

# **LAS NUEVAS TECNOLOGÍAS DE LA INFORMACIÓN Y LA COMUNICACIÓN Y LAS POSIBILIDADES DE PARTICIPACIÓN POLÍTICA EN PAÍSES NO DEMOCRÁTICOS (EL CASO DE BIELORRUSIA)**

## **THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES OF THE INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION AND POSSIBILITIES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NON-DEMOCRATIC COUNTRIES (THE CASE OF BELARUS)**

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### **Resumen**

Treballs recents sobre la influència de les TIC en els processos de presa de decisions no han explorat totes les conseqüències de l'ús dels mitjans digitals en sistemes polítics no-democràtics. Malgrat la presència de múltiples restriccions imposades pel govern de Bielorússia a l'activitat de grups d'interès, evidències empíriques suggereixen que l'ús de les TIC obre noves possibilitats de compromís electrònic. Nosaltres plantejarem que els actors polítics (ciutadans en particular) utilitzen les TIC per exercir influència en el procés de presa de decisions en el marc de règims no-democràtics, encara que l'abast del seu impacte varia profundament, segons el domini de les polítiques en què les solucions són considerades i acceptades.

### **Palabras claves**

TIC, Bielorússia, participació política, campanya cívica règim, règim no-democràtic

### **Abstract**

Recent work on employment of NTICs in order to influence decision-making has not explored all the consequences of digital media usage in non-democratic political systems. Despite the presence of multiple restrictions imposed by the government of Belarus on activity of interest groups, empirical evidences suggest that the usage of NTICs opens new possibilities of electronic engagement. We argue that political actors (citizens in particular) use NTICs to influence the decision-making in non-democratic countries, though extent of this impact varies deeply depending on policy domains as to which solutions are considered and accepted.

### **Keywords**

NTICs, Belarus, political participation, civic campaign, non-democratic regime



## 1. Introduction.

On 15 June 2011, thousands of protestors gathered on central squares and streets of major cities of Belarus<sup>1</sup>. They were invited there by the activists of the social network group “Revolution in Social Networks [Belarus].” The creation of group was inspired by events of African-Arab Spring and gained more than 150 000 online subscribers at that point. People, who have gathered for the “silent” protest, were standing on the streets and clapping hands while bearing no political slogans or claims. As a rule, political events organized by this group lasted no more than 30 minutes. The next collective action took place a week late. However, it was stopped by the government security services. Notably, those series of the protests, lasted for about a month, emerged after half a year after the opposition’s riot on 19 December 2010, when hundreds were detained, including seven of nine presidential candidates that ran against Aliaksandr Lukashenka, serving as the President for three terms. Consequently, the opposition crackdown marginalized its leaders and made its leadership over the future protests less possible. However, non-associational interest groups emerged in the social networks despite the fear of repressions. Those events have provided scholars with additional evidence regarding the ability of the New Technologies of the Information and Communication (NTICs) to influence over political process in non-democratic regimes.

The supporters of the “Revolution in social networks” movement were greatly frustrated over the deep economic crises, which extended in Belarus in the summer of 2011. However, civil society activists in Belarus use the potential of NTICs to mobilize public in pursuit of a wide range of issues that are not limited to economic realm or Belarus’ political order. Particularly, they employ different instruments ranging from e-petitions to aforementioned mobilization of street protests to address public policy issues by collaborating and advocating. Moreover, we witnessed several successful stories of political appropriation of Information and Communication technologies (ICT) by Belarus’ campaigners to engage public in politics during the past years.

Over the previous decade, Belarus has been often labeled as “the Last Dictatorship of Europe.” As far as its last internationally recognized elections took place in 1994, the Belarusian regime “crushes political dissent” and imposes multiple restrictions on activity of social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)<sup>2</sup>. For instance, many of them do not have (and cannot obtain) the state registration. This fact makes many grassroots groups illegal. In those circumstances, NTICs open new opportunities for social activists to diffuse their message to citizens through the internet and other modern communication

1 Belapan. Anti-government protest in Minsk draws several thousand people, 2011. [online]. Available from Internet: <http://en.belapan.by/news/?filterby=day&startdate=2011-06-15>

2 Freedom House. Nations in Transit, 2013. [online]. Available from Internet: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/nations-transit#.VEUvum3DUtF>



instrument. Despite the fact that the level of the internet censorship in Belarus is low, if compared to some non-democratic states, restrictions on digital realm create additional obstacles for social groups that are active online.

