

**ONLINE PRACTICES AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT:
STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE IN
BELARUS¹**

*A window of opportunity opened where
politics in crisis met with the new media savoir
[Hague and Loader, 1999].*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY	2
INTRODUCTION	3
1. NEW OPPOSITION: SOCIAL MOVEMENT THROUGH NETWORKING	6
2. DEMOCRATIC ACTORS ONLINE: EMPOWERED BUT INOPERATIVE	11
3. EFFECTIVE USE OF THE INTERNET AS A TRANSFORMATIVE TOOL	17
4. GENERAL FRAMEWORK FOR ONLINE STRATEGIES	23
5. CONNECTING MOVEMENT PRIORITIES AND ONLINE PRACTICES	28
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	39
APPENDIXES	
APPENDIX 1. INTERNET TOOLS USE IN CIVIC CAMPAIGNING 2004-2007	
APPENDIX 2. TIPS FOR NON-PARTISAN POLITICAL WEBSITES	
APPENDIX 3. WORKING WITH BLOGGERS	
APPENDIX 4. DESCRIPTION AND EVALUATION OF ePARTICIPATION TOOLS	
DIAGRAMS AND TABLES	
Diagram 1. Frequency of internet access in 2007	11
Diagram 2. Dynamics of milinkevich.org and kozylin.com websites' visitors	12
Diagram 3. Comparative visibility of Belarusian politicians on the web	14
Diagram 4. Rating of the most popular social networking sites in Belarus	31
Table 1 The potential impact of ICT on political communication	19
Table 2. Outcomes of strategic alignment of online practices and movement policies	25

¹ The research is conducted within the IPF OSI Website www.policy.hu

SUMMARY

Belarusian pro-democracy actors have already established their presence online. The next step is to use their online venues in order to effectively consolidate agents of democratic change. The Internet , and new ICTs in general are seen as tools for circumventing authoritarian state pressures and surmounting communication cleavage as they allow it allows to significantly reduce the costs associated with political communication generate new ways of interactions between individuals, which in turn produce qualitative effects on political activism. Situating this possible impact within the context of Belarus this paper seeks to specify the feasible ways in which those uses might produce visible effects on fragmented and isolated civic and political pro-democracy actors in Belarus, focusing primarily on strategic alignment of actors' policies and ICT practices. Having this alignment in view, the paper presents recommendations on effective online communication and position propagation (web presence) and on (participative deliberation and collaboration (civic engagement) for promoters of democratic change in Belarus.

INTRODUCTION

Belarusian society is characterized by political apathy and isolation of pro-democracy civic and political actors (individual, collective and institutional agents of democratic change in Belarus) both from each other, and from the larger society. Because of that isolation and lack of legitimacy these actors are incapable to influence political process, while citizens are unable to aggregate, express and defend their interests before the government and society. This pessimistic picture has become a major standpoint of any political reflection related to the issues of democratic change in Belarus. Many experts explain the situation by the two major groups of reasons:

- 1) structural (authoritarian rule leads to distorted communication channels, censorship and surveillance, tokenism in participation practices, and etc);
- 2) behavioral (absence of communication skills, lack of competence in the field of deliberative practices, vertical patriarchal structure of collective agents).

At the same time the majority of experts and analytics stress that this does not mean that communication cleavages could be subdued only after the existing authoritarian regime falls. Rather they consider that these structural reasons are to be circumvented by means of designing alternative unconventional channels of communication and by designing new collaborative practices.

In this light, the Internet, and new ICTs in general are seen as tools for circumventing authoritarian state pressures and surmounting communication cleavage as they allow it allows to significantly reduce the costs associated with political communication generate new ways of interactions between individuals, which in turn produce qualitative effects on political activism.

Belarusian pro-democracy actors have already established their presence online. The next step is to use their online venues in order to effectively consolidate agents of democratic change in Belarus. Such a consolidation is only possible through establishing alternative communicative channels and strengthening connected network of pro-democracy “minipublics” aimed at deliberative and participatory practices. In this context strategic alignment of agents’ policies and online practices can open windows of opportunities. However, there is still no certainty about the ways and limits of new ICTs (internet and mobile phones) as a means of communication, collaboration and deliberation among the agents of democratic change.

