

A group of photographers, mostly women, are gathered on a city street, holding cameras and looking towards the camera. They are wearing dark jackets and some are wearing face masks. In the background, there is a blue pedestrian crossing sign with a white silhouette of a person walking on stairs and the word "ПЕРЕХОД" (Crossing) written below it. The scene is set in an urban environment with buildings and a street lamp visible.

*CENTER FOR NEW IDEAS*

# THE MEDIA IMAGE OF BELARUS ABROAD IN 2022–2023: MEDIA MONITORING REPORT

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# INTRODUCTION

The media is a vital player in democratic societies: through it, people formulate their perception of world events and their attitudes towards politicians. In monitoring the image of Belarus in the international media, we strive to determine how the outside world perceives Belarus, Belarusians, and the events affecting our country.

Belarus generated considerable media attention in 2020, when active protests were sweeping the country. However, the news cycle ran its course, and interest gradually diminished. New crises, protests, conflicts, and even wars have broken out around the world. Although Belarus returned to the international media spotlight in 2022, this time the focus was on the regime's military participation in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Another topic that often appeared in conjunction with Belarus was the migration crisis at the EU border. These and other trends are reflected in our 2021-2022 [media monitoring](#) report.

News about the war in Ukraine dominated the second half of 2022 and the first half of 2023, becoming more acute due to Prigozhin's rebellion, Lukashenka's role in deciding the fate of the Wagner Group, the deployment of nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory, and the Belarusian regime's strengthened external relations with Russia, China, and Iran. In addition, the government in Minsk continued to expand repression, pursue Russification, and ideologize every sphere of society.

Despite this, the Belarusian democratic forces have established new global ties, entered into [strategic dialogue with the USA](#), [advocated](#) for the adoption of resolutions on Belarus, and worked to develop a network of parliamentary groups in support of their country. To address challenges Belarusians face in legalizing their residency in Europe, the democratic forces have announced a project to create [a new type of passport](#).

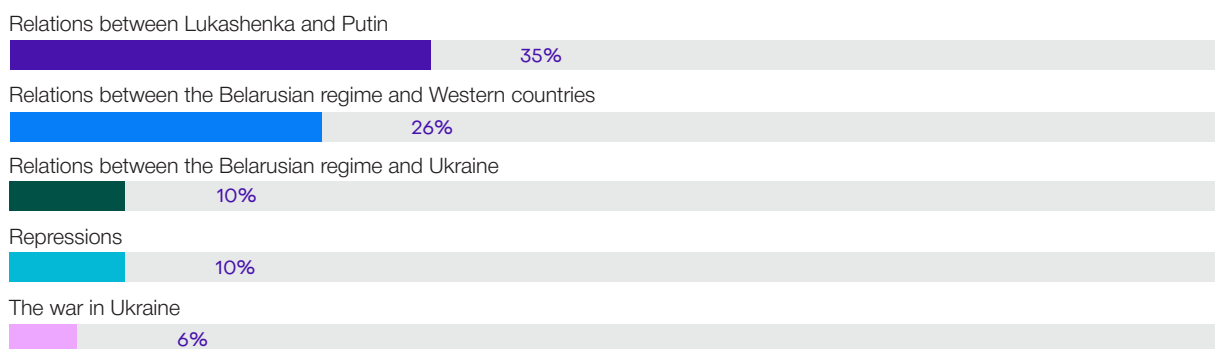
For this monitoring project, we analyzed 20 international media publications to establish what images of Belarusians, the regime, the democratic forces, and the diaspora are being disseminated in the context of current events (for more on our methodology, see page 11).