Although the nature of political regime in Belarus is striking, in the article we focus on new potential of political participation in Belarus with emergence of NTICs, asking what is the relationship between usage of NTICs by political actors and their success in addressing public policy issues under the conditions of non-democratic regime. There is a discussion in the literature about influence of digital media (as a part of NTICs) on political participation, namely e-participation, and their ability to cause certain changes in the political process. Undoubtedly, various evidences suggest that NTICs open new ways of citizens' influence over politics. However, there is a gap in the existing studies regarding the impact of NTICs on channels of political participation in Belarus (and other non-democratic countries) and involvement of civil society activists in politics via non-traditional media. In a democratic context, three main questions could be asked: what are the channels of digital media influence on political engagement; who has a chance to be involved in politics through digital technologies; and what external factors contribute to or obstruct involvement in politics through digital technologies (Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba 2012). In the case of authoritarian political systems, we can simplify and ask whether there is any room for political digital engagement with employment of NTICs in the conditions of state censorship, political persecution, and other conditions of non-democratic regimes.

We argue that political actors (citizens in particular) use NTICs to influence the decision-making in non-democratic regimes, though the extent of this impact varies deeply depending on policy domains as to which solutions are considered and accepted. Particularly, an ability to influence decision-making is defined by characteristics of a political regime, a structure of ownership on a media market, a level of the internet censorship and other oppressive restrictions imposed by the state.

To analyze the prescribed processes, we focus on practices of the political engagement of citizens with employment of NTICs. First, we look at relations between political participation and digital communication practices in non-democratic countries. After the narrative, we present the results of the qualitative study of Belarus' advocacy campaigns (mainly organized by non-associational interest groups) that used NTICs in the period of 2011-2013. For that purpose, we collected relevant data about their activity for the case study and organized semi-structured interviews with their leaders to gather information for the case study.



## **2. Practices of political participation and digital media.**

### **2.1. Transformation of Political Participation in Non-Democratic Countries with the Arrival of NTICs.**

Political participation could be defined by the description of actions taken by citizens to influence political outcomes (Dalton and Klingemann 2009). These actions can vary from the routing of taking part in general election or communication with their elected representatives to radical activities like involvement in terrorist groups. This article deals with less conventional ways of political participation as taking part in discussions in the internet, diffusion of political information using digital media, online petitioning, and e-letters to authorities. We argue that enhanced old and brand new modes of participation enabled by digital media open possibilities for citizens of non-democratic countries to gain influence over decision-making when old ways of influence appeared to be ineffective or exclusively appropriated by the ruling elite.

Citizens of democratic society often enjoy more opportunities of political participation than those who are living under authoritarian rule. However, even in democratic societies the government could constraint the exercise of freedom of speech and other freedoms that are important for opening channels for participation. In Belarus, which is a clear example of non-democratic country, political parties struggle to attract attention and to articulate interest of a significant part of citizens who could potentially express their disagreement with the policy of the government (Rouda 2011, p. 191). However, exactly this group of citizens can be potentially active in employment of e-participation in the circumstances of a restricted political life. Thus, in the research we have turned our attention to non-associational participation (that is not defined in legal acts) which can have local, regional, or national character.

Consequently, political participation in non-democratic country requires some verbal manifestation, voluntary character of joining and acting in an environment where an alternative exists. Moreover, this sort of pluralistic participation should be distinguished from political mobilization in totalitarian states. Though Belarus' style political systems can attempt to promote mobilization in totalitarian way, a question about the character of participation in politics by Belarusian citizens is more problematic. In addition, there are some common characteristics of political participation in non-democratic countries. For instance, possibilities of participation in authoritarian context are often weak and narrow, while existed ways provide everything but real impact on government policies. Moreover, sometimes the government can use participation as a tool of manipulation over citizens or as a fake democratic frontage over the authoritarian political system. In that case, as Hague and Harrop (2008, p. 166-172) argue, government's attempts to narrow the scale of "real participation" are often imposed by the will to abate and get rid of any uncertainty



and political risk. According to Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba (2012, p. 9), in non-democratic systems governments may impose censorship on digital content or prosecute the expression of online opinions that are critical to official doctrines. These methods of response from authorities can have significant consequences for digital politics and political participation with the employment of NTICs.

