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POLITICS FROM THE NICHE

DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION AND EXCHANGE FORUM FOR THE OPPOSITION IN BELARUS

Stephan Malerius

Unlike in Western Europe and most of the new EU member states, political communication in Belarus using new digital media is not discussed with reference to the specific possibilities offered by Web 2.0 for communication between politicians and the public or in relation to digital democracy. Rather, the Internet is considered primarily as a tool for bypassing the censoring in the traditional media (newspapers, radio, and television). This is because no conventional public space exists in Belarus in which people are free to express their political views. The suppression of public political communications is one of the “ingredients” with which Lukashenko has secured his system through his fifteen years in power, thus far successfully. This is also one reason why the democratic opposition is leading a niche existence and is scarcely recognized by the public. The only public sphere that so far remains largely uncontrolled is the Internet. Adroit use of the digital media therefore has the greatest potential to become a driving force for democratic change in the country. This would however be conditional on the opposition giving up its “communicative conservatism” and beginning to develop coordinated strategies for online activities, incorporated into intelligent political planning.

CONTROL OF THE PUBLIC SPACE IN BELARUS, OR THE BANNING OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

It is a noteworthy phenomenon of Lukashenko’s administration that the repressive system in the country does not appear as such from outside at first glance. There are no periodic murders of critical journalists or human rights

activists. Since late 2008 there have been no more internationally recognized political prisoners, and there are no reports of mass protests against an authoritarian and/or corrupt government. Anybody who visits Minsk as a tourist but also as a political observer does not get the immediate impression that they are in an authoritarian state. It quickly becomes clear from conversing with the people that those who avoid involvement in political activity or civil society or publicly expressing a critical political opinion can live peacefully and unmolested in Belarus. At second glance, however, it is soon evident that the condition for public peace is the exclusion, to a large extent, of the political from the public discourse. Similarly to the Brezhnev period in the Soviet Union in the 1970s, in which the most important arena for political communication was the kitchen, politics is discussed in Belarus today almost exclusively in private, as the private sphere is the only space that is not entirely regulated and the population is still entitled to live there outside the ideological frame decreed by the state. In a study of social relationships in Belarus Pavel Usov writes: "It is clear that every "individual freedom" ends at the point where public/political activity begins. Any person who participates in public actions that go against the interests of those in power is immediately placed under strict surveillance and experiences the full political pressure of the system".¹

Policy in Belarus is dictated vertically and politics is not discussed. Political communication as traditionally understood (a) as that of political actors for the purpose of achieving specific goals, or (b) as communication about politics and political figures is banned from the public domain (the street and the traditional media). When for example three human rights activists protested, close to the Presidential administration in the center of Minsk, against the enforcement of capital punishments that took place in March 2010, they were immediately removed by the secret service or the police. When the journal *Arche* reported on the manipulation of the last parliamentary election in Belarus in the fall of 2008, the secret service instigated proceedings against it for propagating extremist ideas. The

1 | Pavel Usov: "Political and Social Structures in the System of Political Control in Belarus", in: *Bell (BelarusInfo Letter)*, 3 (13) 2010, 3, http://www.eesc.lt/public_files/file_1270650236.pdf (accessed April 14, 2010).

banning of political discussion from public spaces is legally sanctioned and based on a far-reaching arbitrariness of justice in the country. The three human rights activists were issued with fines under articles 23 and 34 of the Law on Administrative Offences (“Violations of the provisions for mass gatherings”) to the equivalent of four euros. And in early 2009 a court found Arche guilty of violating the so-called extremism paragraphs and ordered that the confiscated issue, number 7/8 (2008) be destroyed.² These two examples stand *paris pro toto* for a highly developed system of control of communication in Belarus in which any expression of independent political views in public or in the media can be prohibited, should those in power consider it necessary, and every repressive action has its associated paragraphs in the penal or civil codes. Where there is doubt or in special cases the President decides. The absolute control of Lukashenko over the justice system, which is yet not fixed in any one place, is perhaps the most important pillar of the repressive system.

**POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ENCODED:
THE DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION IN THE NICHE**

A further particular feature of the political system in Belarus, unique both in Europe and in the post-Soviet states, is the complete absence of political parties in the quasi-democratic institutions at either local level (the Councils of Deputies) or national (the Parliament). The country thus lacks one of the central elements of political communication. Against a background of pretensions of wanting to function like an ordinary European democracy,³

2 | Under the law ratified in 2007 for combating extremism, all organizations accused of advocating violent overthrow of the constitutional order or terrorist activity, or of inciting national or racist hatred, will be dissolved (Article 14).

3 | cf. Lukashenko’s utterance in an interview with the Austrian newspaper *Presse am Sonntag* of July 12, 2008: “But most important for the forward movement is that no conditions or demands are made that we democratize our country. What should we democratize? What is this standard for democratization? Every country has its standard. And I see no so great a difference between the democracy in Belarus and that in Europe. Do you perhaps have the feeling that everybody here is trembling in the way that is so often described in your media? People live more peacefully here than in any European country.” Cited from <http://diepresse.com/home/politik/aussenpolitik/494312/index.do> (accessed April 14, 2010).

even official representatives admit informally that this situation is at least unusual. The absence of parties in the political institutions has far-reaching consequences for political communication within the country: not one of the elected representatives in the entire house of representatives (the Parliament) represents a particular position (conservative, social-democratic, liberal, Christian, etc). Politicians in Belarus are not public figures; rather, they are judged by their closeness and/or loyalty to the President and his circle. Since the entire government, up to the second rank (deputy ministers) and the regional administrative chiefs (governors) are appointed by the President and even the parliamentary representatives, who conform to the system, are quite obviously carefully selected and then legitimized through manipulated and only pseudo-democratic elections, it has no need to court the support of the electorate or to show itself accountable. Once elected – or, better, nominated – representatives quickly internalize the unwritten law mentioned above, that any independent opinion expressed in public may be dangerous for one’s “political” career.

The suppression of public political communications is one of the “ingredients” with which Lukashenko has secured his system through his fifteen years in power, thus far successfully. This is also one reason why the democratic opposition is leading a niche existence and is scarcely recognized by the public.

Political parties exist *de jure* in Belarus as the extra-parliamentary opposition. While the traditional political spectrum is represented here in its entirety – from the nationalist-conservative Belarusian People’s Front through the liberal United Civil Party to the pro-democratic post-communists – yet the structures of these parties are weak, such that analysts speak rather of political clubs than of parties. Alongside these are quasi-political citizens’ initiatives such as the “Movement for Freedom” (MFF) of the opposition leader Aliaksandr Milinkevich. The problem for all these political and civic society groups is their lack of a real relationship to the public. A mode of political communication between the democratic opposition and the population of the country scarcely exists. Unlike, say, in Poland in the late 1980s or Lithuania in the late 1980s, where national movements such as Solidarność or Sąjūdis acted as initiators of democratic change, no extraparlimentary group in Belarus has managed to achieve a significant level of prominence, let alone support, among the population in the last ten years. The representatives of the democratic opposition operate in social niches, where

they themselves are little coordinated with one another. Conspiratorial working conditions, coded communications and the constant worry of being intercepted mean that they function more as dissidents than as public political figures. No "normal" form of communication with the public is possible. This isolation results in a lack of legitimacy and also to the inability to influence the country's political processes.

At the same time the banning of political communication from the public domain has had the result that citizens also are only rarely in a position to jointly formulate their interests to the government and authorities and to defend themselves. In 2009 the EU announced a program for

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Belarus titled "Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development" focused on boosting the traditional functions of political communication. Salient aspects here included promoting equal rights to political dialog for different social actors, and partnership in the process of policy formulation. A further aim

was to encourage citizens to participate in discussions and decision-making processes at the local level.⁴ The fact that the emphasis of an EU program for Belarus was placed on strengthening political dialog in the country underlines how far Belarus remains removed from European standards in this regard. It likewise makes clear that, in European understanding, free political communication and democracy go together.

