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INTRODUCTION

In issuing the first collection of works of young political scientists who studied in the Political Science and European Studies programme of the EHU, the staff of the department, jointly with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, have realised a long-held dream of EHU's researchers of sharing new critical research that has been built up in the university's archives. Found in this collection is edited research of young specialists in the field of political sociology, political culture, and gender political studies with a focus on Belarus. Owing to cooperation with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the dream of political scientists working in EHU's Department of Social and Political Sciences and of those who died before their time – S. Pankovskii, S. Naumova, and V. Charnou – has been realised. We share the research of our department with pleasure and honour.

The objective of such cooperation is to popularise political-science research about Belarus and, at the same time, to de-marginalise EHU's political science and of independent Belarusian political science generally. Moreover, a particular academic approach has been established at EHU despite crises and challenges. A new circle of researchers and lecturers in political science has emerged who are able to remain critical, to comprehensively analyse the political and, most importantly, to teach political science without imposed ideologies while working in Vilnius.

Another important aspect is the focus of EHU's political science on Belarusian issues. The evidence of this includes articles offered in the collection dedicated to lesser-known and often marginal political topics in the Belarusian context.

We hope that this attempt at familiarising the reader with new works of Belarusian political thought and analysis will become a solid and long-term tradition. On this, the aspirations of the EHU and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung to bring research closer to practice and to assist in consolidation and democratisation of Belarus through a scientific, intellectual channel open to debate and reflection coincide.

The collection is intended generally for European and Belarusian politicians, activists, political scientists as well as those who are interested in alternative positions on Belarus.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND INTERNET PLATFORMS: HOW NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES HELP BELARUSIAN CIVIC ACTIVISTS

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Summary: This article is based on research of political participation practices of Belarusian political and social activists who employed Internet platforms such as social networks or websites in their campaigns. With the proliferation of the Internet, more hopes for significant improvement of political participation opportunities were laid upon new tools of communication in countries like Belarus. Social networks and other Internet platforms attracted attention as tools that can promote public campaigns under the conditions of restricted freedoms and media sphere. The article draws on a qualitative case study of seven civic campaigns and groups that were active in 2011-2013 in Belarus. The data for the research was collected through interviews with leaders of those campaigns. The article suggests that those Belarusian Internet activists who actively employed Internet platforms were able to widen opportunities for the political engagement of citizens. Activists followed main trends that are used among digital political practitioners around the globe. However, some problematic features of the Belarusian political and media systems such as control and persecution of the political actors or Internet censorship did not allow activists to use the potential of Internet platforms to the fullest. Moreover, the list of domains of public policy that could be appealed by activists were restricted by unspoken rules.

Keywords: Belarus, political participation, nondemocratic regime, Internet, online activism, civil society.

INTRODUCTION

Politics, as well as many other facets of life, is strongly influenced by new technologies. Jose van Dijck and other researchers of social sciences even say that we now live in a society which can be defined as a "platform society" (van Dijck, Poell 2015). Online platforms such as Facebook or VK currently occupy almost as much space as other popular media. The platforms transform us, our civil institutions and how we interact with these institutions. Such transformations happen in different spheres from creating educational content to protecting our health and life.

As well as other facets of life, the Internet has its history. Van Dijck and Poell (van Dijck, Poell 2015: 2) divide it into two periods: before platforms and after. This article is based on research covering the period of 2011-2013 – the time when Belarus just began to transform into a platform society following the global trend. This transformation was also accompanied by expectations that such social media platforms as Facebook were able to introduce significant changes in political processes. Researchers and activists hoped that the platforms could bring a ray of light to the "dark kingdom" of political possibilities opening to common people and political activists in nondemocratic countries such as Belarus. During this initial period of establishment of the platform society, Belarusian political and civic activists dreamt if not about an Arab Spring in Belarus than at least about the possibility to disseminate their message and to be heard by the authorities. The wish to be heard concerned different issues and topics from students' rights to petrol prices. In my work, I attempted to examine some of those topics to understand whether online platforms in fact extended the possibilities for political participation in Belarus.

Thus, the object of the research is political participation of citizens using online platforms in nondemocratic countries with the case study of Belarus. Political participation is defined as "citizens' actions aimed to try to influence politics" (Anduiza et al. 2012: 5). I examined political participation within the broader concept of citizens' political engagement. The scope of the research covers practices of using online platforms by citizens who attempted to influence politics during the period of 2011-2013 when online platforms just began to turn into significant instruments for citizens' political engagement.