# HOW THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA COVERED EVENTS IN BELARUS IN 2022–2023

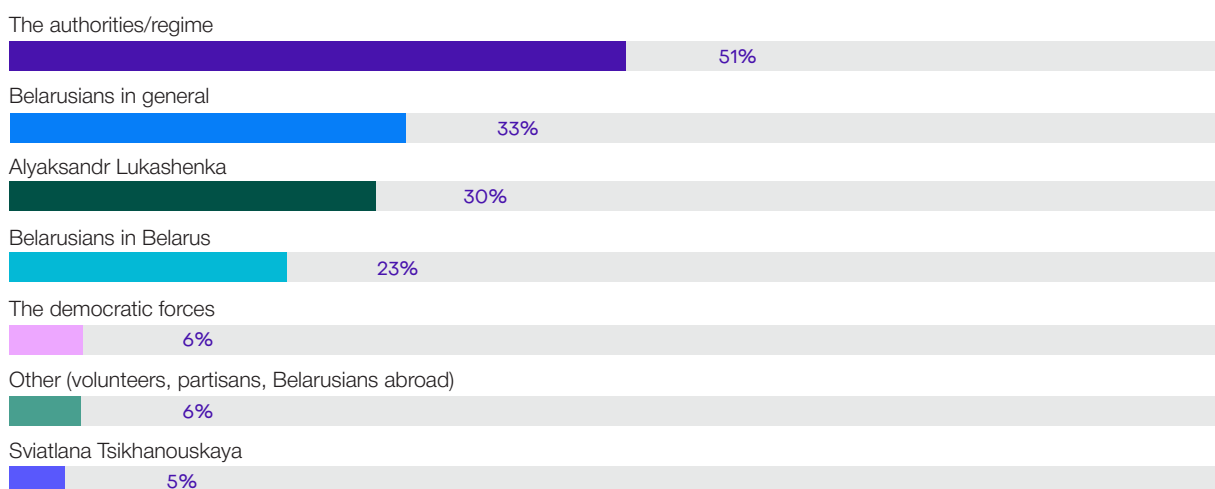
In 2022–2023, Belarus-related topics that interested the international media included the regime’s involvement in the Ukraine conflict, the domestic political crisis, and the democratic forces’ international activities. The media also covered events such as Prigozhin’s rebellion and Lukashenka’s role in resolving it, meetings between Putin and Lukashenka, the deployment of nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory, and the international visits of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Political prisoners garnered less media attention than the year before. Nevertheless, international publications did write about the conspicuous silence of well-known political prisoners such as Maria Kalesnikava, Mikola Statkevich, Viktor Babaryka, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, and Maksim Znak.

Lukashenka, the image of the regime/authorities, and relations between Lukashenka and Putin were the most popular Belarus-related topics for the international media. The least visible topics included volunteers, partisans, the image of the democratic forces, and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Coverage of Belarus has also got shallower: articles often described the country as a secondary player in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, omitting important details and the context of the events of 2020.

**Graph 1a: What did the international media write about most in connection with Belarus? \***



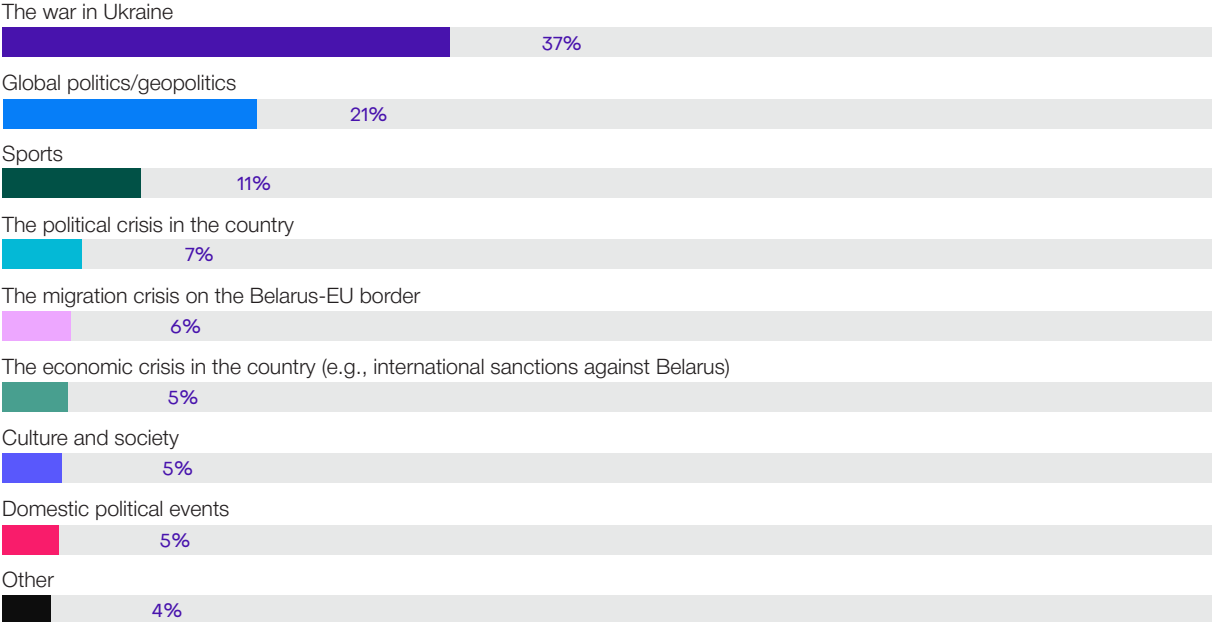
**Graph 1b: Whom did the international media write most about in connection with Belarus? \***



\* Figures in this and the following graphs are rounded to whole numbers.

Our monitoring of the international media shows that most articles covered Belarus in relation to the war in Ukraine and the geopolitical context. The political crisis in the country and domestic political issues interested foreign journalists much less (see Graph 2). Belarus was also mentioned in the context of sporting events, such as discussions of whether Belarusian athletes should be allowed to participate in the 2024 Olympics.

