Institute of Political Studies
Political Sphere

Palitsfera Working Papers No. 10/2026

MEMORY OF THE UPRISING

Narratives of 1863 in Belarusian Public Debates, 2010–2024

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Andrei Kazakevich

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Scale and Dynamics of the Information Flow

A search of three state media websites (SB. Belarus Segodnya, Zvyazda and BelTA) and three independent media websites (Nasha Niva, Radio Svaboda and Zerkalo) identified 1,967 publications from 2010 through 2024 that mentioned the uprising or its principal figures. The independent sector was markedly more active, accounting for 80.4% of all publications, compared with 19.6% for state media.

It should be borne in mind that, when the data were collected in the first half of 2025, not every outlet had a complete archive dating back to 2010. The independent outlet Zerkalo was established only in 2021. It was also impossible to include publications from Tut.by, Belarus's most popular portal until 2021, which inevitably leaves the picture incomplete. Among state outlets, the archive of the newspaper Zvyazda was clearly incomplete; this may also have led to an undercount for state media in the first half of the 2010s. Publication frequency in 2010–2024 reveals both common trends and substantial differences between the state and independent sectors.

Nevertheless, even if Zvyazda and Zerkalo are excluded, interest in the uprising shows substantial growth from the early 2010s. Across the five outlets with continuous archives, the annual average for the entire study period was 115 publications; in 2020–2024 it was 145. Each outlet considered separately also published more on the subject in recent years.

The data provide grounds to conclude that the topic's presence increased by approximately 1.8 times when 2010–2019 is compared with 2020–2024. Growth was recorded in every type of media, both state and independent. For outlets with regular archives spanning the whole period, the growth factor was 1.4–1.7.

Despite this overall increase in both sectors, their publication patterns differed substantially. In independent media, the main drivers were anniversary years (2013 and 2023) and a major commemorative event: the reburial of the remains of uprising leaders, including Kastuś Kalinoŭski, in Vilnius in 2019. Coverage fell considerably between anniversaries. A further rise in activity was recorded in 2020–2021, associated with the greater use of the uprising's symbols in public and political discourse and the spread of commemoration beyond Belarus.