However, despite all obstacles imposed by the political environment, the issue of political participation could be studied not only in the context of democratic political system. Consequently, the problem of participation in non-democratic countries becomes even more acute in the circumstances of arriving NTICs, which in its turn raise a question about digital literacy of citizens. However, civic activists that try to influence decision-making and politicians' behavior often meet less structured obstacles in their activity as censorship and political repressions imposed by the government.

At the same time, there is no clear answer on the question whether the influence of NTICs on political participation has positive or negative impact on reinforcement of democratic practices in public policy (Morozov 2011). Particularly, Morozov (2013) argues that there is no clear evidence of positive outcomes of political appropriation of NTICs neither for democratic system of governance nor for its sustainability in a long run. Commenting on African-Arab Spring, Morozov reminds about abusing practices driven through social networks and forums in order to diffuse a certain political message to support the incumbent that were employed the pro-government agencies. In addition, Rinnawi (n. d.) noticed a range of examples of spreading ethno-nationalistic texts in many blogs which became popular tools for diffusing the message in the second half of 2000s. These and other cases observed, for instance, in Iran and Egypt before African-Arab Spring, could be added to a long list of history of digital tools usage in order to search, persecute, and detain activists who do not support the official view of the government (Aday n. d.).

Indeed, digital as well as traditional media do influence public policy (Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba 2012, p. 111; Birkland 2001, p. 94; Soroka 2012). However, this influence could be both direct and circumstantial. The latter is referred to agenda setting function of media as well as framing that can influence those who make decisions (Kingdon 1995). Moreover, deliberative practices could also be useful in non-democratic regimes. Nevertheless, technological determinism, the views according to which the fruits of IT-revolution are often viewed as panacea, could be risky. Furthermore, political discourses are often dependent on the context. Thus, the employment of deliberative methods in non-democratic countries could be not just useful for strengthening of democracy but meaningless or even harmful.





## **2.2. Variables that influence practices of digital engagement.**

Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba (2012, p. 8) identified three sets of contextual variables that are expected to have influence over practices of digital participation and engagement. They are the digital divide, the institutional setting, and the media system. Let us draw our attention to them in order to observe their characteristics on the example of the Belarussian political system.

First, the digital divide creates obstacles for citizens to access ICT, thus, to the relevant interact with other citizens. In addition, it prevents groups to distribute technologies of communication and diffuse their message (Norris 2001). In fact, there are noticeable positive examples of influence over policy process by interest groups through appropriation of digital media. However, the Belarus' example is oblique in this regard. On the one hand, Belarus occupies position closer to Western democracies than to developing countries as to the level of internet access and the number of internet users (The World in 2013: ICT Facts and Figures 2013). Since the internet usage with non-political purposes becomes one of the main indicators for vast possibilities of political digital engagement (Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba 2012), Belarussian citizens are supposed to be prone to a higher level of political engagement than citizens of many Arab countries or even China. On the other hand, this level in the Belarussian case should be lower than one of the US. However, as many scholars agreed, the digital divide is not a single indicator that explains and predicts the level of digital engagement.

Second, the institutional setting is important because it defines the context of conduct of digital politics in political system. There are three components that influence the institutional setting: political responsiveness, the level of political mobilization, and restrictions on freedom of speech (Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba 2012). For example, less responsive political system with lower rank of trust in institutions can be a successful field for digital media usage. The latter could help to bypass the institutions that control the media environment or engage external actors that can provide additional demand for reaction. For instance, Welp and Whetley (cited in Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba 2012, p. 249) pointed out these characteristics in the case of the Dominican Republic, when NTICs were employed by civic activists in order to win support of the US authorities which in their turn put pressure on the government of the Dominican Republic. In comparison with other European countries, Belarus' institutional setting is not favorable for development of practices of digital engagement. The Belarussian political system is characterized by low responsiveness and poor opportunities for political mobilization. At the same time, activists should deal with restrictions on political activity in general. However, the characteristics of the mentioned indicators could be improved by employment of digital media. Thus, as empirical



examples of China, Egypt and other non-democratic regimes (as of 2010-2011) suggest, digital engagement is possible also in the institutional setting that is unfavorable to any political activity (Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba 2012; Bray 2000; Yang 2009).