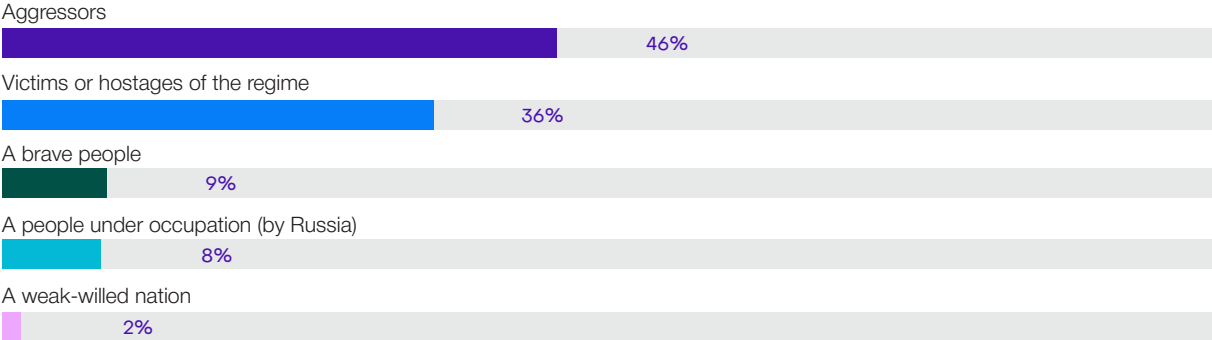
**Graph 2: Topics associated with Belarus in the international media**



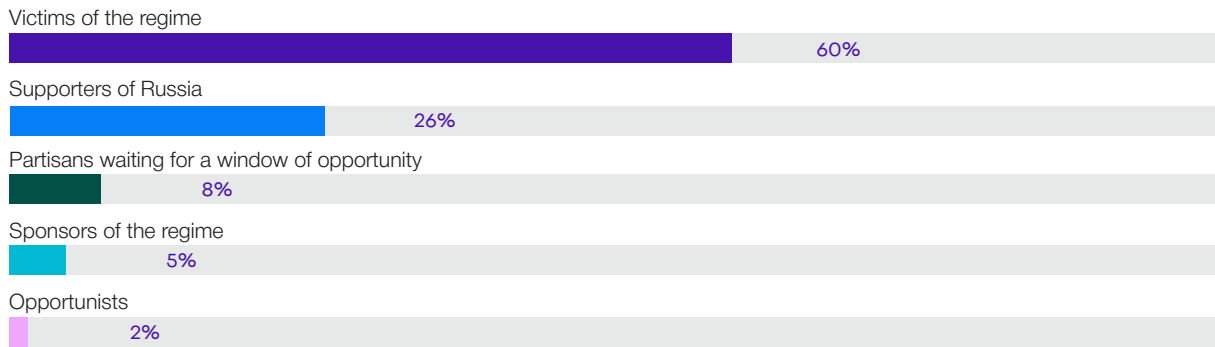
## THE IMAGE OF BELARUSIANS IN THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

Compared to last year’s monitoring report, the general image of Belarusians has changed considerably: in 46% of analyzed articles, Belarusians were even called aggressors (see Graph 3). This is most characteristic of Polish and Ukrainian publications and least characteristic of British ones. That said, the image of victims of the regime remains the most prevalent when it comes to Belarusians remaining inside the country. Compared to our previous monitoring report, the number of articles where Belarusians in Belarus were called supporters of Russia has increased slightly. This opinion is most commonly found in the Polish, Ukrainian, and Japanese media.

**Graph 3: The image of Belarusians in general**

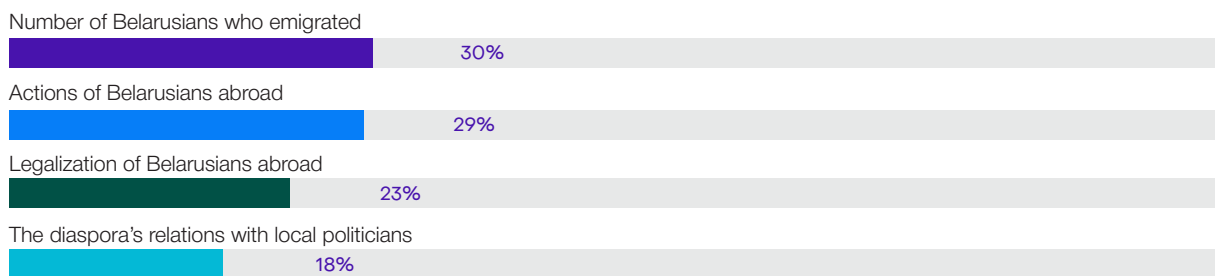


#### Graph 4: The image of Belarusians in Belarus



A total of 3% of articles analyzed were devoted to Belarusians abroad. The diaspora was most often mentioned in connection with political actions abroad and issues surrounding the legalization of Belarusians' stay. The actions of Belarusians were of greatest interest to American journalists, whereas residency issues appeared most in Ukrainian and Polish publications. In addition, foreign journalists mentioned the diaspora in a general context, citing the number of Belarusians who left the country due to the political crisis.