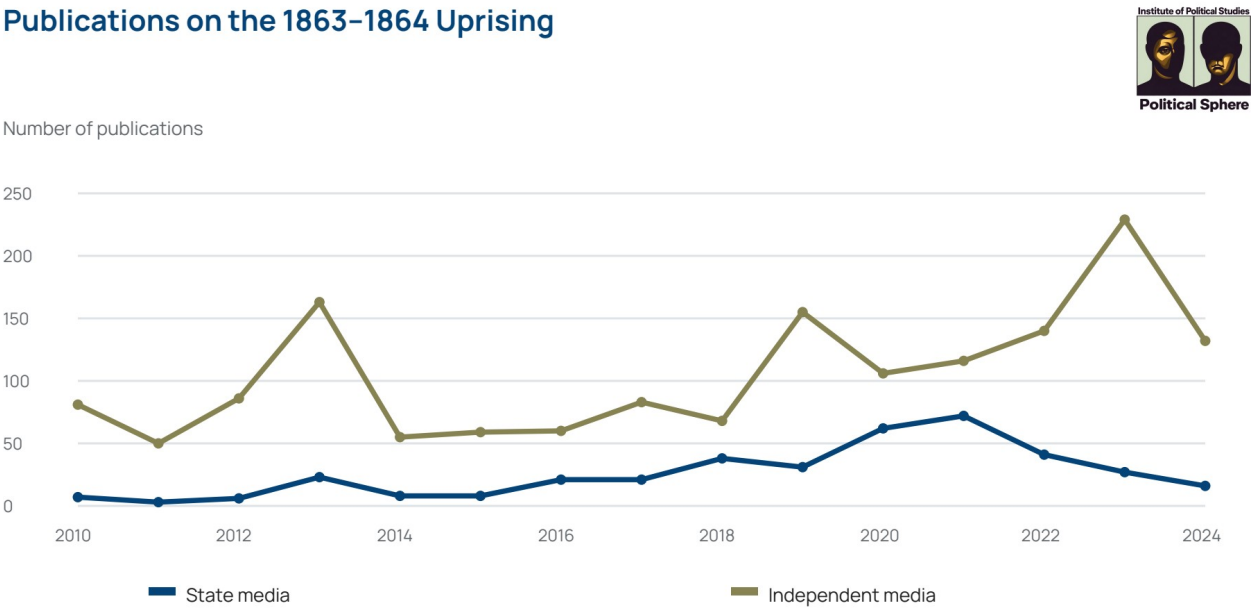


Figure 1. Publications on the 1863–1864 uprising, 2010–2024

State media coverage peaked in 2013, when the authorities responded to public celebrations and some pro-Russian establishment figures began a new round of critical reinterpretation, emphasizing the uprising's "Polish" character. Interest in Muravyov also grew, alongside rising interest in him among Russian nationalists. In terms of publication numbers, the 2023 anniversary was ignored, although several ideologically significant critical articles appeared that year and framed a new phase of state policy. Coverage also declined in 2019, when the leaders of the 1863 uprising were reburied in Vilnius. At the same time, interest in the two sectors moved in parallel in 2020 and 2021, predominantly through political polemics and responses to debates in independent media.

Publication Topics

The collected material varied greatly in length, content and genre. Seven main thematic and genre categories can be distinguished: biographical sketches; anniversary pieces devoted to major events or individuals; local-history articles; announcements of publications about the uprising; specialized historical surveys; and news about contemporary commemorative events.

In the overall corpus, passing references to the uprising within other texts predominate (about 40%). Publications on contemporary forms of commemoration—public actions, marches, rallies and presentations—rank second (21.3%). Anniversary material (13.9%) and local-history publications (13.4%) also account for substantial shares. Surveys of historical events and episodes of the uprising represent 5.7%. The remaining thematic and genre categories were small, each accounting for no more than 1–2.5%.