The rigid control of the public sphere has caused many people in Belarus over the last 15 years to revert to Soviet-era patterns of behavior – censorship, fear of expressing an inclination (such as signing up for a party or candidate

4 | cf.: *Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development (NSA&LA) Belarus: Guidelines for grant applicants*; Budget lines 21.03.01 and 21.03.02; Reference: EuropeAid/127989/L/ACT/BY: "The specific objectives of this Call for Proposals are: Facilitation of equal participation of non-state actors and local authorities in policy dialogue and partnership in policy formulation processes. Capacity-building of non-state actors to represent their target groups. Strengthening citizens' capacity to engage in discussion and decision-making process at local level through awareness-raising, advocacy and development of campaigns...", 5, <http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/tender/data/d84/AOF82084.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2010).

before an election), and even warnings by parents to their children not to pass on at school any political discussion that they may have heard at home. Censorship and surveillance have resulted in a deformation of the channels of communication. The best example of this is the popularity of Skype in Belarus. Skype is a free piece of software that allows free telephone communication, instant messaging (chat) and data transfer via the Internet. While Skype is most valued in Central and Western Europe as a means of cutting the still substantial costs of international telephone calls, it is prized in Belarus primarily because it offers communications without the danger of being intercepted. Messages sent via Skype are passed between users via a process that make them unusable to anybody who might succeed in tapping into the conversation, since the data is encrypted to a high standard of security. Consequently, sensitive conversations in Belarus are not held over the fixed or mobile telephone networks and confidential information is not sent via email; rather, the entire democratic opposition communicates among itself and mostly also with its international partners almost exclusively via Skype.

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Belarus and the EU, which signaled again and again that the latter considered the democratic opposition in Belarus to be an entirely equal partner for dialog. Now even official representatives began cautiously to take part in the

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forums, organized internationally and usually initiated by independent experts, and indeed in early 2009 a Public Consultative Council with regular sessions was created on the initiative of the presidential administration, to which, alongside state functionaries, selected representatives of the democratic opposition were also invited. Since 2009 this

cross-milieu committee has discussed topics such as the Belarusian economy during the financial crisis, the abolition of the death penalty, and reforms to the electoral code.

DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: ONLINE MEDIA AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INTERNET IN BELARUS

One important reason for the low level of public awareness and the niche existence of the democratic opposition in Belarus is the lack of an independent press. The electronic media are entirely state-controlled and are used as an effective propaganda tool against the opposition. The sole independent television broadcaster, *Belsat*, is operated from Poland, as are two radio stations, and has not been capable so far of addressing wide sections of the population. There exist some 30 independent newspapers, but most of these appear only weekly in print runs of a few hundred. With two exceptions they are excluded from the state distribution system and thus do not reach the kiosks and cannot receive subscriptions. Such economic discrimination is the most effective and refined of all methods of restricting the freedom of the press – because it is difficult to see from outside the country. Businesses are forbidden from placing advertisements in independent newspapers if they wish to avoid problems with the secret service or the tax police. In addition, the Ministry for Information uses the law for registration and warning of newspapers as an active instrument against media criticism of the government or the president. Two warnings in one year is enough for a newspaper to be forced to close; one warning may suffice for publication to be suspended. Consequently the majority of non-state newspapers in Belarus have

either the character of advertising journals or are editorially restricted to purely non-political content. Against this background the Internet has grown rapidly in importance for many Belarusians as a source of uncensored information and as an alternative public space for political communication in recent years. According to the *Internet World Stats* the number of Internet users in Belarus increased between 2000 and 2007 by a factor of 15.⁵

Year	Users	Population	% Pop.
2000	180,000	10,073,600	1.8
2003	1,391,900	9,755,025	14.3
2005	2,461,000	9,714,257	25.3
2007	2,809,800	9,678,864	29.0

Usage Source: ITU

According to data from Gemius, an analysis center that specializes in researching the internet markets in Central and Eastern Europe, there were a total of 3,047,939 Internet users in Belarus in February 2010, who visited 316,527,019 websites and spent a total of 706,717 hours online.⁶ The rapid growth of user numbers can also be explained by the fact that access to the Internet has become affordable for large numbers of Belarusians in recent years. While the cost of access in Belarus remains some 4.5 times that of access in Ukraine, for example, there has been a clear trend in the pricing, whereby the cost of access has fallen over the last five years by a factor of 30 (from US\$612 for unlimited access at a rate of 256 kilobytes per second in 2004 down to US\$22 in late 2009). By late 2009 62 per cent of families had a computer at home; 500,000 people had broadband Internet access, 43,000 used Wi-Fi and there were 640 Wi-Fi hotspots in the country. Another important event was the commercial

5 | cf. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/euro/by.htm> (accessed April 14, 2010). Source is given as ITU, International Telecommunication Union, a leading UN agency for information and communications technology. Data on user numbers from 2007 are however given incorrectly on this website and have been corrected by the Belarusian Ministry for Communications; cf.: <http://providers.by/2009/09/news/ministerstvo-svyazi-ispportilo-statistiku> (April 14, 2010).