#### Graph 5: Belarusians in exile



## BELARUS VS. "WHITE RUSSIA"

Whereas our first [media monitoring report](#) revealed that the Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, and German media often used an equivalent of "White Russia" (Byelorussia) to refer to Belarus, in our [second monitoring](#) such names were barely used at all. However, Spanish, Portuguese, and Scandinavian-language media were not part of the sample of the latest monitoring report (the latter had already been using the name Belarus anyway); therefore, we cannot make a statistically significant comparison.

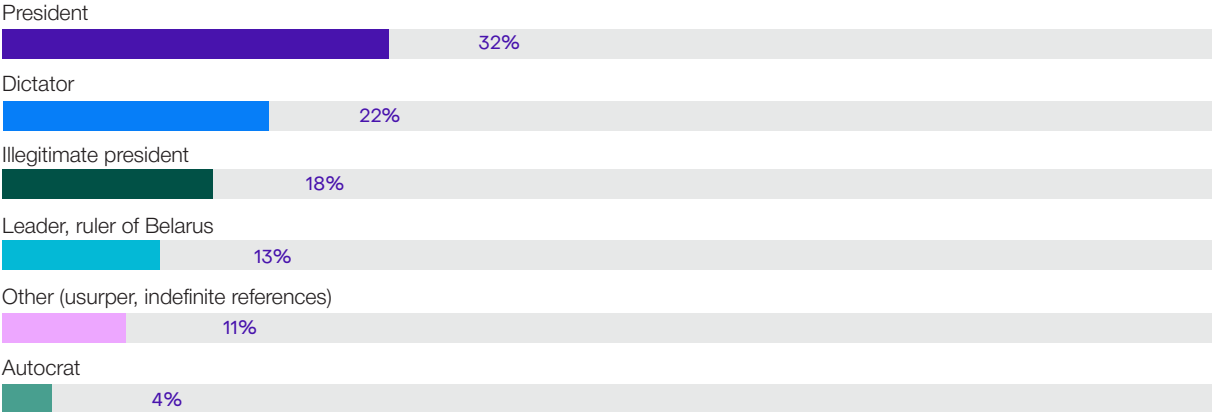
Nevertheless, if we look at individual examples, we see that usage of "White Russia" has fallen in Germanic languages yet stayed the same in Romance languages. Thus, in the German publications we analyzed (which we sampled both years), the number of instances of Weißrussland within one article dropped from 7% in our 2020–2021 monitoring report to 2% in 2022–2023. The old name Vitryssland was also entirely absent in Swedish publications, with the Danish media partially following suit as of relatively recently. On the other hand, equivalents of "White Russia" dominated in major Norwegian publications. Likewise, the Romance-language media we analyzed in our last monitoring report (El Mundo, Folha de S.Paulo), along with other popular Spanish- and Portuguese-language publications, continued to use equivalents of "White Russia" or "Byelorussia" in the absolute majority of cases.

# WHO DOES THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA CALL THE PRESIDENT OF BELARUS?

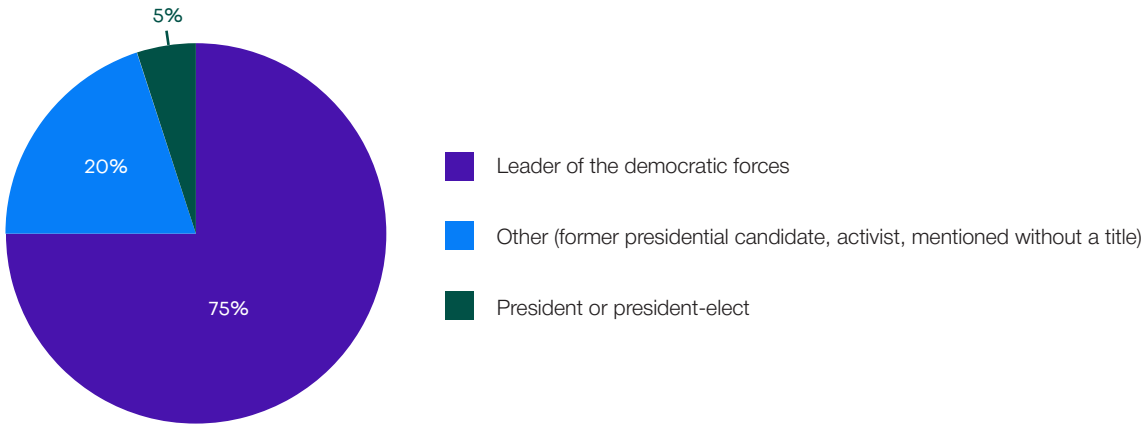
Lukashenka was mentioned in 30% of the articles we analyzed; as shown in Graph 6, the international media usually called him a president or dictator. Lukashenka was referred to as the president most often in Japanese (93%), French (69%), American (63.5%), and British (52%)<sup>1</sup> publications. In half of all Ukrainian articles Lukashenka was referred to as the illegitimate president. Epithets such as “dictator” and “autocrat” were also used most often in Ukrainian and Polish publications. Finally, journalists in Germany were most likely to use the term “leader” or “leader of Belarus” (60% of the total number of German articles about Lukashenka).