Publication Topics

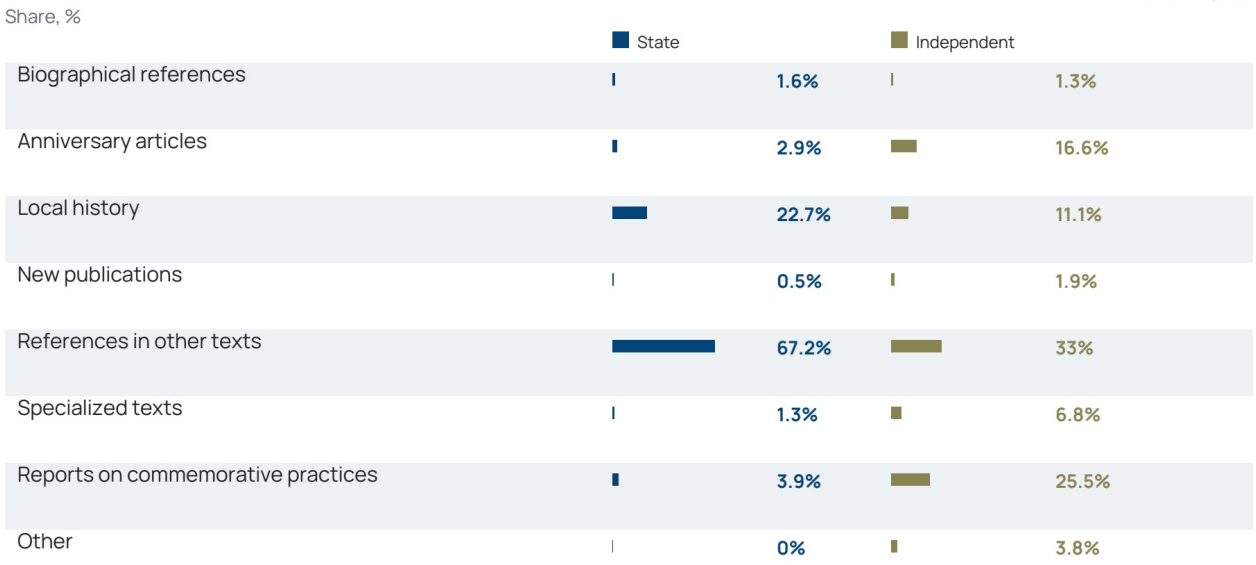


Figure 2. Publication topics as a share of the total, 2010–2024

The genre structures of the state and independent sectors nevertheless differ sharply. Brief references to the uprising in texts on other subjects are the leading format in both groups, but their share is about 33% in independent outlets and 67.2% in state outlets. Local-history articles rank second in the state press (22.7%), while only 3.9% concerns contemporary commemoration. Other formats each account for 0.5–3%.

In the independent sector, contemporary commemoration ranks second, at 25.5% (more than 400 items). Anniversary publications follow at 16.6%, local-history sketches at 11.1%, and specialized historical surveys at 6.8%. Biographical texts and announcements of new literature remain a small share (1–2%).

The data show considerable genre diversity in the independent sector and pronounced uniformity in the state sector. State media largely ignored anniversaries and commemorative practices, limiting themselves to indirect references to the uprising in lists of historical events or in politically framed material. When obliged to acknowledge the context, they tended to avoid reinforcing a tradition of remembrance. The one substantial channel of coverage was the incorporation of the events of 1863 into local history: accounts of settlements, estates and buildings.

The independent sector, first, paid greater attention to public commemorative practices, which often took the form of political and opposition activity. Second, it systematically constructed and preserved memory of the events of 1863 through a wide range of formats: anniversary publications, specialized historical surveys, local-history articles and others.

Dominant Narratives and Their Measurement

Memory of the 1863 uprising is also a contest between narratives reflecting Belarusian domestic political confrontation and channels of Russian influence. This study identifies five narratives circulating in the information and cultural spheres. Each was assigned a numerical value for quantitative analysis.

Texts were assigned to narratives by analyzing their emphasis and terminology.