6 | cf. Mikhail Doroshevich, Internet in Belarus, February 2010, <http://www.e-belarus.org/news/201004051.html> (accessed April 14, 2010).

introduction of 3G technology, which led to a considerable drop in the costs of mobile Internet access. The popularity of Internet cafes has fallen correspondingly, since most people now access the Internet either at home, from work or using a mobile device. In a study conducted by the BBC in the fall of 2009, the spread of the Internet was described as “one of the highest rates in the region”, with websites that indicate up to 10,000 individual visitors per day, and a highly developed blogger community with over 20,000 blogs registered on the most popular blogging platform, LiveJournal.⁷

As a virtual arena for political communication, the Internet serves different functions in Belarus, under the conditions described above, to those it serves in Germany or, say, in Poland. Its primary purposes in Belarus are to bypass the censorship and blocking of communications imposed by the authoritarian system, to reduce the costs for communications with readers, users, and supporters, and to broaden the public sphere. It is precisely under authoritarian conditions such as in Belarus – as shown by experiences in Iran, Egypt, and China – that the potential of the Internet can hardly be overestimated; digital political communication can allow new public realms to be created in places where free political discourse is no longer an option. In order, however, to use it effectively as an alternative communications tool, the Internet has to be understood – by both

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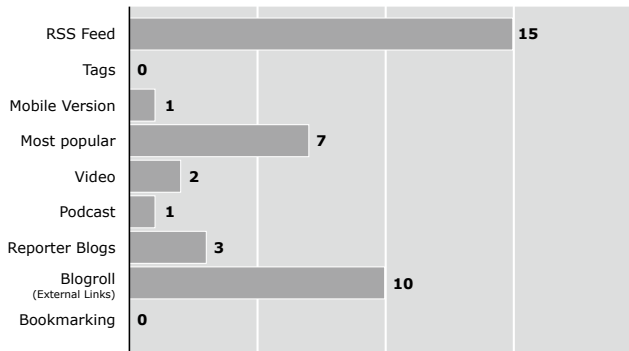
the independent media and the democratic actors – not as a mass medium in the traditional sense, but rather as “a space for digital discussions in which anybody can take part – regardless of time and place”.⁸ This understanding is not yet widespread in Belarus. A study published in 2007 examined 21 of the most popular websites in Belarus, including ten online versions of print media, ten online news sites and the online service of a radio station. In the analysis it was asked whether the pages included material submitted by users (user-generated content), and also which Web 2.0 features were charac-

7 | Michael Randell: “Opportunities for Supporting the Development of the Media in Belarus. A Report Compiled for the British Embassy in Minsk” (London: n.d.), 9.

8 | Arne Klempert: “Wie das Internet die Massenmedien verändert”, in: *Die Politische Meinung*, 484, (2010) 3, 42.

teristic of online journalism in Belarus. The result showed that while the sites examined were experimenting with a few forms of interactive design and active communication with readers/users, the majority of the media nevertheless remained oriented to traditional journalistic techniques and restricted themselves solely to the delivering of news.

Fig. 1:
Use of Web 2.0 features by the 21 most popular online media in Belarus



Source: e-belarus, Belarusian Online Journalism: Citizens' Generated Content and Web 2.0. A survey of 21 most popular Belarusian web-sites, <http://www.e-belarus.org/article/online-journalism2007.html> (accessed April 14, 2010).

The study criticized the lack of networking, poor levels of interactivity and the concentration on linear propagation of information by most of the sites examined. In recent years numerous international programs and training initiatives for journalists have attempted to specifically target these deficits and to make the online media in Belarus into an alternative location for political communication. In summer 2008, for example, as part of an EU program for supporting independent media in Belarus, two training events were organized for online journalists that included the topic of Web 2.0, in which the basic differences between print and online journalism, blogging and social networks for journalists, or audio podcasting and live videocasting, were treated. Similar in-service training for Belarusian journalists was offered in 2009 by the Deutsche Welle Akademie and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in collaboration with the Association for International Education and Exchange (IBB) in Minsk.