Unlike Lukashenka, Tsikhanouskaya occupied a much smaller place in the international media space: she was mentioned in just 4.6% of analyzed articles. Tsikhanouskaya was most often referred to as the leader of the democratic forces (75%) and less often as the elected president (4%); Tsikhanouskaya was called the President of Belarus only in Polish publications. In German publications Tsikhanouskaya was occasionally called a human rights activist (however, such articles make up only 0.3% of the sample).

**Graph 6. Alyaksandr Lukashenka**



**Graph 7. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya**

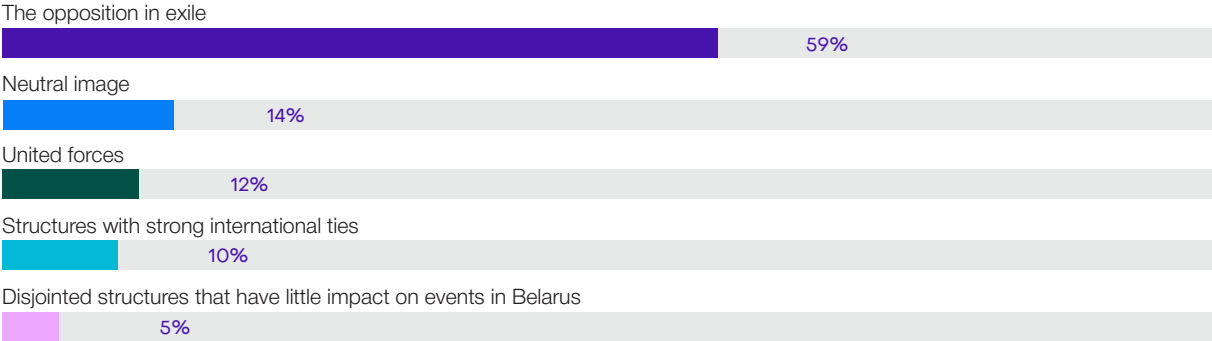


<sup>1</sup> Percentage of all analyzed articles by country where Lukashenka is mentioned. For example, in 52% of such materials from British publications, the noun “president” was used.

# THE IMAGE OF THE BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES AND THE DEMOCRATIC FORCES

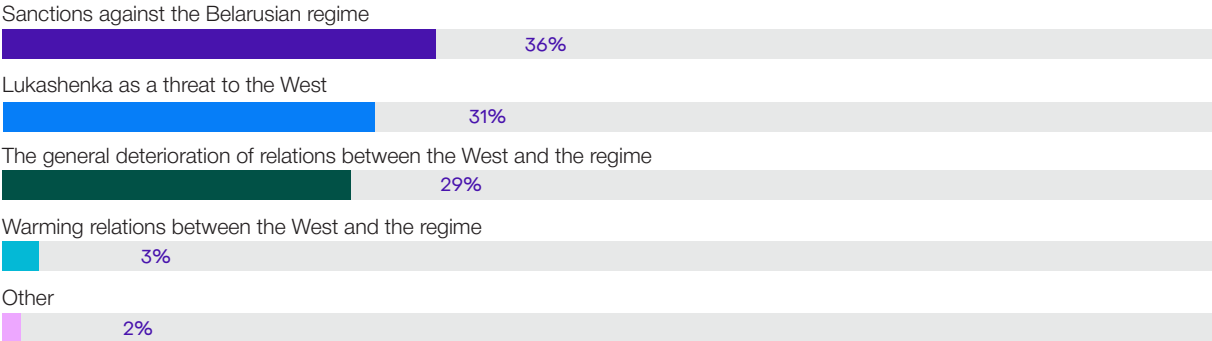
In total, the democratic forces were mentioned in 6% of the analyzed materials in our sample, where they were mostly depicted as the “opposition in exile with strong international ties.” The image of the Belarusian democratic forces stands out only in the Ukrainian media, which often described them as disparate structures that have little influence on the situation in Belarus. The most positive image of the democratic forces can be found in Polish articles, which were five times more likely to describe them as strong and united than other media.

