In 2017 Belsat – a television station broadcasting via satellite from Poland to Belarus – celebrated its 10th jubilee. But the celebrations gained publicity neither in Belarus nor in Poland. In Belarus because the station has been still seen as a medium non grata, and in Poland because its further existence was endangered exactly at the time of the 10th anniversary. Poland’s government, elected in 2015, seeming to strive for better relations with the Lukashenko regime, was about to cut the majority of funds for the channel. The aim of the presentation is to discuss a case of Belsat TV that is understood as a comeback to the Cold War models of border - transcending production and reception of news. Belsat was born as the answer to the exclusion of Belarusian viewers from international flow of information and in line with the early concepts of international broadcasting, providing viewers under authoritarian regimes with access to information. It has been operating thank to an agreement from 2007 between Poland’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and TVP SA – Poland’s public service broadcaster. In line with public broadcaster’s remit, the station was to represent Poland and create its image abroad, and at the same time, to provide Belarusians living in Poland with news in their native language. Thus, Belsat became a station substituting the missing Belarusian free media (Belarus was estimated by Freedom House as a not free press system, 2017), while supplying viewers with information on politics. Such broadcasters are called “surrogate” (Cull, 2012). Belsat’s structure and financing responds well to the concept of governmentally sponsored international broadcasting, framed by the mediated public diplomacy model. The presentation puts stress on internal – political and economic – and external – cultural and political factors, determining operations of the station. The author adopts Schudson’s definition of journalism, that is „(…) not the sum of the individual subjective experiences of reporters and editors but the source or structure that gives the rise to them. It is the matrix of institutions and outlooks that produce people who understand their situations in these terms.” (Schudson, 1995, p. 12). The case of Belsat illustrates how political, economic and cultural factors – both in Poland and Belarus - contribute to the station’s success or failure. Its operations were limited not only because of the fact, that Belarus refused Belsat’s accreditation four times, but also due to the changing priorities of Poland’s foreign policy in relations with President Lukashenka regime. The war in Ukraine turned to a relevant turning point in Belsat’s performance and was decisive for the use of Russian on its website. It proved that its programming was received also in Ukraine. However, although Belsat has been governmentally sponsored and in fact, won much independence within Poland’s public broadcaster, the lack of a coherent strategy in international broadcasting has affected its existence in a negative way. Hence, the station’s autonomy has also a negative side, manifested as constant cuts in budget and financial instability. In the beginning of 2018, Belsat gained support from British government sources, aimed against fake news propaganda coming from Russian Federation. Once more political tensions, in this case between Great Britain and Russian Federation, proved the sense of broadcasting from Poland to Belarus and gave Belsat the opportunity to develop its broadcasting in Russian, in a cooperation with BBC. The focus on fake news nowadays seems to convince, that Belsat – while adopting to Cold War models of broadcasting – prepared well to the situation after 2014. The quest against fake news defines a new frame in studies on Belsat and gives it a new
relevance. Thus, the concept to provide Belarusians with news on politics that would compete with very diverse Russian media offer, has a potential to pay back at the time of international conflict.

However, if seen as an element of Poland’s mediated public diplomacy eastwards, Belsat is only loosely connected with Poland’s strategies of public diplomacy and nation branding. Structurally, it has been subordinated to the Eastern Department of Poland’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and not to the Department of Public and Cultural Diplomacy. The television has been broadcasting from the very beginning in Belarusian - according to UNESCO one of the endangered languages, and at the same time, the language of Belarusian opposition. In this case, the decision on the language defined the political position of the channel. According to the director of the station (a former Poland’s anti-communist opposition member and journalist Agnieszka Romaszewska - Guzy), Belsat actually contributed to more inclusion of Belarussian into programming in the country, where Russian has been dominating in public discourse. Nowadays, Belsat offers more language versions online (English, Polish and Russian, the latter from 2015). In 2018 Romaszewska-Guzy announced a start for broadcasting in Russian.

Belsat adopted an unusual path of team building. Its director employed young journalists with no background in any Belarusian or Polish media. As Belsat operates with no permission in Belarus, its journalists suffer from persecutions and arrests. They have been working outside the network of Belarusian journalism, that has been split into pro - government and oppositional groups. Paradoxically, the same might be said about a position of Belsat journalists in Polish journalism, also split in two conflicted groups, pro - governmental and oppositional. Belsat broadcasts via satellite (this fact results from no accreditation in Belarus and limits the number of viewers to a large extent) and provides with information online, publishing its programming on Youtube, where it achieves its biggest number of viewers. Belarusian governmental media ignore its existence, but users of social media as Odnoklasniki and Vkontatie, and some Russian media online (Lenta.ru) usually follow its news. According to information published by the station itself, it reaches about 10 per cent of Belarusian viewers, who, however, identify it with the EU. Although run by Poland’s public service television, Belsat is hardly recognized as Polish. The fact contradicts the efforts – if any – to promote Poland while broadcasting to Belarus. However, the fact that 80 % of viewers trust the television must be seen as a success.

The presentation is the effect of an analysis of Belsat, framed by neo-institutional approach, that was essential for the definition of its role in Polish and Belarusian media systems and in international communication. The study on Belsat basic documents and programming allowed for identification of its main values and goals. These findings were verified in semi-structured interviews with editors and journalists and content analysis. At the moment, the further surveys on the role and position of journalists of the station are planned.

References
https://belsat.eu/pl/about/widzowie/ derived January, 2018