CONTROL OR CONTINUING FREEDOM? LUKASCENKO'S INTERNET DECREE NO. 60

In view of the street protests following the presidential elections in Iran in 2009 and the present conflict between Google and the Chinese leadership the question arises whether the regime in Belarus operates, or at least aims for, state control over the Internet. Iryna Vidanava, chief editor of the multimedia journal 34, believes that in recent years many independent actors have learned to keep one step ahead of the state controls. When the Internet first started in Belarus, she maintains, the regime did not regard it seriously as a threat. The leadership already had control of all TV channels, and that seemed sufficient. When the first online groups sought to register themselves as organizations, the state did not prevent them doing so. Later, when the power of the Internet became more evident, the government did not know at first how to respond.⁹

Some experts are alarmed by the fact that users will in future only be allowed access from Internet cafes on presentation of their passport and with the storage of their personal details. Nor is an anonymous log-in via the mobile telephone network possible; a SIM card can likewise only be obtained on presentation of one's passport and Belarus registration.

In recent months, however, Belarus and Chinese delegations have regularly met to exchange their experiences as to how one might effectively monitor the Internet. The Minsk leadership seems meanwhile to have developed a concept. In early 2010 Lukashenko signed Decree no. 60, "On measures to improve the national segment of the Internet network", which comes into force on July 1, 2010. International organiza-

tions such as Reporters Without Borders are critical of the decree, and Lukashenko has been declared, in a practiced ritual among regime critics, as an enemy of the Internet. Yet this international outcry would seem to be premature. It should first be understood that the functioning and use of the Internet has thus far barely been regulated. Decree no. 60 is the attempt at a systematic regulation of such matters as internet trading. It defines standards for the websites of state institutions and contains clauses on copyright protection and against Internet piracy. Some experts are alarmed by the fact that users will in future only be allowed access from Internet cafes on presentation of their passport and with the storage of their personal details. Nor is an anonymous log-in via the mobile

9 | Iryna Vidanava at the Washington Human Rights Summit, February 2010, quoted from <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/content/view/30178/> (accessed April 14, 2010).

telephone network possible; a SIM card can likewise only be obtained on presentation of one's passport and Belarus registration. In addition, user behavior data is supposed to be recorded and Internet providers instructed by the state authorities to block access within 24 hours to users who infringe the law. In fact in the run-up to the last presidential election in Belarus at least two politically-motivated criminal proceedings were invoked, in which evidence based on internet surveillance was used (the cases of the Partnership organization and the Internet cartoons of *Third Way*). Nevertheless, Yury Chavusau of the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs in Belarus, believes that Decree no. 60 does not imply qualitatively new mechanisms for monitoring and control over Internet users in Belarus, but rather is of symbolic significance. According to him, it is a signal to all state institutions that the leadership intends to control the virtual flow of information – and, with it, digital political communication. To what extent the controls set out in the law will in fact be implemented can not however be predicted. Chavusau concludes: "The Belarusian government has chosen a very strict model of Internet regulation, which offers the possibility of unjustified invasion of privacy. This strict model finds support in almost all current discussions on the restricting of Internet freedom, even in the West. There is no reason to compare Internet regulation in Belarus with that in China or Iran... Decree no. 60 is closer to the model of regulation found in Kazakhstan".¹⁰

THE WAY OUT OF THE NICHE: CHANCES FOR DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN BELARUS

Sociological surveys are based on an assumption that the population of Belarus is divided three ways by political preference, with one third supporting Lukashenko, one third in favor of democratic reforms, and one third undecided. Nonetheless, support for the democratic parties (and awareness levels of them) among the population has remained constant over a number of years at under 5%. And for years both international observers and experts within the country have asked why the democratic forces are

10 | Yury Chavusau: "Soon there will be less Privacy in Belarusian Internet?", in: *Bell (BelarusInfo Letter)*, 3 (13) 2010, 2, http://www.eesc.lt/public_files/file_1270650236.pdf (accessed April 14, 2010).