**Graph 8. The democratic forces**



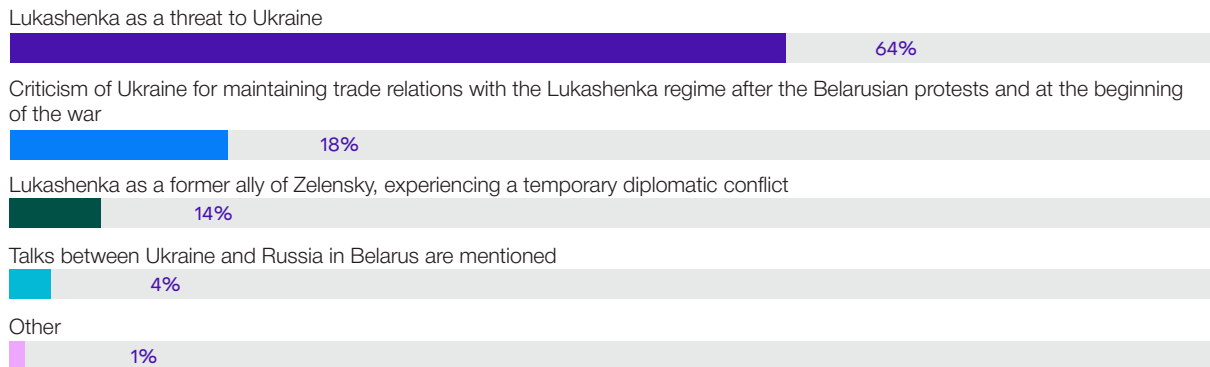
As for the Belarusian authorities, the foreign media often portray them as aggressors — individuals and institutions that pose a threat to neighboring countries and tightly control Belarusian society. The Belarusian authorities were described using neutral language in only 7% of articles. The main topics touched upon by the international media when writing about the Belarusian authorities included sanctions against the regime and the deteriorating relations between Minsk and the West.

**Graph 9: The Belarusian authorities and the West**

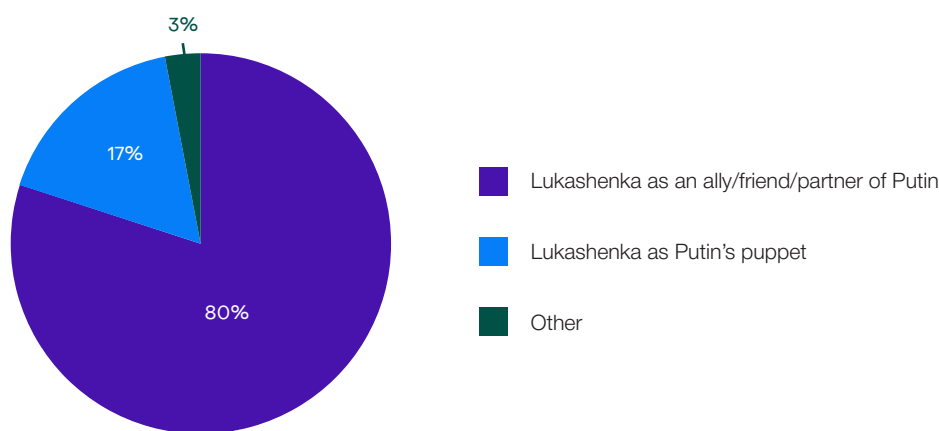


In the context of relations with Ukraine, Lukashenka is most often called a threat. In a quarter of articles, writers for Polish, British, and Ukrainian publications criticized the fact that Ukraine maintained trade relations with the Lukashenka regime at the beginning of the war. Most media/journalists described relations between Lukashenka and Putin as friendly (80%). The metaphor of Lukashenka as a puppet of Putin was most common in materials from the United States, Poland, and France.