CYBER OPTIMISTS AGAINST CYBER PESSIMISTS: WHO HAS WON?

Debates over whether the Internet is able to provoke any little changes in nondemocratic countries have existed for a long time. The most interesting period of the debates was somewhere between the "Twitter Revolution" in Iran in 2009 (protests that were found to be influenced by Twitter only insignificantly (Morozov 2011)) and the Arab Spring, which peaked in 2011 (Tufekci 2011). Thus, the academic research is divided into two camps: cyber optimists and cyber pessimists. When cyber optimists searched for and found capacity of the new media to democratise different societies and political systems (Shirky 2010), cyber pessimists defended the idea of insignificant influence of social platforms on political protest and activism (Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2011).

Currently, the initial debates between cyber optimists and cyber pessimists are considered to be too simplified and general. The relationships among political institutions, actors, and online platforms are more sophisticated than thought prior to the Arab Spring (Fuchs 2014; Gunitsky 2015). As a result, the debates regarding citizens' political engagement are more concerned with the details of participation. At present, researchers are interested in the following issues: how new technologies

change political participation, whether they are able to make closed authoritarian systems more open; whether they unite or divide people; how new technologies change strategies and tactics of political activists; among others (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Gunitsky 2015).

However, the Arab Spring not only demonstrated the complexities of generalising influence of online practices on politics but also encouraged activists in other countries. In particular, the Occupy movement was encouraged by practices of Egyptian political activists occupying public places (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). During the economic crisis in many developed countries of the world, anti-establishment groups united by the overarching brand of the Occupy movement organised numerous protests in different cities of Europe and America. The movement enabled Bennett and Segerberg (Bennett, Segerberg: 2013) to examine characteristics of online activismmore attentively . As the researchers state, activism changed the nature of what we used to label "collective action" – joint actions such as protests or flash mobs organised by civic movements. Currently, movements which can arise on the Internet easily and spontaneously require no formal membership, do not impose a single ideology and, in general, get along easily with potential participants of the movements. At the same time, potential participants benefit more and more from exceptionally personalised social platforms. In addition to the increase of possibilities for spontaneous emergence of different protest formations, personalisation permits to discuss not "collective" but "connective action". Connective action is a simpler yet more chaotic method of political engagement because it doesn't require significant organisational effort as well as mandatory acceptance of the same version of reality by all participants.

This article foremost examines the possibilities of political participation in Belarus, which is why I will focus on this country further on.

DIGITAL DIVIDE, POLITICAL CONTEXT, AND BELARUSIAN MEDIA SYSTEM

It is usually more difficult to analyse the situation in Belarus because the majority of theories that intend to explain social processes and could be useful to analyse Belarus are currently being created and verified in more or less stable democracies. However, the categories which are often key to interesting theories are oftentimes not applicable to the Belarusian context. For example, researchers of democratic systems have paid significant attention to the possibilities of deliberative participation or discussions and negotiations. It was expected that extension of discussions on the Internet, dissemination of online petitions, and development of "e-government" would permit each citizen to have potential influence on decision-making. That is, the society would become more democratic (Carpini et al. 2004: 318; Halpern, Gibbs 2013: 1160). However, the research focused on deliberative participation has been based on the cases of Western democracies and have typically made theoretical assumptions that the state is interested in democratisation (Carpini et al. 2004). The same happens to theories about the new "platform society" and "digital participation"; that is, the majority of these have been created and tested in the West.

Comparative research can sometimes offer a solution. Upon studying 15 cases all over the world, Anduiza, Jensen, and Jorba (Anduiza et al. 2012) determined three contextual features that can influence digital participation practices in politics. These features or variables can be applicable

to my attempt to understand how the Internet influences Belarusian politics. These are the digital divide, political context, and the condition of the media system. I will further examine these variables theoretically as well as through using the Belarusian case study.

Currently, various phenomena can be considered the digital divide. In the period under examination, it was more expedient to consider the digital divide as a limitation of access to the Internet. In other words, researchers try to understand what happened in the societies and communities where a relatively small part of the population had access to the Internet. In 2013 just over half of the Belarusian population used the Internet (International Telecommunications Union (Geneva) 2014). It was similar to the level of many Latin American countries of the country and lagged significantly behind Central and Eastern European countries.