unable to mobilize at least the pro-European, democratic spectrum among the people. There is no simple answer to this. One explanation always given, and that is quite correct, are the personal ambitions of the various party leaders and the resultant continual quarreling within the opposition. A further reason for the structural weaknesses of the democratic parties in Belarus are the massive, deliberate repressions applied to active party members or sympathizers; these were particularly tangible over the past year for the Belarus Christian Democrats (BChD), who had tried as a single political force to build and extend their party structures in the regions and to create active communication with the population. One should also however mention the lack of understanding of the potential of the Internet and digital political communication to help establish and anchor a party more firmly among relevant sectors of the population. Despite a large number of online political and media projects, the Internet in Belarus is not a means for communication with one's own supporters, nor is it a tool for binding selected population groups to parties or movements, but rather a collection of locations that are isolated both from one another and also in relation to the wider public. Even and indeed precisely under authoritarian conditions as found in Belarus, the many benefits of the Internet would therefore seem also to be obvious:

- Low costs for the production, management and above all the distribution of information
- Direct link between sender and recipient
- Particular target groups can be selected among recipients
- Various forms of communication possible (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many)
- Speed of information transfer
- Interactive functionality
- Decentralized architecture
- Global presence

If these advantages were recognized by the "agents of change", the Internet in Belarus would be entirely capable of becoming the driving force for democratic developments. What Gldenzopf and Hennewig write about the role of Web 2.0 in political communication methods is therefore not only applicable to the developed democracies of Western Europe and North America: "The Internet is one

of the standard tools of political communication. It makes a major contribution to the success or failure of a campaign and can be a decisive pillar for the organization of policy and party. It gives many committed and interested persons new possibilities for involving themselves in the political process".¹¹

The last political momentum for democratic reform in the country – the presidential elections of 2006 – are an example of a missed opportunity, partly because the Internet was not used to its full potential. It is true that Alexander Milinkievich gained, in an extremely short time (he was nominated in October 2005 for the ballot held in March 2006 as a single candidate for the opposition), an astonishing level of public support. However, during the election campaign he relied on what in communications terms was an outdated method. In four months the initially practically unknown candidate travelled throughout the country and met with people in countless, often spontaneously organized gatherings, mostly in the open air. Time after time his loudspeaker system was confiscated or the power required for his technical back-up cut off. The principal meeting space between Milinkievich and the public was the street. Yet for the young and predominantly active sector of his followers, the Internet and not the street was the arena for political communication. Blogs, forums, LiveJournal blogs, and flashmobs organized via the Internet were hallmarks of Milinkievich's electoral campaign. Both opposition candidates – Milinkievich and Kozulin – made more active use of the Internet than did Lukashenko, who did not regard young Internet users as his main voter group. Overall, however, the websites of the opposition candidates were used primarily for distributing information and not for active electioneering or for reconciliation with their own followers. The Internet served as a source of information, but was not actively used by the candidates as the place for digital political communication. None of the candidates had a recognizable online strategy as part of his electoral campaign:

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11 | Ralf Guldenzopf and Stefan Hennewig: "Im Netz der Parteien?", in: *Die Politische Meinung*, 484, (2010) 3, 44.

- Neither Milinkievich nor Kozulin published interactive election polls online in order to understand the opinions of users.
- Both websites had extremely weak linking strategies. There were no permanent links to the pages of other political parties or to supporter groups.
- Links between the online and offline activities of the campaigns of either candidate were almost entirely absent.¹²

The protests against the electoral fraud and the erecting of a tent city on October Square after 19 March were largely digitally coordinated and were barely linked with the official campaigns of Milinkievich and Kozulin. Many young protagonists in these actions continue to blame Milinkievich for not accepting their willingness to rally people via the

Internet to join street protests. Their relative lack of success of almost all campaigns by the democratic opposition in Belarus since 2006 – one may name the European and the social march in late 2007 and the annual demonstrations on the unofficial national holiday on 25 March and on the Chernobyl memorial day of 26 April – is related to the incapacity to understand the Internet as an effective tool for mobilizing their own supporters.