### Graph 10: The Belarusian authorities and Ukraine



### Graph 11: Lukashenka and Putin



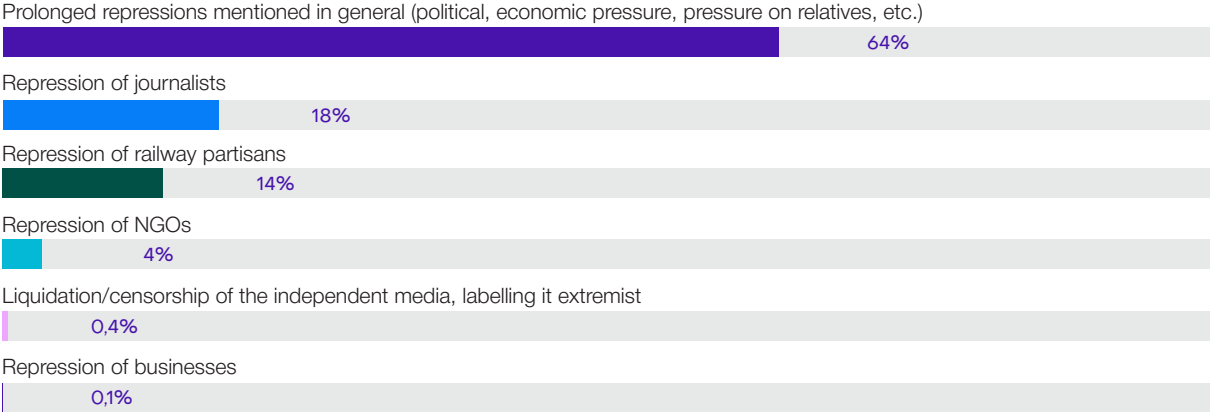
## WAR AS THE MAIN FOCAL POINT OF MEDIA ATTENTION ON BELARUS

In contrast to our previous monitoring, in 2022–2023 the international media wrote about repression in Belarus in general terms. Most often, political repression was mentioned as a long-term phenomenon or as part of the domestic political context. The international media also wrote about the repression of Belarusian journalists, as well as detentions and convictions of railway partisans. Unlike last year, however, the media outlets we analyzed barely touched upon the repression of Belarusian businesses.

In 2022–2023, the international media reported less frequently on the actions of railway partisans or on Belarusian volunteers fighting for Ukraine (2.6% of the total number of articles). The articles mentioned the actions of Belarusian railway partisans, also covering volunteers from Belarus in the Ukrainian army. Journalists drew attention to the arrests of railway partisans and the criminal charges against soldiers in the Kalinoŭski regiment.



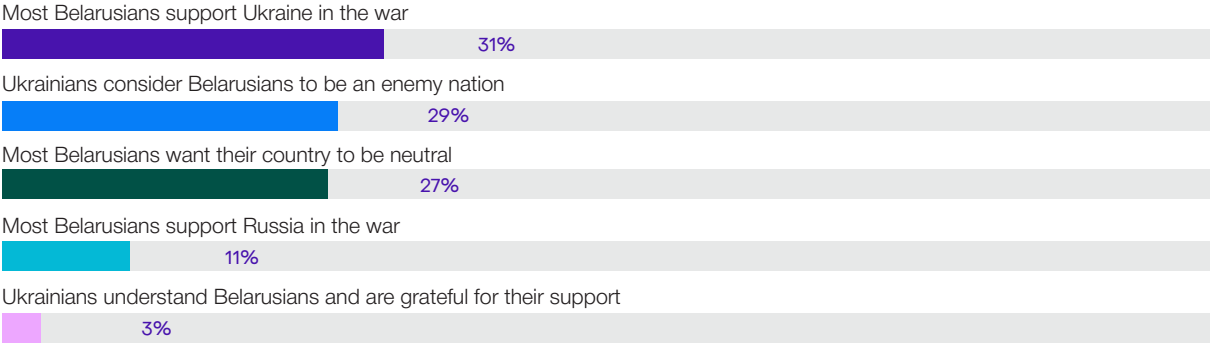
**Graph 12: Repressions in Belarus**



The war was a central event for the international media. However, unlike last year, the media focused not so much on the complicity of the Belarusian regime in Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine, but more on specific events and news items. For example, foreign publications paid considerable attention to Prigozhin’s rebellion, Lukashenka’s involvement in these events, and Wagner troops entering Belarus. The deployment of nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory was also discussed.

As in the previous monitoring report, we paid attention to how Ukrainians’ attitudes towards Belarusians were covered in the context of the war. Thus, one third of articles claimed that most Belarusians support Ukraine in the war. Notably, the share of articles claiming that most Belarusians support Russia grew by 10% compared to last year — from 1% to 11%. The share of materials stating that Ukrainians consider Belarusians to be an enemy nation grew by 11%. This opinion was most common in Polish and Ukrainian publications. Interestingly, in the Ukrainian media, the thesis that Ukrainians are grateful for the support of Belarusians helping Ukraine was more noticeable than last year.

**Graph 13: War**



## CONCLUSIONS

Our monitoring of the image of Belarus in the international media allows us to draw several conclusions about the changing press coverage of the country.