This paper seeks to prove that the potential of new technologies can be used effectively only in case a coordinated strategy for online actions is incorporated into policy planning. Focusing primarily on strategic alignment of actors' policies and ICT practices, the paper presents recommendations on effective online communication and position propagation (web presence) and on (participative deliberation and collaboration (civic engagement) for promoters of democratic change in Belarus.

The analysis presented in the first section "*New opposition: social movement through networking*" provides evidence that pro- democracy collective actors in Belarus ("new opposition") try to circumvent state pressure through social networks which become substitute both for organizations and mass media, forming thus necessary foundations for mobilization by opposition groups. Meanwhile, lack of communication skills accompanied by absence of encompassing internal and external communication strategies often labeled as "communication cleavage" is described by experts as one of the most important deficiencies of Belarusian civil society. The overarching goal for civic and political pro-democratic actors in this context is to enable networks with strategies and tools which provide a freer flow of information; strengthen and connect structural elements of the public sphere; mobilize democratic actors for collective political action.

In the second section "*Democratic actors online: empowered but inoperative*" it is shown that the Internet is often seen as a tool for circumventing of authoritarian state pressures and for overcoming 'communication cleavage'. However, the mechanisms through which this might occur are rarely specified by Belarusian pro-democracy actors. As a result civic and political actors fail to use new ICTs as an effective remedy for cleavages in public sphere, as a catalyst for networking and consolidation of democratic social movement. That's why it is important to develop strategic vision of new ICTs potential as of "possibilities set" for leverages cleavages in communication and democratic movement consolidation.

Third section "*Effective use of the Internet as a transformative tool*" describes the Internet transformative potential and presents arguments to prove that effective use of possibilities provided by the Internet in Belarusian context depends on comprehensive strategy based on awareness of structural opportunities provided by new ICTs and international experience of online activities strategic planning.

The next, fourth, section “*General frameworks for online strategies*” focuses on the framework for strategic alignment of general policy planning and online activities priorities. It is argued there that in order to benefit from new ICTs, an “alignment behavior” must be developed and cultivated. Therefore systematic thinking about internet usage in order to contribute to sustainability of pro-democratic civic and political actors’ efforts, and to affect authoritarian regimes is a must for consolidation of democratic social movement in Belarus. A window of opportunity opened where politics meet with the new media savoir

The last section “*Connecting priorities and online strategies*” focuses on effective use of structural opportunities provided by new ICTs: freer information exchange, more possibilities for framing and promotion, reduction of participation costs (through introduction of online participatory practices for “discontented groups” of citizens), greater organizational sustainability. Having a strategic alignment of movement policies and ICTs in view, these possibilities are to be interpreted within the two distinct but interrelated frameworks: movement “online presence” (communication and position propagation) and civic engagement (participative deliberation and collaboration). Online presence connected to social networks and able to successfully integrate user generated content while having control over it would enable movement leadership to offer on-demand access to current information; to allow the creation of a flexible information environment; to encourage the indiscriminate circulation of claims; to enhance the perceived legitimacy of activist claims by raising their profile; to provide flow of carefully crafted movement information ; to integrate and aggregate citizens’ contributions); to maintain organizational ties online; to coordinate globally. Agents of democratic change should also provide venues for citizens deliberative participation, including online practices of eParticipation. The latter should be understood as a distinct but integrative part of their strategy, as it has a potential as it has a potential to foster movement or organization transparency; to mobilize citizens through deliberative participation; to establish a new kind of collaboration with citizens incorporating citizens’ needs thus extending movement supporters network.

The exploration is based on analytical papers published by Pontis, BISS, IPM, NIISEPS, online analytical bulletin “Nashe Mnenie” and supported by interviews with representatives of various civil society associations. Theoretical framework of the research is informed by works of A. Gung, S. Coleman, B. Barber, M. Diani, J. Koteen, J. Luftman and others (for the complete least see section “References”)

1. NEW OPPOSITION: SOCIAL MOVEMENT THROUGH NETWORKING

Pro- democracy collective actors in Belarus (“new opposition”) try to circumvent state pressure through social networks which become substitute both for organizations and mass media, forming thus necessary foundations for mobilization by opposition groups. Consequently they face the necessity to enable networks with communication strategies and tools providing a freer flow of information, to strengthen and to connect structural elements of public sphere, to foster qualitative and participative deliberation, to mobilize citizens for collective political action.