Anduiza, Jensen, and Jorba understand a range of factors as political context. For example, there are limitations and control on the Internet. In 2011-2013 Internet censorship in Belarus was widespread but not critical. Freedom House (2012) labelled the Belarusian authorities as "enemies of the Internet" among such countries as the Egypt under President Mubarak and China. However, China had greater control over the Internet than Belarus, saw more infringements on users' rights, and other limitations. At the same time, even China has numerous examples of the Internet being used for political participation by activists with different agendas (Yang 2011). Thus, less control over the Internet in Belarus allowed for the hope that Internet activism and digital participation practices would be disseminated further following the example of the nondemocratic countries discussed above.

Finally, the third component which influences the level of political participation is the state of the media environment. If the media system is not particularly independent from governmental regulation and relevant agencies, trust in traditional media channels such as newspapers or television can erode. For example, Egypt and Pakistan saw this kind of media environment prior to 2011 (Anduiza et al. 2012: 247). In such situations, trust in digital information channels can increase (Anduiza et al. 2012: 247). However, the Belarusian media system has been in a particularly deformed condition. According to the IISEPS, Belarusians' trust in government mass media did not exceed 39% in the past two years, and following the protests of the crisis summer of 2011 organised via social networks, it reached a all-time low of 25% (Независимый институт социально-экономических и политических исследований 2013). Trust in independent media was relatively low as well. In other words, the Belarusian media environment did not encourage dissemination of alternatives to government opinion on the one hand or preserve the potential for the appearance of new actors on the other. Further on I will examine how Belarusian online activists attempted to leverage this situation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To study the practices and strategies of those who attempted to influence the Belarusian political process using online platforms, I applied a qualitative approach to data collection and held nine interviews according to a semi-structured interview method. I interviewed seven civic activists who organised public civic campaigns on the Internet in 2011-2013 within which public policy demands were stated. In addition, I conducted two expert interviews with representatives of the online platforms that were often used for mobilisation, information dissemination, and analysis by numerous civic campaigns . In the interviews, I was most interested in the issues of limiting the citizens' access to the

Internet (digital divide); the political context: expected reaction of the political system, limitations of activists' activities in Belarus; the condition of the media environment; the structure of the campaign audience; and the degree of their trust in media. The overall results of the initiative/campaign activities were examined as well.

A sampling of complaints and their representatives was carried out in consultation with several experts in the field as well in order to examine the campaigns of the recent years most visible in the public sphere.

As a result, the following civic initiatives and campaigns were selected for analysis:

Table 1. Principle information examined concerning civic initiatives/campaigns

Name of civic initiative/ campaign	Main objectives of the campaign (studied within the research)	Main results
Visa Free Travel Campaign "Go Europe! Go Belarus!"	Attracting public attention to the issue of the visa regime; facilitation of visa procedures as a temporary measure	Visa issue is constantly in the public eye, however no significant institutional changes have been carried out by the Belarusian authorities
Campaign to amend the Game Husbandry and Hunting Rules of Public organization "APB-BirdLife Belarus"	Decision not to pass amendments to the Game Husbandry Rules prepared at the moment; to make other amendments to the Rules, such as rejection to define "harmful species", prohibition of seasonal hunting of other bird species	Ministry of Forestry prepared legislative amendments intended to satisfy most demands of the petition
Let's build BSUCA Centre Fairly and Transparently! Civic Campaign	Renewing construction of the sports centre of the Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts, ensuring transparent spending of funds for construction	Construction was renewed following a meeting of the university's management with the organiser of the signature collection and after her address to the Governmental Control Committee; GCC and the university made statements on the issue
Revolution on Social Networks group/Future Movement	Mobilising citizens, primarily youth, for protest action in a "new" format; liberation of the public sphere; accumulation of protest sentiment; demand for Lukashenka to resign was subsequently made	Organisation of most significant protest actions in 2011 and following the 2010 presidential election; indirect result has been that students, the most active participants, were granted the right to use public transport for free
Include Belarusian [language] in Self-Service Terminal Menu online petition	To include Belarusian language in the menus of Belarusbank's ATMs; to expand use of Belarusian in other fields in the future	Several meetings with bank management; app. 2 500 signatures collected
"We Demand to Launch the Negotiations with the EU on the Visa Facilitation Agreement!".	Exerting pressure on the presidential administration to renew negotiations between the EU and Belarus concerning visa regime facilitation	App. 10 000 electronic signatures collected
Stop Petrol Campaign (2011)	Lowering petrol prices	Petrol prices returned to pre-crisis level, however grew gradually later on

Sources: author's analysis of campaigns' websites and additional information messages.