Third, media systems can also be important for determination of possible success of appropriation of ICT. While characteristics of media consumption, regulations of media system as well as the way they are integrated into political system are important, relations between digital media and broader media system can play a vital role too. In Belarus, political communication exists in a specific and partly deformed state. Communication is often directed to one side that often reminds of appropriation of propaganda methods to influence masses, but in no way corresponds to the definition of communication. Therefore,

it can be argued that because of the lack of willingness of the authorities to obtain feedback on decisions and events, as well as their attempts to freeze the political process and “kick out” actors from the political field and, consequently, from the electoral process, the diffusion of propaganda becomes the main objective of political communication in Belarus. Moreover, the means of political advertising in traditional media are available only for the ruling elite (Kazakevich 2011). Consequently, any attempt to take advantage of this way of advertising, perhaps with the exception of the internet, though also partly restricted, are prevented. Advertising campaigns are possible during an election period, but the discriminatory electoral code limits them to a high degree (Rouda 2011). At the same time, citizens do not trust much both independent and governmental media. During the critical events of mass riots during the summer of 2011, only 25% of Belarusians trusted governmental media, while independent media was trusted at the level of 32.3% (Opposition vitamin deficiency n. d.). According to the literature (Rinnawi n. d.), the low level of trust in governmental and traditional media can help to increase confidence in online media, blogs, and social networks. In addition, digital media provides more possibilities of development of the public sphere in non-democratic political systems with the dominance of pro-government media (Rinnawi n. d.).

All in all, the aforementioned indicators do not favor the strengthening of deliberative practices in Belarus. However, they do not forbid some experiments with political communication. The next chapter will be dedicated to some of them that were conducted by the activists in a hope to influence policy process.



### 3. Analysis of Belarusian public campaigns and initiatives that used NTICs to influence public policy in 2011-2013.

#### 3.1. Research methodology.

We used a qualitative approach to collect data. Particularly, we conducted seven semi-structured interviews (Veselkova 1994) with leading activists of advocacy campaigns that addressed policy domain in Belarus. In addition, we organized two expert interviews with representatives of various e-platforms that are often used to mobilize citizens and to spread information about non-associational groups.

We used the following criteria to sample campaigns: a campaign should be implemented in the period from 2011 to 2013; its activists intensively employed digital media at the beginning and throughout their campaign; activists persuaded political objectives, clearly articulated them, and tried to influence over policy process in Belarus; a campaign was not launched or openly supported by any commercial entities, political parties or the government.

The sampling was carried out in a consultation with several experts in the field in order to explore the most notable advocacy campaigns that have been conducted in recent years. As a result, seven civic campaigns were chosen for interviews and analysis (see the Table 1). All the references to the campaigns are cited according to the Table 1.

**Table 1.** “The Assessment of the results of the studies campaigns”

No	Campaign	Assessment of a degree of mobilization of its audience	Assessment of the campaign's outcomes	Did the campaign influence public policy?
1.	Visa Free Travel Campaign “Go Europe! Go Belarus!»* <sup>*</sup>	3	**	No data
2.	Campaign in favor of amending the Rules of Hunting by the public organization “APB-BirdLife Belarus”	3	3	Yes, the Ministry drafted a decree
3.	Campaign «Let's build the campus of BDUKM fairly and transparently!»* <sup>*</sup>	5	4	Yes, the construction works were renewed





4.	Group “Revolution in Social Networks [Belarus]”	4	4	Partly, indirect influence that did not coincide with the goals
5.	E-petition “Add Belarusian Language in the menu of payment machines!”	3	**	No data
6.	Campaign “We Demand to Launch Negotiations with the EU on Visa Facilitation Agreement!”*	3	**	No data
7.	Campaign «Stop Gasoline» (2011)	4	4	Significant but short-lasting influence
	Mean	3.7	3.75	-

**Source:** Prepared by the author

\* The campaign was going on during the collection of data.

\*\* No evaluation.