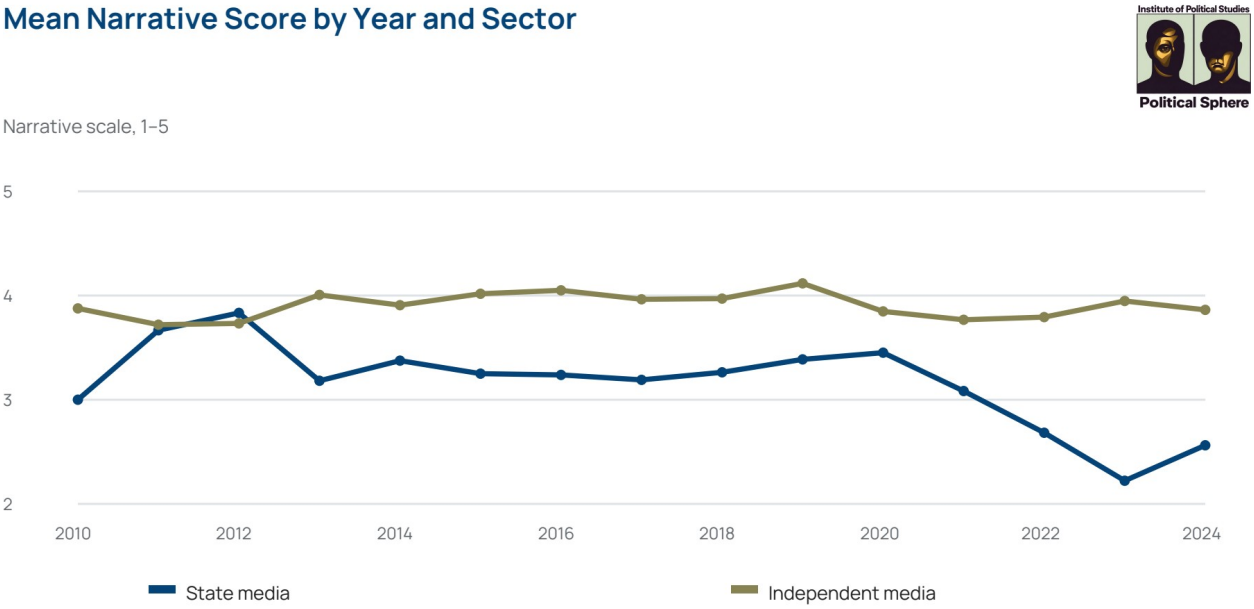


Figure 3. Mean narrative score by year and sector, 2010–2024

The first narrative: a Belarusian national uprising. This category includes texts defining the uprising as part of the Belarusian national movement. They were assigned a score of five.

The second narrative: an "uprising with a significant Belarusian national component." In this account, the uprising may be described as a broad regional movement with a distinct Belarusian element, even if it is too early to speak of a developed Belarusian national movement. These texts were assigned a score of four.

Substantively neutral texts. A substantial number of texts were classified as "neutral." Most contain brief mentions that do not permit the author's position to be reconstructed, or deliberately avoid expressing one. These texts were assigned three points.

The fourth narrative: a "Polish uprising with a local element." It describes the uprising as "Polish" and "noble" and denies a connection to the Belarusian national movement, while sometimes acknowledging local ethnographic features. For example, it may note the participation of Belarusian petty nobles or peasants or the use of Belarusian in agitation. This narrative received a score of two.

The fifth and final narrative: a "Polish uprising." It presents the uprising as exclusively Polish, in line with the Russian historiographical tradition. Its numerical value is one.

The chosen methodology made it possible to calculate the mean narrative score for any group of texts. Figure 3 shows how these scores changed in state and independent outlets from 2010 to 2024.

The results indicate that the gap between the state and independent sectors became established in 2013. In independent media, the mean narrative score was fairly stable, ranging from 3.72 to 4.12. As in any body of media texts, many items do not characterize the uprising and fall into the "neutral" category; the remainder describe it either as a Belarusian national uprising or as an uprising with a Belarusian national element.

The state sector followed a somewhat different course. In the anniversary year of 2013, the mean score fell markedly to 3.18, its lowest level before the 2020 political crisis. A wave of critical publications and debates in state media in response to the 150th anniversary established new boundaries for the official discourse, within a range of 3.18–3.45. Thus, the mean narrative score remained in the "Belarusian" zone, slightly above "neutral."

The political crisis of 2020 changed the situation entirely. From 2021, mean scores began to fall, reaching a low in 2023 close to two—that is, close to the dominance of a narrative emphasizing the uprising's Polish character. There was some movement back toward neutrality in 2024, but further observation is needed to establish whether it will last. Since 2022, however, narratives emphasizing a Polish character have clearly become dominant in the official information sphere. This may be the first time this has happened in Belarus not only since independence but since the collapse of the Russian Empire.

Among individual outlets, "national" interpretations were most prominent in Radio Svaboda and Zerkalo, with mean scores of 4–4.1. Nasha Niva followed at 3.8, then Zvyazda and BelTA at 3.2–3.3. Among mass-circulation outlets, only SB. Belarus Segodnya was in the "Polish zone," at 2.8–2.9. Scores in independent media remained fairly stable throughout the study. SB. Belarus Segodnya proved the most sensitive to changing political circumstances, shifting sharply from "national" to "Polish" narratives. It first entered the "Polish" zone in 2017, and that position became fixed from 2020. The evolution of BelTA and Zvyazda was much slower, although both displayed a clear trend toward "Polonization" after 2020. BelTA entered the "Polish" zone in 2022 and Zvyazda in 2023.



Figure 4. Mean narrative score for individual media outlets: 2010–2020 compared with 2021–2024

Strengthening the Pantheon of Heroes

The uprising of 1863–1864 was decentralized: many people took part in its organization, and its leadership was collective. In Belarusian public tradition, however, the events are strongly personified in Kastuś Kalinoŭski. This differs markedly from both Polish and Lithuanian practices of remembrance.