Belarusian society is fragmented and characterized by political apathy and isolation of pro-democracy civic and political actors (individual, collective and institutional agents of democratic change) both from each other, and from the larger society. According to Belarusian-Slovak think tank reports, for instance, “the UDF (United Democratic Forces) in its current form will not draw support from the vast majority of political civil society groups which, for the most part, receive funding from foreign donors and are intent on using it effectively to reach out to people through focused campaigning. Instead of real action in the field, the UDF is likely to further increase its focus on the international community (which supports its current survival mode rather than serious development) and further positioning with respect to those already opposing the regime. Analysts are unanimous in the opinion that the Union of Opposition Forces does not have any serious hope of winning sympathizers among citizens” [Pontis, 2007]. The non governmental sector remains completely isolated from other sectors and therefore there are no possibilities of conducting programs externally directly, which effectively hampers its natural development and rules [Pejda, 2007; 4].

Because of that fragmentation of efforts, internal conflicts and lack of legitimacy (understood as trust to and authority of democratic actors) these actors are incapable to influence political process, while individuals are devoid of mechanisms for aggregation, expression and defense of their interests before the government and society. Though, there is a growing need for, and attention to the democratic modernization of society [Pontis, 2005b], and in spite of the fact that the potential advocates for change (e.g. the radicals) could be found in each of the focus groups, in each layer of the society [Pontis, 2005a], Belarusian pro-democracy actors are isolated and are often characterized by “a strong fear of an uncertain future, of (any) change, and of the repression that may follow any action, by widespread political apathy generally stated as: .nothing is possible, nothing makes sense [Pontis, 2005b; Pontis, 2006]

This pessimistic picture has become a major standpoint for any political research related to issues of democratic change in Belarus. Many experts ascribe the situation to the two major groups of reasons: 1) structural (authoritarian rule leads to distorted communication channels, restrictive measures and repressions discourage citizen from participation in pro-democratic activities); 2) behavioral (absence of communication skills, lack of competence in the field of deliberative practices, vertical structure lack of transparency and accountability of collective agents- political parties and civil society organizations).

Many Belarusian analysts and politicians argue that these impediments should be circumvented by means of designing alternative channels of communication, and by strengthening civil society organizations. However, significant efforts and investments put into civil society have not brought any visible effects. Basing at the assumption that CSOs (civil society associations) are the main structural element of civil society, foreign and domestic supporters of democratic change in Belarus have arrived to pessimistic picture of Belarusian civil society “dying a slow death” under the constraints of an authoritarian regime [Pontis,2007]. This tendency develops in parallel with disregard of the obvious fact that when CSOs are reinforced, the civil society becomes more formal, it loses its dynamism, and is easier to control. Being also a field of ideological conflicts, civil society can be progressive or conservative, and ,therefore, may even limit the democratic aspirations of the people [Santa Ana, 1994]. That does not mean that “civil society today are in the deepest crisis” yet. Rather the problem is that both the institutionalized opposition and the third sector organizations are losing moral legitimacy in the eyes of the public and the part of intellectual community which is not directly engaged in their activities [Pintis, 2007].

As a result, pro-democracy actors operate mainly beyond conventional “civil society” paradigm being connected by informal networks of organizations, individuals and initiatives “divided by political interests, partly depoliticized under threat of persecution, or subordinate to other political forces” [Cavusau, 2007;7], or, in some cases, keep their autonomy and independence. Through these networks, individuals and organized actors engage in collective action, and in exchange of resources. Thiese changes signal that current Belarusian context could be better seen through the lenses of ‘social movement’ paradigm as defined by such theorist lie M. Diani and D. Della Porta [Diani and Della Porta, 2006].