All of the initiatives/campaigns examined were carried out without institutional political actors, though respondents were members of political organisations (in some cases informally).

The campaigns studied differed significantly as to the issues raised within them. However, interviews demonstrated that, similar to political actors in other countries of the world, the Belarusian groups and activists were attempting to exert pressure on authorities through civic campaigns using online platforms. At times this use combined with other factors allows citizens to influence political decisions. Thus, three of the seven campaigns examined achieved significant success.

ANALYSIS OF SEVEN CASES

As mentioned above, conditions for the spread of online activism and engagement of broader circles in the activities of different civic campaigns and interest groups in Belarus were established to a sufficient degree, but were far from ideal over the period analysed. On the one hand, technical conditions allowed for reaching a broad audience via the Internet. On the other hand, not all of the potential campaign and event participants were able to join connective action because they had no access to the Internet or had no knowledge of how to make use of the potential of online platforms. Almost all of the leaders of the campaigns studied noted this. Although representatives of some campaigns that targeted not only youth (e.g., "APB-BirdLife Belarus" and Stop Petrol) viewed working with audiences that had no access to the Internet as a natural part of the campaign. A majority of other activists had no time for similar actions.

It is indicative that access to what we call traditional media – newspapers, television, and similar information sources – seemed very important to Belarusian online activists. According to the research, a majority of activists saw Facebook, VK, and other platforms only as the first step in reaching a more "serious" level and having the possibility to sell their version of events to a newspaper, for example. It was desirable that newspapers were government sponsored, as the majority viewed state media as much more influential than non-government types. As one example, the activist who created the online petition Include Belarusian in the Self-Service Terminal Menu believed that "the number of signatures [of the petition] is not the most important thing". He explained that he "intended to get public attention, catch the interest of the mass media, people, and the general public" (5). It seems that "mass media" was raised with a range of meanings for a good reason. The possibility to integrate traditional media into one's Internet campaign could be significant for its success in Belarus. This conclusion is consistent with research results in other countries (Rojecki, Meraz: 2016).

However, it is not only non-government media that were considered relatively less important to Belarusian online activists. Traditional political actors such as opposition parties also did not play a visible role in the eyes of activists on the campaigns mentioned above. In fact, activists tried to distance themselves from opposition parties. "I don't want my petition to be associated with the opposition", the leader of the civic campaign "We Demand to Launch Negotiations with the EU on the Visa Facilitation Agreement!". explained. It is indicative also that three out of the seven activists asked did not identify themselves as active public-policy actors: "I never collected signatures, though I used to sign. I am so law-abiding in general. I only cross the street at a green light", (5) the author of the online petition Include Belarusian in the Self-Service Terminal Menu recollected.

The Belarusian online activists who were the focus of the research not only considered themselves law-abiding. They perceived state agencies as those that will consider their demands more carefully if the demands are laid on officials' tables in a certain form, preferably defined by law. Thus, the activists began to pay special attention to individual appeals by citizens. They "work well with administrative [sic] procedures in our country", a representative of Public organization "APB-BirdLife Belarus" said. When it was complicated to convert online signatures into signatures of individual appeals, activists expressed their regrets (Include Belarusian in the Self-Service Terminal Menu). However, such procedures do not always work well with other means of online mobilisation, as in the case with citizens' appeals to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated by Visa Free Travel Campaign "Go Europe! Go Belarus!", which received no official reaction from the government.

