event - the reunification of the Belarusian people in 1939 - unites all those who are proud of their Motherland and believe in its worthy future"* [3]. [3]. *"The Day of National Unity marks our common devotion to Belarus, and love and careful attitude to the Motherland, care for it are the supporting structures of the Belarusian statehood, our genetic and cultural code"* [5].

The People's Unity Day is an **occasion to once again demonstrate one's love for one's motherland, to take interest in Belarusian history and traditions,** and to emphasise how important it is to love one's country and support people's unity: *"We all honour our history sacredly. We are proud of every page of it. We remember how many people, including civilians, died during the Great Patriotic War defending our sovereignty. We not only remember, we accept the baton of the defenders of independence and peace in our land"* [3].

Although Belarus is surrounded by enemies, who are hatching insidious plans, **Belarusians have a powerful weapon to counter these plans: it is the people's unity.** *"This holiday is a worthy response to the enemies. We regard interference in internal affairs, attempts to destabilise the situation in the country as revanchism and a real threat to national security"* [4]. *"Thanks to our unity we have been living without war for 80 years. Thanks to consolidation around our President we live in a strong, prosperous and independent country.*



*Thanks to our unity, we can be masters of our land."* [5].

The state media also promote the narrative that the Day of National Unity is an important date in the life of the Belarusian people, which is not only widely celebrated inside Belarus, **but also on which other countries are friendly to us (and we have many friends!) congratulate Belarusians.** All over the world it is recognised that *"national unity" is the guarantee of "eternal peace and stability"* [1].

**By this the state media broadcast the following narratives:**

- people support Lukashenka and his policy, there is people's unity in Belarus;
- Belarusians willingly celebrate the Day of National Unity, it is a real holiday, undeservedly forgotten;
- Belarus is threatened by the West, wanting to enslave us, especially Poland, which has lost its sovereignty and is a puppet of the USA;
- Poland is a historical enemy of Belarus;
- Russia is a historical friend of Belarus;
- Belarusians need to preserve "people's unity" - unity around the leader.

Narrative group	Narrative content	The function of narratives	Techniques used
1st	how bad it was for Belarusians "under the Polish oppression" and how much better life was for those Belarusians who turned out to be a part of the USSR	-To demonise Poland, to create a positive perception of the Soviet period of Belarusan history, to form an image of Russia as friendly to Belarusians.	Contrast, false dilemma, substitution of notions, opposition, silence

2nd	Belarusians resisted the "policy of polonisation" and in 1939 welcomed the Red Army as liberators	<p>-To emphasise the distancing of Belarusans from Poland.</p> <p>-To form a positive perception of the Soviet period of Belarusan history.</p>	Contrast, false dilemma, substitution of notions, opposition, silence
3rd	This date was not celebrated before so as not to spoil relations with Poland. Poles didn't appreciate it.	<p>-To emphasise the peaceful, friendly attitude of Belarus towards Poland, the desire not to recall past offences, to start relations with a clean slate.</p> <p>-To show that Poland did not appreciate these aspirations.</p>	Contrast, false dilemma, substitution of notions, opposition, silence
4th	The "collective West" seeks to "rewrite history" and behaves aggressively, in such a situation the Day of National Unity is a triumph of historical justice.	<p>-To demonise the Western countries, to present them as oppressors and enemies of the Belarussian people.</p> <p>-To show that the Belarussian people unravelled these insidious plans and counteracted them with the people's unity.</p>	Contrast, false dilemma, substitution of notions, opposition, silence

5th	Only those who celebrate National Unity Day on 17 September are true patriots of Belarus	-To emphasise that the "real", "correct" Belarusians are those who are loyal to the authorities.	Contrast, false dilemma, substitution of notions, opposition, silence
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**Recommendations based the report "17 September - People's Unity Day"**

1. For analysts and researchers

1.1 In-depth analysis of historical policy and development of a strategy to counter Lukashenko's propaganda:

- Examine the use of some historical events by Lukashenka's propaganda system. The latest example is the partition of the RzeczPospolita.
- Analyse historical manipulations related to "Polish oppression" and the image of the USSR as a liberator, using examples from Polish and international historiography.
- Develop a communication strategy aimed at demonstrating real facts and exposing distortions, including a focus on deep Polish-Belarusian historical interrelationships.
- Organize a special conference on the topic of 17 September, which would become an annual platform for Belarusian-Polish historical dialogue.
- Establish a Belarusian-Polish historical cooperation group

1.2 Create alternative interpretations of historical events:

- Publish research that shows that the events of 1939 were part of complex political processes, not just a "liberation".
- Prepare materials about the real life of Belarusians in Poland, based on Polish, Soviet and independent sources, avoiding extremes in assessments.

1.3 Monitoring narrative change:

- Compare how the presentation of the topic of 17 September in the state media changed in different years and identify new emphases, such as increased anti-Polish rhetoric.
- Conduct regular monitoring of publications, especially in terms of changing approaches to the perception of Poland.

## 2. For independent media

### 2.1 Outreach programmes and alternative lighting:

- Organise special projects, such as podcasts or articles where Polish and Belarusian historians jointly address the 1939 issues.
- Identify opinion leaders on this topic, form a pool of bloggers.
- To include the contexts that remain outside the official propaganda: cultural, economic and social aspects of the life of Belarusians in the interwar period. "Narodny Albom" created by Michal Anempodistau is an example of how historical truth can be communicated through a cultural product.

### 2.2 Analysing current narratives and exposing manipulation:

- To analyse in detail how the state media presents the relations with Poland, emphasising distortions and silences (e.g. Poland's role in the restoration of Belarusian culture in the interwar period).
- Create visual content (charts, infographics) that simply and clearly demonstrates real historical data.

## 3. For international organisations

### 3.1 Support initiatives for the objective study of history:

- Provide grants to create educational resources that explain the context of Soviet-Polish relations and the role of Poland in the history of Belarus.
- Organise international conferences with the participation of experts from Poland, Belarus and other countries of the region.

### 3.2 Raising awareness among international audiences:

- Include the topic of 17 September in a dialogue on the peculiarities of the propaganda of the "Russian world" in Eastern Europe, highlighting how distortions of history affect the perception of neighbours.

### 3.3 Strengthening international cooperation:

- Create working groups to develop joint educational programmes that can be used in Belarus, Poland and other countries.

## 4. For civil society

### 4.1 Organisation of public educational events:

- To hold joint Polish-Belarusian seminars and lectures covering little-known aspects of the history of the interwar period.
- Develop educational campaigns that emphasise the multicultural heritage of Belarus.

### 4.2 Promote independent research and debate:

- To support the initiatives of young historians and students who are engaged in the study of Polish-Belarusian relations based on the Kalinowski program.

### 4.3 Increased access to objective sources:

- Establish online archives to collect material on the history of the region, including documents, photographs and eyewitness accounts as Archive of Oral History or newly established portal <https://belarus-history.com/>

## 5. For a wide audience

### 5.1 Raising awareness through mass platforms:

- Use social media to talk about the complexities and nuances of the 17 September story.
- Publish videos debunking propaganda myths with the involvement of experts.

### 5.2 Emphasise Polish-Belarusian co-operation:

- Organise public events on common history and culture, such as exhibitions or film festivals, showing that Poland and Belarus have a long history of interaction, not just conflict.

## Conclusion

The recommendations focus on countering anti-Polish rhetoric and creating an objective perception of historical events related to 17 September. Strengthening ties between Belarus and Poland, exposing the myths of state propaganda and promoting critical thinking among the population can contribute to the creation of a more accurate and balanced historical picture.



**Ministerstwo  
Spraw Zagranicznych**

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