The collected texts made it possible to analyze the structure and operation of the uprising's pantheon of heroes and antiheroes. The study identified the principal historical figures on whom authors focused. Usually, the title and content readily revealed a central figure or several related individuals. Texts that mentioned too many people without a clear hierarchy were excluded from this part of the analysis. The initial analysis therefore recorded the main figure, or two to three main figures, rather than mechanically counting every mention of each person.

It was possible to identify a central figure or group of key figures in 62% of the texts examined. The rest either contained no personalized references or presented many names without a clear structural focus. The corpus encompasses different genres: biographical articles, event announcements, local-history sketches, analytical commentaries and opinion pieces.

Overall, publications on the uprising focused on 132 people. Radio Svaboda covered the widest range (67 individuals), followed by Nasha Niva (58) and Zvyazda (38). The range was narrower in SB. Belarus Segodnya (26), BelTA (17) and Zerkalo (10), and narrowest in the journal Belaruskaya Dumka (two).

Almost half of the figures were discussed in substantive terms only once. Ten appeared twice, 16 three times, and 18 between four and eight times. Only 14 individuals reached the highest level of presence in the heroic or antiheroic pantheon, with ten or more mentions. The findings reveal a substantial imbalance in the distribution of figures between state and independent media and among individual outlets.

For example, Ludwik Narbutt ranks relatively high, with 25 publications, but most appeared on Radio Svaboda and only isolated pieces in Zvyazda. A similar concentration applies to Michał Ciundziewicki, mentioned only in Nasha Niva and Radio Svaboda, and Adam Falkowski, who appeared only in Zerkalo, Nasha Niva and Radio Svaboda.

To reconstruct a shared pantheon, the in-depth analysis included only figures mentioned at least ten times and represented in most outlets in both the state and independent sectors. Eleven people met these criteria and form the uppermost tier of the pantheon studied.

Kastuś Kalinoŭski is the undisputed leader: his image has been central to public debate for more than a century. The findings show the extent of his dominance in collective memory of 1863. He appears in 31.3% of all texts and in more than 50% of all references to individuals. No other figure comes close to 10%. Kalinoŭski appeared on the agenda of every outlet studied and dominated every genre, from news of commemorative events to biographical surveys and analysis.