In addition to appeals and petitions, Belarusian online activists paid attention to discussions social network sites such as VK or Facebook as well as to messaging to journalists and supporters. "The means which are associated with administrative procedures in our country are most efficient because our country has lots of administrative procedures. That is why appeals that follow administrative procedures can be more influential. And the petition is not an official submission, it is just pressure on an individual", one online activist asserted. It is significant that activists tried to print appeals, including those sent electronically, and delivered them to the institution for which they were intended. That is they did not try to use the legal possibility to send civic appeals electronically (as such appeals had to be sent individually but activists did not, in fact, ask citizens to do so). The strategy could be related to the digital divide where a significant number of citizens had no access to the Internet. The activists considered lack of access or impossibility to use platforms as something natural. According to them, actions joined online were to eventually result in offline actions, something beyond the cyberspace. As a matter of fact, the Revolution on Social Networks group set a goal of offline mobilisation – collective action in real squares of real towns supported with collective action. However, the relative failure of the admittedly utopic goals of the group demonstrated an important feature of political engagement through the means of online platforms in Belarus – it is well nigh imposible to raise and promote every issue through this means.

The research demonstrates that the possibility of Belarusian online activists to influence public policy and to accomplish their purposes within it depends on the existing social and political circumstances to a significant degree and is more often than not not within the activists' sphere of influence. In other words, the Belarusian political system has a number of issues or domains in which the authorities could be influenced using social platforms. And it has those issues concerning which pressure on the authorities would be fruitless. It is possible to mention environmental issues, issues raised by small groups (e.g., students of a certain university) and related to financial benefits, consumers' rights issues, etc. Domains within which the regime legitimacy or some fundamental principles of the foreign and domestic policy could be questioned can be hardly influenced by interest groups with insignificant resources. Thus, this situation resembles the models of other nondemocratic political systems, e.g., the Chinese (Anduiza et al. 2012: 249; HagueHarrop 2008: 172).

However, certain differences from other nondemocratic systems can be noted as well. For example, the Belarusian authorities rarely apply censorship on the Internet as a means to pressure activists. However, activists were more often influenced not by censorship on the Internet but through physical means. Concerning censorship, the activists named the following:

• Attempts to influence online discussion with insults;

• Groundless accusations and dissemination of facts which discredited the activists (so-called "network trolls");

• Temporary limitation of access to certain websites and pages of social networks;

• Attempts to obtain (steal) access to web pages and sites.

In some cases (Revolution on Social Networks group, Stop Petrol Campaign), activists had to invest additional efforts and resources in order to avoid persecution on the Internet. However, in the majority of cases activists faced no limitations by the authorities that they would cite as extraordinary.

CONCLUSIONS

The research has demonstrated that, like in other countries of the world, Belarusian activists can successfully use online platforms in order to influence the authorities via civic campaigns. Online platforms such as electronic petitions, social media, and websites, can expand the potential for political engagement in nondemocratic countries and engage more participants in politics. Activists, even those with limited resources, can carry out large, high profile campaigns, unite people online, and realize their objectives to some degree.

It seems that Belarusian online activists, just like their colleagues from the U.S. to China, have been able to use the benefits of a platform society to spread and expand possibilities for collective actions on the Internet. The Revolution on Social Networks group as well as the Occupy movement were inspired by the Arab Spring and were able to unite citizens with different ideologies and personal agendas through collective action. Less radical groups, such as representatives of "APB-BirdLife Belarus", sought to communicate not only with Internet users but also with "offline" people while preserving the main focus of the campaign on the Internet. In addition, as in other countries, traditional media were considered an important part of the communication strategy of civic campaigns most often, in spite of the existing limitations of the media system. These examples demonstrate that Belarusian online activists operate in the context of global trends.

Belarusian activists who use online platforms, however, face similar barriers and challenges that are typical of nondemocratic regimes. These challenges have been related to the nature of the Belarusian political context that manifests itself in relatively strong control of the Internet and limitations on activities of political entities. Political persecution has entered the Internet in pursuit of activists. And the traditional media, most importantly government media, still preserve significant influence, which affects activists' opportunities to reach out to a more general public. In addition, censorship on the Internet and the digital divide complicate access to information for potential platform users.

Probably one of the most serious limitations of online activists' work in Belarus concerns the issues that can be raised within their campaigns. Civic campaigns related to environmental issues or issues of small, less protected segments of the population can be advocated for with relatively few challenges and can be covered by traditional state media and even resolved later on. However, it is more complicated with issues that concern the legitimacy of the government or foreign policy. Some activists (e.g., "Go Europe! Go Belarus!", or Revolution on Social Networks group) have attempted to raise similar issues, however have been unsuccessful. It seems that online activism aimed to resolve such issues has fewer chances of succeeding in the Belarusian political system.

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