The studied campaigns aimed very different goals and acted in diverse policy domains. However, the interviews have proved that Belarusian activists in line with their colleagues in other countries attempt to organize advocacy campaigns in a way to be able to use digital media in order to influence decision-making. Moreover, from time to time these attempts are successful, while NTICs play an important role in influence over policy process.

Three of seven studied campaigns succeeded significantly. However, none of the cases demonstrated the whole fulfillment of the goals of a campaign. At the same time, it was hard to weigh the results of three other campaign studied (campaigns 1, 3, 6) since they were still in progress during the data collection. Admittedly, self-assumption of the campaigns' outcomes did not always reflect the real state (see the Table 1), while even mostly unsuccessful campaigns considered themselves as partly effective and vice versa. All the activists who attempted to organize protests and riots mentioned their mistakes which were connected, as they argued, with the undeveloped strategy of a campaign. At the same time, many activists strikingly strengthened their attempts to mark themselves apart from traditional political actors (“opposition”) and independent traditional media. The latter were often labeled as “opposition” as well. These efforts were especially noticeable when the activists were members of the political parties or NGOs. Nevertheless, three out of seven activists interviewed have never been involved in policy process before. In



conclusion, creativeness (campaign 7), online character of communication (campaign 4), and coverage by traditional media appeared to be the keys to success of the studied advocacy campaigns.

### **3.2. The digital divide and restriction on NTICs.**

It seems like the activists of the Belarusian advocacy campaigns do not worry much about the digital division. Some of the interviewees specified their ambition to combat the digital divide by means of standard “offline” instruments of information diffusion like printed materials, leaflets, etc. However, the issue of digital division is not the first one in the agenda of the campaigners. Moreover, the activists consider the existence of inequality in the access to the internet and other means of communication as something natural. Generally, the older the audience of a campaign, the higher the possibility of employment of traditional offline tools by activists. However, necessity of spreading the message offline became a positive cause since it allowed receiving a real rather than electronic signature. Particularly, bellow mentioned e-letter to authorities should be supported by real signature. In addition, they allowed activists to receive a response from the government and, thus, were considered as more effective instrument in advocating.

Thus, the level of penetration of NTICs in Belarus allows arguing citizens to join a particular advocacy campaign. However, some activists meet restrictions in access to wider audience because of the digital divide.

### **3.3. How the institutional setting effect the practices of digital activists in Belarus.**

The interviews proved that the ability of Belarusian civic activists influence public policy is highly depended on the existing social and political settings. Generally, activists do not have any impact on settings. Moreover, all the interviewees strengthened different barriers and obstacles resulting from the nature of the political system of Belarus and that appeared in front of them during their campaigning. In addition, the analysis suggests that there are several policy domains that could be influenced by like social activists that effectively use NTICs to address political issues and diffuse information. However, many other public sectors could be hardly addressed by activists, say nothing of impact. This state of affairs remained typical for many other non-democratic countries. For example, it is possible to challenge the Chinese government over issues like gender equality or ecology and to expect later positive outcomes of the respective campaign (Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba 2012, p. 222). However, there are no evidences of successful campaigns addressing the legitimacy of the Communist party or the future of Tibet.



The same is true about the Belarusian political system. Until individuals or groups do not address issues of legitimacy of the regime or principles of external and internal policies that are important for the authorities, they can expect at least partly positive outcomes of their initiatives. These cases include some issues important for small groups like a group of students, the customers' rights, ecology, etc. Nevertheless, we did not observe a real inclusion of the social activists in the decision-making as officially recognized stakeholders - their contacts with authorities were limited to the institutional level where only formal communication with means of letters or questions during public gatherings are acceptable.

Thus, the mobilization for collective actions using digital media in the circumstances of the Belarusian political system is possible. However, campaigners used collective actions to put pressure on the authorities only in two studied cases (campaigns 4, 7). And in both of them these methods appeared to be only partly effective. Moreover, the effect of mobilization and following political engagement of citizens lasted for a limited period. This is, again, a typical pattern for mobilization via NTICs in both democratic and authoritarian political regimes.<sup>3</sup>

Proliferation of NTICs can allow activist to act in the hostile political environment meeting less restrictions and challenge authorities more effectively. Whether is it a case for Belarus? Table 2 can suggest some answers.