- Firstly, interest in Belarus continues to decline. This is reflected in a decrease in the number of articles about the country, as well as our research team’s qualitative assessment. In some of the publications we monitored, the number of articles about Belarus has decreased five times over the past three years. This applies primarily to the Western European and American media. Moreover, when writing about Belarus’s involvement in the war on Russia’s side, foreign journalists neglect to mention the post-2020 domestic political context of the country; they also fail to describe the resistance displayed by the democratic forces and Belarusian society.
- The decrease in attention paid to Belarus in the international media can be explained by the large number of “pressing” current events in the world, which leads to a faster news cycle in general.
- Belarusian society interests the international media much less than the actions of the regime, whose consequences can impact the entire region. Coverage of the situation in Belarus is likely to decrease even more given the upcoming elections in Russia, the USA, and the EU.
- Secondly, despite the fact that in 2023 politicians in Poland and Sweden referred to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as the rightfully elected president, most media outlets described her as an activist or the leader of the Belarusian democratic forces. According to our monitoring, the number of articles calling Lukashenka the president of Belarus has tended to increase. Nevertheless, some publications add the word “illegitimate” or call Lukashenka a dictator. If our research had covered a larger number of media outlets, the share of articles referring to Lukashenka as the president would probably have been higher. It should be noted that in previous monitoring reports, we conducted interviews with representatives of the democratic forces and journalists, who confirmed the existence of strong and stable mutual contacts, stating: “These connections can be used to ensure better, more accurate, more in-depth coverage of political events in Belarus.”
- Thirdly, the number of materials in which Belarusians were called supporters of Russia increased notably in the publications analyzed. Although this partly coincides with the results of [opinion polls](#), this image does not do Belarusians any favors. The strong influence of this image of “aggressors” and Kremlin supporters has already had an effect beyond the media. For example, a scandal broke out in Lithuania due to a bar fight that was covered by the local media and subsequently [became the subject of high-level political debates](#). Given the existing ties between journalists and Belarusians abroad, emphasizing an alternative image of Belarusians as supporters of independence and European values may help prevent political decisions unfriendly to Belarusians.

## MONITORING METHODOLOGY

When people think of Belarus, what events primarily come to mind? How does coverage of Belarus differ from country to country? To answer these questions, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of 20 publications from 8 countries.

<i>Country</i>	<i>Analyzed publications</i>	<i>Number of articles (total: 7,505)</i>
General European publication (main office in Belgium)	Euronews	236
UK	BBC UK	39
	The Guardian	245
	The Independent	262
Germany	Die Zeit	333
	Deutsche Welle	40
USA	Washington Post	66
	The Hill	152
	NPR	134
	CBS News	70
	New York Times	325
	CNN	35
Lithuania	Delfi LT	16
Poland	Rzeczpospolita	1024
	Wyborcza	997
France	Le Monde	227
	Figaro	586
Ukraine	Ukrainska Pravda	763
	UNIAN	1680
Japan	NHK	275

To monitor the image of Belarus in the international media, we used qualitative content analysis, which we carried out in accordance with the Margrit Schreier method (2012). Qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to effectively and systematically describe an array of secondary data. The creation of a codebook to systematize data requires an in-depth preliminary study of the material and a qualitative approach to categorizing and naming data.

Our analysis began with a detailed study of one of the publications, on the basis of which we formulated the main categories and subcategories. After that, we carried out a pilot coding of several dozen articles from different publications, which became the basis for validation and revision of the codebook. Next, we focused on the thematic categories that met the criteria of the coding framework according to our method (one-dimensionality, mutual exclusivity, saturation), and we characterized the collection of articles for analysis in a broad and comprehensive way (Schreier, 2012, Chapter 4). Twelve researchers took part in our media analysis over the course of two months. All of them underwent preliminary methodological training and are fluent in the language of the articles they analyzed. After categorizing the articles, we analyzed the data using SPSS.

As in the previous study, our main analytical focus was major Western media outlets. Nevertheless, in order to identify possible deviations and to further study the media image of Belarus in other countries and cultures, this year we included popular publications from Japan and Ukraine. In countries with large media outlets that write a lot about Belarus (like Poland, the USA, Germany, or the United Kingdom), we analyzed several publications. In the future, we will strive to expand the sample for qualitative media analysis to cover more media outlets and countries, bearing in mind that quality remains one of the key principles of our work.

For most media, we purchased a premium subscription to cover all available articles in the desired period. The analysis period (July 14, 2022–July 13, 2023) comprises a continuation of last year's analysis, which covered the period from July 14, 2021 to July 13, 2022. The sample includes articles that mentioned Belarus (as well as related words) in the title and in the main text of the article. In total, we included 7,505 articles from 20 selected publications in our sample for the period (almost 2,000 less than last year).

Our research reveals certain trends in the international media's coverage of Belarus, its political actors and citizens. That said, our sample is not random and therefore cannot be completely representative. A more representative quantitative study of the media image of Belarus would require the automatic collection and processing of large amounts of data. However, our method focuses on qualitative analysis and identifying trends. As such, the graphs in this report should be taken as an indication of trends in coverage of Belarus, and not as representative quantitative indicators.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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