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The Internet in Belarus: Hopes and Realities

Introduction

Imagine waking up on a Saturday morning to this text message: “Provocateurs are planning bloodshed, watch out for your life and health.” For cellular phone subscribers living in the capital of Belarus, this is what happened on the morning of March 18, 2006. The next day, President Alexander Lukashenko was reelected in what turned out to be a fraudulent election. Nobody knows for sure who sent this message warning of violence at October Square in Minsk (Heintz). However, members of the opposition had planned to protest the results on election night there. One possibility is that the government sent this message en masse in order to deter any rallies.

The fact that text-messaging was used to intimidate people shows the extent to which digital technology is becoming more and more pervasive in political affairs. The Internet and cellular communication has added a new dimension to politics and sociopolitical organization (Morozov, 2009A). Though one may at first appreciate without question the transformative nature and democratic potential of the Internet, which now grants the ability to self-publish, quickly and efficiently distribute information across vast distances, and thus coordinate political events, planning in cyberspace is not a panacea to the political repression of dissidents.

The Internet is more like a double-edged sword, and while it can serve as a great resource for opposition groups around the world, ruling regimes can use the Internet as well or even better to maintain their power and crush opponents. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace reported in 2003 that “rather than sounding the death knell for authoritarianism, the global
The diffusion of the Internet presents both opportunity and challenge for authoritarian regimes” (ibid.). This insight rings true for Belarus, a small country in Eastern Europe, whose current political and technological situation is characteristic of a place where the Internet could help in promoting political liberalization.

Using non-governmental sources, news reports, personal communication from a Belarusian doctoral student in the United States, and Gene Sharp’s primer on democratization, “From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation,” this paper examines the role of the Internet in Belarus and the prospects for a peaceful transition to a liberal democracy. The reality is that any significant change toward a freer political system will happen from the bottom up. Political change is contingent on a variety of domestic and foreign factors and though the Internet will play a role, real democratization will still be the product of people’s desire for change and a freer society and their collective action against repressive regimes.

Rather than acting as an equalizer, the Internet is more akin to a weapon in the arsenal of politicians and political groups. It may help in accumulating political capital, but in the end, real results will come from the willingness to fight for freedom. Belarus’s problems in this context are based in the government’s control of electronic means of communication and its harassment and criminal prosecution of reporters who write stories critical of the ruling regime. Opposition groups have disparate goals, and the ruling government has staunch backing from large segments of the population.

**Recent Developments**

In 1996, a constitutional referendum extended the powers of the president to allow for Lukashenko’s five-year term beginning that year. In 2001, he won reelection with 75 percent of the vote. Foreign observers declared the election neither free nor fair and independent exit polls
showed that Lukashenko had only won 47 percent of the vote, which should have forced a second round that did not occur. Furthermore, former service workers said that Lukashenko had created a death squad to eliminate political enemies (Freedom House, 2008A). The United States had pumped 24 million dollars into opposition efforts for this election to no avail (Peterson).

The March 19, 2006 election referenced at the beginning of this paper was also met with unsatisfactory marks from opposition groups and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR). Their observers concluded that: “the election failed to meet international standards, was characterized by a disregard for the basic rights of freedom of assembly, association, and expression, and included a highly problematic vote count,” (ibid.; Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs). There were no independent exit polls, which puts to suspicion the 83 percent Lukashenko allegedly won. After the election, 500 to 1,000 members of the opposition were arrested and one opposition leader and presidential candidate, Alexander Kazulin, was sentenced to five and a half years in prison. Though there were local elections in early 2007, public participation was minimal.

After the most recent parliamentary elections in September 2008, no opposition candidate won a seat for the 110-member House of Representatives. This happened despite 70 opposition candidates successfully registering their names on the ballot. The OSCE/ODIHR said that the elections failed to meet international standards (Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs; Gatehouse, 2008).