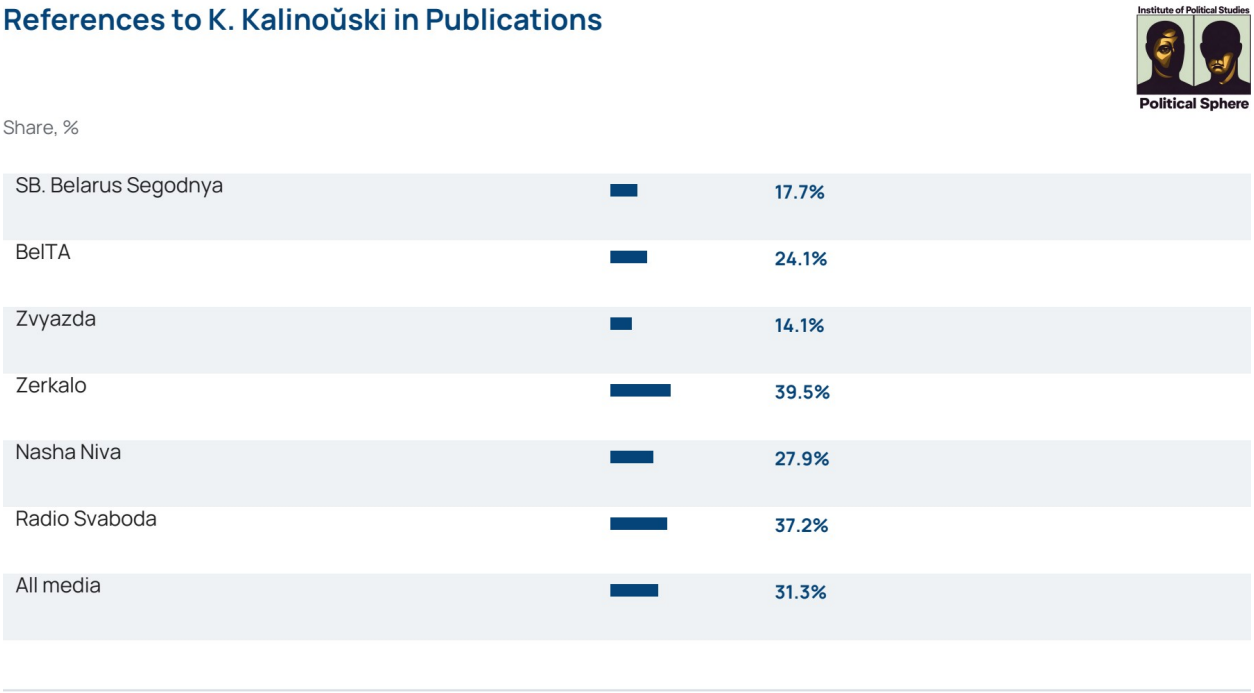


Figure 5. Share of texts mentioning K. Kalinoŭski among all publications on the 1863 uprising, 2010–2024

A distant second is the uprising's antihero, Mikhail Muravyov, appearing in 4.3% of the total media flow and 6.9% of personalized publications. Despite attempts by some authors to emphasize him, attention to Muravyov is not comparable with attention to Kalinoŭski. Apart from the journal Belaruskaya Dumka, where the imbalance reflects a small sample, the governor-general nicknamed "the Hangman" both by insurgents and in Russian left-wing circles attracted attention mainly in independent media. His presence on the agenda of state outlets—Zvyazda, SB. Belarus Segodnya and BelTA—remained minimal.

Analysis beyond the Kalinoŭski–Muravyov divide reveals a deep gap in the representation of the uprising's other military and political leaders. Romuald Traugutt appeared in most outlets, but much less often. His presence in the state sector (4–7%) was even greater than Muravyov's, while in independent media it remained peripheral (1–3%). Zygmunt Sierakowski appeared almost exclusively in the independent press and not at all in the state press. The military commanders Walery Wróblewski

and Henryk Dmochowski also received appreciable attention, with 15–16 publications over the study period. Viktor Kalinoŭski was mentioned about as often.

The remaining figures are not leaders or instigators of the uprising but rank-and-file participants who achieved public recognition in other fields. Francišak Bahuševič is prominent here: only Muravyov was mentioned more often, and Bahuševič appeared with similar frequency in state and independent media. Eliza Orzeszkowa—especially in state outlets SB. Belarus Segodnya and Zvyazda—Jan Czerski and Zygmunt Mineyko also occupy notable positions. These figures appear across various media without a clear association with any one genre.

Balance in the choice of individuals. As noted above, Radio Svaboda has the greatest genre and biographical breadth (67 people), although references to K. Kalinoŭski dominate overwhelmingly. By contrast, the newspaper Zvyazda shows the greatest structural balance: the combined figures for E. Orzeszkowa, F. Bahuševič and R. Traugutt are comparable with its references to Kalinoŭski. A similar balance can be seen in SB. Belarus Segodnya. This evenness, however, results from redirecting references to 1863 almost exclusively toward local history, ignoring contemporary commemorative practices, and deliberately working against Kalinoŭski's image after the 2013 anniversary.

What Should the Uprising Be Called?

A central element of the politics of memory is the choice of names and terminology. Since the nineteenth century, the events of 1863 have been described in different ways. Russian historiography favors "Polish uprising"; Polish historiography uses "January Uprising" (Powstanie styczniowe); and the Soviet term rested on an understanding of its "(social) liberationist" or "anti-tsarist" character.

In Belarus, the choice of name is often linked to political position. Existing terms and phrases fall into several clusters. The first employs terminology from the Russian Empire and contemporary pro-Russian discourse, used by various pro-Russian forces and occasionally by the Belarusian authorities. Names in this cluster combine such categories as "Polish (noble) uprising," "Polish revolt" and "Polish mutiny." Their defining feature is an insistence that the events were exclusively Polish.