**Table 2.** "Censorship and restrictions imposed by the government on public campaigns in Belarus"

Campaign №	Censorship (1)	Mobilization (2)	The most useful online tool	Traditional media (3)
1.	Yes	3	Social networks (Facebook)	High
2.	No	3	E-letters to the authorities	High
3.	No	5	Platform of e-petitions change.org	High
4.	Yes	4	Social networks (VK)	Controversial (sometimes was an obstacle)
5.	No	3	Social networks (VK)	«A key role»

3 Let us take example of Indonesia of 1990s. There "online engagement contributed largely to the fall of Suharto's dictatorship [...], but after the transition, engagement via digital media dropped" (Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba 2012, p. 249).



6.	No	3	Platform of e-petitions change.org	«Middle»
7.	Yes	4	Social networks (VK)	«The main mean of communication»
Mean	3 – «Yes», 4 – «No»	3.7	-	-

**Source:** Prepared by the author

- (1) "Were you a subject of state censorship or other restrictions imposed by the government?"
- (2) Assessment of the degree of mobilization of the campaign's audience.
- (3) Assessment of the role of "traditional" media for the outcome of the campaign.

Belarusian political communication experiences the impact of development of NTICs that is a common trend for the whole world regardless of a political system and a regime type. However, the falling prices of initiation and support for the collective actions do not compensate price that activists should pay off as a consequence of the response from the Belarusian repressive system. As it was mentioned above, censorship does not obviously prevent campaigners from their advocating activity. However, as it follows from the Table 2, the higher the political sensibility of the addressed issue, the higher the probability of new restrictions imposed by the government. Moreover, these restrictions often have physical rather than nonmaterial character.

Regarding censorship, some interviewees have met further obstacles: attempts to influence discussion in the internet by the third users (so called 'trolls'), temporary restrictions for access to their pages and websites. Some activists (campaigns 4, 7) were forced to apply significant measures to escape censorship. However, in most of the cases activists did not meet any restrictions which can be ascribed in terms of censorship.

Concluding, the Belarusian political system allows activists to access relatively small quantity of communication channels. However, NTICs broaden opportunities to articulate interests and spread the message around using both digital and traditional media. In addition, chances for mobilization remain on low level while some non-associational interest groups inclined to employ online tools to mobilize citizens. Nevertheless, activists often do not consider NTICs as a key mean to do this. Sometimes the internet censorship can influence the activities of political actors, but the most common restrictions imposed by the government are associated with its traditional repressive methods.



### **3.4. Activists and the media system: what is the role of NTICs?**

Five electronic channels of communication were revealed during the interviews with the campaigners (see the Table 2). These channels combine both traditional and new ways of mobilization, communication, and diffusion of information. Admittedly, while the first steps of the activists in their communication efforts were associated with social networks and other digital media, later they preferred to deal with traditional channels of information diffusion. However, the Belarusian media system does not allow a wide variety of the latest. Nevertheless, the fact that many users have joined campaigns online provided activists with, first, additional possibilities of communication with citizens in the future through the establishment of permanent contact; and second, as they believe, gave them more weight at least in the eyes of the editors of the media, which later should make decision about publication of information about campaigns.

Yet the usage of traditional media by groups remains a key to their success (the Table 2). Some interviewees named traditional media as the main instrument of influence the society, diffusion of information, and, thus, the key element and even the final recipient of the institutional message that they were struggling to deliver: *“Media played a key role in my campaign [...]. The number of subscribers does not matter. I attempted to achieve publicity, to gain attention of media and the public”* (campaign 5). This citation reflects the previous findings over the role of traditional media in practices of media activists who use NTICs. Particularly, Löblich and Wendelin (2012) point out that media coverage inline with “offline protests” are “key resources” in achieving a campaign’s goals. Thus, the ability to integrate traditional and new means of mobilization and communication is one of the criteria for success of the civic advocacy campaigns in Belarus.

Almost all interviewees attempt to employ social networks in their activities. Halpern and Gibbs (2013, p. 1166-1167) argue that social networks represent a sort of environment where users - those, who could potentially take part in an online discussion, - are easier identifiable. Thus, it is simpler to align responsibility for their actions and words. In addition, social media could provide “a deliberative space to discuss and encourage political participation, both directly and indirectly” (Halpern and Gibbs 2013, p. 1166-1167). However, Belarusian activists consider social network as additional channel of distribution diffusion rather than a place for deliberative discussions.

