

# INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND NEW POSSIBILITIES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN BELARUS

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**Abstract:** The internet opened new possibilities for political activists around the world. However, there is a lack of scholarship of how activists employ new technologies in non-democratic countries like Belarus. The paper discusses the results of the study of the online campaigns of Belarusian political activists in 2011-2013. It suggests that while activists can successfully employ internet platforms to influence public policy, the outcome of their campaigns is dependent on issues they address.

**Keywords:** ICT, Communication, Political Participation, Civic Campaign, Non-Democratic Regime.

Many noticeable protests that took place in Belarus recently are associated with the internet and social media. If one takes the number of participants, the most significant in this list is probably a series of peaceful protests of 2011. Then thousands of protestors gathered on central squares and streets of major cities of Belarus. They were inspired by the activists of the social network group “Revolution on Social Networks [Belarus]” that attracted more than 150 000 online subscribers in the fervour of the protests. These and similar protests and campaigns in other countries became an evidence of how political activists were aiming at influencing a political process in non-democratic regimes with the employment of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

However, the outcome of these attempts is always unclear. There is a discussion about an ability of ICT to influence the political participation, namely e-participation, or even to alter the political process. Many studies suggest that tools and platforms like Facebook, electronic petitions or YouTube open new ways of citizens’ influence over politics. While the earlier simplistic debates demarcated the field between digital enthusiasts (Shirky, 2008) and pessimists (Morozov, 2011), recent discussions abandoned deterministic perspectives and increasingly focus on such questions as properties of ICT and the strategies of their employment that make them useful for social activists (Gunitsky, 2015).

However, there is still a gap in the literature regarding the influence of ICT over channels of political participation in non-democratic countries like Belarus which did not experience major uprisings as the Arab Spring recently (Oates, 2013). Previous comparative studies of both democracies and authoritarian countries suggest that an ability to influence decision-making through digital engagement 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 (Anduiza et al., 2012). However, it is still an open question, whether there is any room for political digital engagement with the employment of ICT in the conditions of state censorship, and political persecution.

We conducted a qualitative study of Belarus’ public civic campaigns and protests that were active during the period of 2011-2013. Our goal was to reveal the relationship between the usage of ICT by political actors and their ability to address and influence public policy issues in the circumstances of a non-democratic regime. To fulfill the goal, we collected relevant data about activity of the studied campaigns and organised a number of semi-structured interviews with their leaders. Seven public campaigns and groups of activists were studied, namely the Campaign “Stop Gasoline” (2011), the Campaign in favour of amending the Rules of Hunting by the public organisation

“APB-Bird Life Belarus,” the Visa Free Travel Campaign “Go Europe! Go Belarus!,” the Campaign “Let’s build the campus of the Belarusian University of Culture fairly and transparently!,” the Group “Revolution on Social Networks [Belarus],” the Campaign “Add Belarusian Language in the menu of payment machines!” and the Campaign “We Demand to Launch the Negotiations with the EU on the Visa Facilitation Agreement!”. 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 recently.

We found that political activists in Belarus use the affordances of ICT to mobilise public over a variety of issues that are not limited to economic realm or political order. Particularly, they employ different instruments like electronic petitions, though unofficial, e-letters to the authorities, various social networks like VK or Facebook. Some of the campaigns were aiming at a mobilisation for street protests to address public policy issues by collaborating and advocating. Significantly, we witnessed several success stories of using ICT by Belarus’ civic actors to engage public in politics in past years. For example, ecological campaigns or those that were focused on social issues important for some minor groups were normally more successful than those which tried to challenge the political system.

At the same time, most of the activists were only partially happy with the results of their campaigns. We also found that the campaigners experienced the governmental censorship and other attempts of the authorities to prevent them from addressing the public. Traditional media such as newspapers, both online and printed, TV or radio appeared to be very important for all the activists. In most of the campaigns, access to traditional media through initial online raising of awareness became a milestone for the activists. Following other researches of both democratic and non-democratic political systems (Löblich and Wendelin, 2012), it seems that appearances on TV, official newspapers or other types of traditional media were key elements in the process of the message diffusion by groups with small resources.

The results of the study suggest that it is possible to talk about the e-participation in different political environments. While the usage of ICT in the circumstances of non-democratic regimes open new possibilities of electronic engagement, the challenges for civil activists mostly repeat the state of affairs presented in non-democratic regimes. In addition, such issues as low penetration of the internet or online censorship create barriers for activism and political participation. Indeed, political actors (citizens in particular) use ICT to influence the decision-making process in non-democratic regimes through raising awareness on public issues or proposing solutions how to address them. However, an extent of this influence varies deeply depending on a public policy domain as to which solutions are considered and accepted.

And the list of the domains that could be addressed is quite short and does not include problems that concern for instance foreign affairs or internal security, especially in the areas that are important for the regime's legitimacy. Therefore, the Belarusian online political activists remained largely disconnected from the political process despite the rise of the internet in 2011-2013. At the same time, the state remained a dominant actor of the political process. Consequently, we can expect that in the future the authorities of non-democratic states will have all the instruments to use ICT for their own purposes like imposing control over citizens and groups of activists, enhancing their legitimacy, or confronting other political actors who are active online.

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