Now, although politics in Belarus seem to be stuck in the Soviet past, it is not entirely fair to say that the country is not on a path toward globalization. Compared with 20 years ago, more people have electricity, and cosmetic surgeons in the capital have patients (BBC, 2008;
Gatehouse, 2008). Minsk also has a McDonald’s restaurant. Ever so slowly, more foreign investors are putting their money in the country (Marples, 2009A; Gatehouse, 2009). Though numbers range widely, anywhere from 30 to 66 percent of Belarusians use the Internet, with around 180,000 accessing the World Wide Web daily (Central Intelligence Agency; Marples, 2009B; InternetWorld Stats; Silitsky). There are also nearly 7 million cellular phone lines in the country. Of course, these facts do not tell the whole story, but they do contribute to a better understanding.

**Prospects for a Peaceful Transition**

Currently, the Lukashenko regime is firmly in control. But if the government does not make any concessions and economic conditions continue to worsen, inevitably its people will be pushed to a tipping point. The government may face serious challenges when that point is reached.

A Freedom House study showed that when compared with violent overthrows of a ruling regime, nonviolent transitions have had the most effect in securing a changeover to a freer society. According to the research headed by Adrian Karatnycky and Peter Ackerman in their report, “How Freedom is Won: From Civil Struggle to Durable Democracy,” nonviolent, broad-based coalitions made up of engaged civil society groups that are informed and supported by alternative media have had the most success in pushing a pro-democracy agenda around the world (Karatnycky and Ackerman). They analyzed 67 political transitions between 1972 and 2005, using data from the annual Freedom House publication, “Freedom in the World,” to draw their conclusions.

The findings of this study offer hope for Belarus, but it must be kept in mind that every country has its own unique conditions and what works in one part of the world may not work in
what the U.S. State Department has labeled Europe’s last outpost of tyranny. Though three of
Belarus’s neighbors have made the transition to a multi-party democracy in the last 20 years
(Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland), Belarus is yet to join the club. To meet Karatnycky and
Ackerman’s criteria for a political transition, a government needs: 1) to have been formed as a
result of the fragmentation of a larger polity—think of the Czech Republic or the breakup of the
Soviet Union; 2) to have replaced a one-person or military dictatorship, or one-party rule — for
example Poland’s Solidarity electoral participation and political success; or 3) to have removed
an authoritarian dominant-party from power (ibid.). If approached under the right conditions
using the right techniques, Lukashenko’s dictatorship could be toppled, or at the very least, his
supporters would be forced to participate in legitimate elections.

It needs to be stressed that whatever change occurs in Belarus cannot be from the outside.
In “From Dictatorship to Democracy,” Gene Sharp, an American political scientist, examines the
steps a politically repressed opposition must take to successfully establish a freer democratic
system and how to maintain it for the long term. He begins his discussion on overthrowing
dictatorships by discouraging military coups, which only reinforce a cycle of violence, and
warning about the dangers of relying on foreign intervention. Sharp cautions:

- Frequently foreign states will tolerate, or even positively assist a dictatorship in
  order to advance their own economic or political interests.
- Foreign states also may be willing to sell out an oppressed people instead of
  keeping pledges to assist in their liberation at the cost of another objective.
- Some foreign states will act against a dictatorship only to gain their own
  economic, political, or military control over the country.
- The foreign states may become actively involved for positive purposes only if
  and when the internal resistance movement has already begun shaking the
  dictatorship, having thereby focused international attention on the brutal nature of
  the regime (Sharp).

For Belarus, Russia’s influence in the country comes to mind. Though the two countries
have suggested a potential unification (Weir), no more progress has been made in this affair. As
Sharp’s advice merits, those in Belarus who feel that Russia is looking out for them may want to reconsider. In the future Belarus will have to pay European Union (EU) prices for natural gas, which will severely affect its economic growth (BBC).

In a similar fashion as the Freedom House researchers, Sharp advises any would-be pro-democracy activists that to have a fighting chance at knocking down a dictatorship, the oppressed population must be determined, self-confident, and possess strong resistance skills. In addition, social groups—academia, civil society groups, and labor unions—must be organized and share a common goal (Sharp). He explains that when potential outcomes include that of an undemocratic regime’s continued infringement of basic freedoms, negotiations with a dictatorial regime are not an option (ibid.). It is this tough stance that proved successful in recent political transitions in countries where a change from a one-party system or dictatorship to a multi-party democratic model seemed a near impossibility only a few years before the transition happened. Given the experiences of formerly communist countries in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, the Belarusian people have a chance to participate in a more democratic and fair political environment.