The next cluster has its origins in Soviet historiography and emphasizes opposition to the Russian Empire and autocracy: "uprising against autocracy," "revolutionary movement of 1863," "uprising against tsarism" and "anti-tsarist uprising." "Uprising against tsarism" is the most common expression.

"January Uprising," borrowed from Polish historiography, appears occasionally in independent publications as an additional designation or when broadening the regional context and comparison. In state media, the term sometimes serves to emphasize the uprising's Polish character.

The "national" and "national liberation" cluster emphasizes the aspiration for national liberation. Although "liberation" can evoke the Soviet tradition and mean social emancipation, in contemporary publications it is increasingly associated with nation-building.

The "anti-Russian / anti-imperial uprising" cluster shifts attention away from the national character of the events of 1863 and their connection to a particular national liberation movement, placing analytical emphasis on resistance to the imperial center.

The Kalinoŭski-centered cluster is distinctive in its personalization of the events through their leader, as in "the uprising (under the leadership of / led by) Kastuś Kalinoŭski," sometimes accompanied by "liberation," "national" or other modifiers.

Neutral names form a separate group and carry no additional characterization: "the uprising of 1863," "the events of 1863" or simply "1863."

Some texts do not mention the 1863 uprising at all. This is especially characteristic of brief reports on events commemorating K. Kalinoŭski or related remembrance initiatives.

The use of these terminological clusters was distributed as follows. The uprising was mentioned in 22% of publications, more often in independent media. Neutral designation, however, was overwhelmingly dominant. Its prevalence can be explained both by convenience—especially in short reports and pieces that do not need much contextual detail—and by a wish to remain politically neutral and avoid value judgments amid sharp debate and political tension. This approach appeared in state and independent media at roughly equal rates, 56–58%.

Among value-laden names, "Kastuś Kalinoŭski's uprising" ranks first. Its share was slightly higher in state media (about 10%) than in independent media (around 6%). Official media used the term most actively in 2018–2020; its use then declined and disappeared entirely after Ihar Sierhiejenka's speech in 2023. It is absent from the 2024 publications.

"National liberation uprising" accounts for 3.8% of the entire sample and shows a clear discursive imbalance: almost all instances are in independent media, with only isolated mentions in state outlets. "Liberation uprising" (2%) follows a similar pattern and appears almost exclusively in independent media. "Anti-Russian uprising" and "uprising against the Russian Empire" were recorded only in independent media, at approximately 2%.

"Polish uprising." The uprising is called "Polish" mainly in state media. In independent media, the term appears in polemical pieces that give supporters of different interpretations a voice, or is placed in quotation marks. In state outlets it accounts for 9%, roughly comparable to the use of "Kastuś Kalinoŭski's uprising." It cannot yet be considered dominant, however: in absolute mentions it still trails Belarusian "national" terminology. The first increase in state media use of "Polish uprising" came in response to the 2013 anniversary. Since 2017 the trend has persisted, reaching a peak in 2023. The term can now be considered established in the state information sphere.

Thus, the dominant strategy in both state and independent media is to use a neutral variant of "the uprising of 1863." This reflects both economy of expression and a wish to avoid criticism and disputes over the "correct" name. In state media, the category has grown mainly by displacing "national" terminology.

Across the entire period, the most popular meaningful designation was "Kastuś Kalinoŭski's uprising." It had a strong position in state and independent media alike but has almost disappeared from the former since 2023.

"National liberation" and "liberation" appeared mainly in independent media, with occasional mentions in state outlets, whereas "anti-imperial" and "anti-tsarist" were used exclusively in the independent sector.

The name “Polish uprising” is spreading in state media as a result of the struggle against national narratives and as an element of Russifying discourse. Its share has increased considerably in recent years, particularly around anniversaries and periods of intensified political debate. Nevertheless, it has not yet become dominant.

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