E-petitions become another popular online instrument that is actively used by the activists. This tool gained additional popularity in Belarus thanks to several successful grassroots campaigns of electronic signature collection in 2012. Consequently, there were more than 250 active petitions related to Belarus in the spring 2013 (Herasimenka 2013). The potential of e-petition websites was noted by Navarra (2011, p. 18) as of 2007: *“in a short period of*





time, with as little organizational effort as possible and no financial commitment, a citizen with no previous experience in either politics or petitioning managed to achieve something unthinkable for any traditional petitioner." Moreover, if key stakeholders take part in preparation and promotion of e-petitions, this instrument can bear even more success (Panagiotopoulos and Elliman 2012). This factor can explain first achievements of the campaign 3, which on its initial stage, as its organizers argue, managed to accommodate representatives of official youth structures. Later, the campaigners met the management of the University, which policy was a main target of the campaign, and finally was covered by media. In addition, the ability of e-petitions to elaborate an importance of different social problems and to present concrete results of the campaigners' activity embodied in numbers of signatures (Panagiotopoulos and Elliman 2012) allow to praise e-petition platforms as the most efficient tool for online public campaigning in Belarus.

Finally, activists (especially those who are not attempted to organize protests) pay a lot of attention to electronic letters to authorities. This is a special form of communication between citizens and civil servants that obliges the latest to answer a letter in a determined period. As one of the activists points out, *"To be effective, the instrument [of advocating] should be complementary to the Belarusian administrative procedures because our country is very bureaucratic. Thus, e-letters can have more impact since they that follow the logic of civil procedures. Talking about e-petitions – they are not official. It is just a pressure on a person"* (campaign 2).

Thus, the majority of the studied activists demonstrated a positive attitude towards NTICs as a tool of influence policy process. This is also evident from the vast majority of positive responses to the question about a possibility of employment of digital media in campaigners' further activities. However, a small number of successful campaigns, as well as the nature of their outcomes do not allow declaring a determining role of NTICs in shaping of the political environment in non-democratic states.

#### **4. Conclusion.**

The results of the case study suggest that it is possible to talk about e-participation in different political systems. While usage of NTICs in the circumstances of non-democratic regimes open new possibilities of electronic engagement, the challenges for social movements mostly reiterate the state that is characteristic for non-democratic regimes. Furthermore, Belarusian grassroots activists effectively use NTICs in an attempt to influence over decision-making process. However, the list of the issues that could be influenced by them is pretty short (they are, for instance, ecological or social issues) and does not include problems that concern foreign affairs or internal policy, especially in areas that are important for the regime's legitimacy. In addition, usage of the internet and other technologies could help to mobilize citizens for protest actions. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how any such process



could succeed in a political system similar to Belarusian.

Moreover, analysis suggests that digital division and the internet censorship are important factors that prevent different social groups from access to messages distributed by social movements. In that case, traditional media become the key element in the process of message diffusion by interest groups with small resources. At the same time, non-associational interest groups that are exclusively active online remain largely disconnected from the political process. In addition, the regime could try to use NTICs for its own purposes, like imposing control over citizens and groups of activists, enhancing its legitimacy, or confronting other political actors that are noticeable in the internet.

Social networks, online petitions, e-letters to officials, and online discussions provide activists with numerous possibilities of the articulation of interests and mobilization, which now can be conducted faster and safer. However, these channels of influence over the Belarus' political system are restricted. Moreover, it is often easy to observe a wall between groups of individuals and authorities. To tackle that wall social activists should combine the usage of NTICs with a bunch of channels, both institutional, as paper letters to officials, and traditional media channels, as publications in the governmental media.

These peculiarities of online activity in Belarus explain why some social activists look for possibilities of overcoming a barrier between online and offline realms and spread their activity offline. In particular, they search for opportunities to articulate interests of wider public while acting in accordance with existed administrative practices in an attempt to make their pursuits more efficient. Generally, this approach has its advantages and disadvantages and could be seen as the most common in Belarus. Therefore, NTICs open new opportunities of influence over public policy in Belarus, but they are still too narrow to have a visible impact on its political system.

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