One can look to Belarus’s Western neighbor for solutions to some of the country’s troubles. In 1976, authorities in communist Poland attacked and jailed thousands of striking workers. In response, dissident intellectuals founded a Workers’ Defense Committee that helped the families of jailed workers, providing legal and medical aid. The movement grew with news spread by way of an underground network, and in 1979 it published a Charter on Workers’ Rights (Britannica Encyclopedia). In 1980, there were more strikes in opposition to rising food prices around the country. Of particular note were the strikes at the Gdansk shipyard in May of that year which were led by an electrician named Lech Walesa. In August, an Interfactory Strike
Committee was formed and successfully petitioned the government for the right to create labor unions with the option of carrying out strikes and greater religious and political expression. Thirty-six regional unions coalesced in September and Solidarnosc, or Solidarity, became official. Rural Solidarity came into being three months later; its chief purpose was to assist private farmers.

In 1981 Solidarity continued pressuring the government for political and economic reforms. The organization and execution of strikes was its main tool, and with 10 million members out of a population of 35 million or so, it had great influence in the country (ibid.). Under Soviet pressure, Poland’s General Wojciech Jeruzelski imposed martial law in December, and Solidarity was declared illegal. Nevertheless, the group remained an underground entity. Strikes in 1988 led to the government’s agreement to legalize the group a year later. Solidarity was also allowed to participate in elections in June 1989 and a new democratic government soon arose. Without the coordinated and determined efforts of millions of Polish workers, no political change would have been possible. Solidarity’s reliance on underground media, alternative cultural institutions, strike funds, and the support of members allowed Poland’s transformation from a Soviet satellite to a democratic free country (Karatnycky and Ackerman).

Belarus, too, attempted a transition to democracy around this time. The Belarusian Popular Front tried to unite an opposition to Soviet rule by encouraging the use of the Belarusian language and promoting native Belarusian culture. The movement largely failed. As stated by the “How Freedom is Won” authors, “The front united cultural groups, workers associations, and political movements, but its influence was largely confined to major cities” (Karatnycky and Ackerman). The main problem with this group was that it failed to gain national appeal as oppositions in neighboring countries did.
Reality Checks

Belarus has the worst free speech ranking in all of Europe. The French organization Reporters Sans Frontières ranked the country 154th out of 173 in 2008 (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2008A). The U.S. based Committee to Protect Journalists has placed it among the world’s most censored countries. Television and radio outlets and most print publications are under government control. The publication of points-of-view unfavorable to the Lukashenko regime is not allowed and dissent is criminalized (Freedom House, 2008A). Online information must go through the State Center on Internet Security. This virtually guarantees that any items too sensitive for the authorities’ liking will not make the cut.

In April 2007, Andrei Klimau was prosecuted and sentenced to two years in prison for an online article advocating regime change (ibid.; Committee to protect Journalists). President Lukashenko subsequently called for even more government control over online media. Deputy Information Minister Liliya Ananich remarked that the Ministry of Information was “unambiguously committed to the legislative regulation of the operation of Internet mass media.” She also made reference to the use of Chinese “expertise” to block “bad” web sites (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2008B).

In addition, the government has interfered with cellular phone communication. During rallies on Election Day in 2006, cellular coverage at October Square in Minsk was turned off (Mullins and Morozov, 2009). The government is going to new lengths to stop any potential organized dissent. Lukashenko once told an audience of journalism students at Belarusian State University that the media held a weapon of a “most destructive power” and that the state had to control it (Committee to Protect Journalists). Though there are thousands of Live Journal blogs
online, when the government is in charge, any content can be monitored and censored. Alexei Krivolap writes that the government has characterized the Internet as a dangerous place in which limits must be set so that all may have an enjoyable experience online. Furthermore, the government’s means of controlling cyberspace evolve with technological advancements (Krivolap).