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In November 2009 Milinkievich organized a European forum in Minsk, intended to form the starting point of a campaign in which discussions would be held across the country in 2010 about the prospects for an alignment by Belarus with Europe. During this campaign it was intended that the public would be informed in detail about the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership. So far, however, the ideas of Milinkievich's team have been restricted to the planned, cost-intensive production of printed information brochures, leaflets and postcards; no online strategy for the campaign exists. The BChD is another example – albeit currently by far the most active political force in the democratic camp – that in the past year has devoted much energy to the developing of its

12 | e-belarus: "Online Campaigning in 2006 Presidential Election in Belarus", <http://www.e-belarus.org/article/epolitics2006.html> (accessed April 14, 2010).

website. Yet the results are sobering. The report of one of the leading online journalists in Belarus named the biggest shortcoming of the party's Internet presence as the lack of a tie with the "website community" – that is, to the supporters of the BChD. Closely associated with this is, for example, the lack of a possibility for feedback to the Party via its site. It is being suggested specifically that the range of user-generated content on the site be increased (surveys, online question and answer sections, forums, blogs, readers' news, etc). It has not been possible so far to communicate to the BChD what Glden-zopf and Henneweg today formulate as a basic rule for mobilizing one's own supporters: "If a party wants to be effective, it must move its focus beyond the traditional media. Multipliers – online and offline – are more and more important as reliable sources of political information".¹³ There is no doubt that this rule also applies to Belarus. An experiment by the well-known blogger Yevgeny Lipkovich showed how political support can be mobilized successfully over the Internet. The video interview in which he declared his willingness to run as a candidate in the local elections to be held in Belarus on 25 April 2010 was invoked 17,000 times. Lipkovich also used the Internet to recruit the initiative group to collect the necessary signatures for his candidature.

In Belarus's particular situation the Internet offers the possibility of (re)constructing a public political space in the online mode that has otherwise been lost and of creating a new "democratic subculture" or new forms of "existing in freedom", yet the inflexibility of the democratic opposition within the parties prevents the potential for a decentralized, individualized communication being recognized. Communication between different publics and the creation of countercultures and of formal and informal spheres, practically does not occur.¹⁴

13 | Ralf Glden-zopf and Stefan Hennewig: "Im Netz der Parteien?" in: *Die Politische Meinung*, 484, (2010) 3, 47.

14 | Marina Sokolova, "WWW kak politicheskaia publichnaia sfera", in: Sokolova, Furs (ed.) *Postsovietskaia publichnost': Belarus, Ukraina* (Vilnius: 2008), 92 - 118.

OUTLOOK: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN BELARUS, 2011

In February 2011 (or possibly as early as November 2010) the next presidential elections are due to take place in Belarus. In all probability Lukashenko will run for his fourth term. So far there is nothing to indicate that he intends to allow the elections to take place freely, transparently and in accordance with international standards. It is also not to be expected that he will offer the opposition broad access during the presidential election campaign to the electronic media that he himself controls within the country. None of the declared opposition candidates is reckoning on being able to beat Lukashenko under the prevailing conditions. Milinkievich nevertheless expects up to a potential 30% of the voters, who would support a democratic candidate. Yet there is quite evidently still no strategy for mobilizing this potential. Given that a significant part of the population, particularly the young, seem ready to help usher in a shift

In Belarus's particular situation the Internet offers the possibility of (re) constructing a public political space in the online mode that has otherwise been lost and of creating a new "democratic subculture" or new forms of "existing in freedom"

to democracy in their country, it is difficult to understand why none of the democratic candidates makes the effort to address these active young people specifically via the Internet. Here it would seem that digital communication is the best method of gaining support for one's cause. Iryna

Vidanava cites numerous examples in which young people in the last three years have engaged actively in Internet campaigns on behalf of her contemporaries, suppressed by Lukashenko's system: in March 2007 Belarusian bloggers collected money successfully online to pay the bail of Dzianis Dzianisau, one of the protagonists of the tent city in March 2006 and who was arrested because of his political activities. In January 2008 an online community organized a campaign of support for Andrei Kim after he was arrested during a peaceful demonstration of small entrepreneurs in Minsk and sentenced to one and a half years in prison. In Grodno in 2008 it was also bloggers who coordinated the protest against the destruction of the historical old town.¹⁵ These cases show that the Internet is perhaps the most important medium for mobilizing people in Belarus for

15 | Iryna Vidanava, "'New Media' as a Form of Youth Resistance", in: Andrei Dynko (ed.), *The Generation Gap, or Belarusian Differences in Goals, Values and Strategy* (Warsaw: 2008), 145 - 146.

democratic ideas and goals. The success or failure of the democratic opposition during the next presidential election in Belarus will depend to a large degree on whether the opposition succeeds in making intelligent and effective use of this medium.