A new way that the government manipulates the web to its liking is by creating the illusion of choice or active participation. This government-sponsored spin on the web, or as Evgeny Morozov, a Belarusian visiting scholar at Stanford University, calls it, “Spinternet,” is making it more difficult for dissident groups to organize a unified cohesive opposition against the government. The government in Belarus allows online subscribers to read the state-run newspaper, “Belarus Today,” for free, while it charges for connecting to other sites (Morozov, 2009B).

The OpenNet Initiative found that the government monitors online content and that authorities use sophisticated methods to censor political information (OpenNet Initiative). Some of these methods include changing the name of web sites critical of the government, restricting access to the Internet, and launching denial-of-service attacks against targeted web sites. In a denial-of-service attack, many computers access a certain web page at the same time, causing the server hosting that web page to crash. Self-censoring is also pervasive. In 2005, the web site Tut.by refused to advertise opposition groups (ibid.). Those curious to find out more about their country’s political situation from sources outside the country find it challenging. In certain instances, cybercafés require passport identification for customers. They may reduce bandwidth capacity at the government’s request, and users’ online activity is logged.
The future for independent online journalism in Belarus looks bleak. Furthermore, the government is economically squeezing independent print publications out of existence. State companies cannot advertise in them, banks sometimes do not process subscription payments, making it so that they cannot function when they go online (Freedom House, 2008B).

There is still a sizeable amount of people willing to side with the current leadership, which thus far has improved their economic conditions (BBC). A new democratized system would most likely lead to massive privatization, a prospect that would undoubtedly reduce funding for government services. Retired pensioners and those nearing retirement age are among Lukashenko’s strongest supporters. Unless a charismatic opposition leader is able to create a new consciousness in the country, business for the foreseeable future will remain as usual (Interview by author, April 30, 2009).

**Future Courses**

It is difficult to accurately predict the future of Belarusian politics or to arrive at any solid conclusion on the Internet’s democratizing potential. Factors including Belarus’s relationship with Russia and EU incorporation, will play a significant role. How the opposition behaves will be paramount in determining what happens there. For the short term, the Internet will remain tightly controlled and reporters will be under constant pressure to conform to prescribed norms.

The opposition needs to focus on building a responsive and flexible strategy aimed at achieving real improvements in terms of economic and political freedom. Fiscal mismanagement which led to a poor economic situation undermined the Soviet Union’s leadership and its leaders’ legitimacy. The Lukashenko regime will try a different approach only when it sees that economic change is needed. Lukashenko’s view seems to be: If it isn’t broken why fix it? In Russia,
pressure from below convinced elites that a change toward a freer political and economic model would be the only way they would survive politically. The Belarusian authorities will give up power only if they are forced to do so.

In Belarus’s neighbor Ukraine, the Orange Revolution’s success hinged on the willingness of millions of people to stand up and openly challenge blatant corruption. The Internet played a crucial role in organization, but if it were not for well-funded opposition groups and journalists willing to encourage the masses to rise up and remain resolute, nothing would have happened.

The bureaucracy in Belarus may realize the futility of maintaining such a system. Perhaps as one analyst writes, the bureaucrats are simply telling Lukashenko what he wants to hear, thus continuing the cycle of repression (Leshchenko). Some Belarusian intellectuals are looking to join the European sphere of influence as a way of changing the country. Though at present this looks unlikely, in due time something will happen. As Olga Shparaga wrote in the *New Europe Journal*, a Belarusian publication: “Politics, like life itself, is not an objective absolute; it is nourished by events and by our expectations of it” (Shparaga). The Internet offers hope, but it will not change rigid political systems overnight.

When a charismatic new leader rises in the years to come, when public space is retaken by Belarusians who are determined to change things regardless of the consequences, and when reform-minded people in the government see the pointlessness of keeping their own citizens hostage, then the prospects for transition towards a multi-party system will look more promising. For the time being, freedom in Belarus will gradually take hold, but current events point to a tough course ahead. How the Internet will help or hurt this transition is still unclear. These are sobering realities, but the Belarusian people have overcome greater obstacles. Online
collaboration is a great way to gather information and organize events, but the force of the Internet is secondary in comparison with the basic desire to progress and to improve one’s lot in life.

Works Cited