The first signs of the shift were provided by young people participating in protest actions, and in election campaigns at various levels. Many of them registered their initiative groups to gain nomination as candidates in the local government elections in March 2003, and in the

parliamentary elections of 2004. CSOs activists being unable to continue organized functioning, participated in the whole array of democratic campaigns. Particularly, before the parliamentary elections of October 2004 a significant part of (political and nonpolitical) youth grouped into an informal youth network connected through seminars and gatherings organized by East European Democratic Center, Poland [<http://www.eedc.org.pl>]. The members of the network meetings identified themselves as a movement, and stressed that it should be as broad and inclusive as possible [Pontis, 2005b].

Just before presidential elections of 2006, a number of initiatives have emerged. Youth Initiative “Khvatit” (Enough) developed “a plan for a new youth movement” to mobilize young people through coordinated “negative and positive campaigns”, and to coordinate the existing capacity of several youth structures as well as young political leaders in the. Civic initiative Together proposed to reconcile political leaders (as independent pressure on political parties from civil society) by involving professional moderators in the candidate selection procedure regions [Pontis, 2005b].

It is important that both presidential candidates A. Kozulin in 2005 and A. Milinkevich in 2006 were initiators of movements “Peoples Will” and “Za svobodu” (“For Freedom”) respectively. It is also indicative that both movements are still associated exclusively with personalities of politicians rather than with democratic change per se [Pontis, 2005b]. Some observers perceived the idea of the “Za svobodu” movement as a step forward, as it has been built on the basis of regional activists and NGOs. Others questioned this model and stressed that despite its strong popularity, the movement would not attain stronger organizational backing. They criticized movement initiators for the timing and said that it had come too late [Pontis, 2007].

However, election and post election campaigns, CSOs (registered and unregistered) have produced a large number of educated and experienced activists [Pontis, 2005b; Pontis, 2007]. These activists, were not only intended to continue dissemination of their ideas, but thought, according to J. Čavusau, about broader strategy of the pro-democracy coalition [Čavusau].

Networks of campaigns’ activists and young politicians formed during election campaigns, and especially, on the wave of post-election protests in March 2006 are often labeled “new opposition” [Lalkou, 2007]. The phenomena is appreciated by experts and politicians, first of all, in regard to its mobilization potential. Meanwhile, they doubt that “the new opposition” could become an independent entity in Belarusian political life, because of the weakness both of its program and organizational functioning [Pontis, 2006]. However, isolated political parties

failed to gain control over this new emerged movement because of an absence of new initiatives, of organization skills, and because of increasing passivity of parties' elites[Pontis,2007].

It's indicative then that "For Freedom " movement has not dissolved. Its strategy, publicized in 2007, is built around the following objectives: *networking* ("building and extension the existing network, involving new groups and improving the organization of cooperation with the existing ones"); "*consolidating democratic forces* that share the movement's objective (values) and coordinating their activities"; *mobilization and campaigning* ("raising public awareness, civic protest, solidarity campaigns"); *informing and framing* ('positive alternative"); *training* ("developing training system for activists (preparing specialists for democratic government of Belarus, local self-government, civic education, internships, conferences, round tables)"; *policy influence* ("coming up with the alternative solutions for the most pressing public issues"); global presence (international contacts and lobbying activities and projects aimed at democratization of Belarus in international organizations and foreign countries)[The Strategy of the Movement for Freedom , 2007]².

Due to the effectiveness of network structure for movement consolidation and mobilization, the challenge is to develop strategies for strengthening democratic actors networks rather than to try to bring them back under the umbrellas of isolated and ineffective NGOs and political parties. Democratic social movement in Belarus thus can be understood as social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors circumvent state control and engage in collective action combining interconnected strategies (primarily networking and citizens' deliberative participation initiated and supported by such networks). These strategies are aimed at enhanced legitimacy and efficiency of attempts to promote democratic change, formation of structured issue driven relations of democratic actors based on sustainable strategies instead of ad hoc opportunities or personal contacts; provision of alternative interconnected public sphere

Benefits of networking for movement mobilization and consolidation

First, opposition networks provide channels through which uncensored information circulates. They circumvent the state censorship controls by passing along written materials and gossip. Networks structure the diffusion of information. \

Second, networks use social contacts for raising money, locating, and sharing the material resources necessary for mobilization.

Third, as networks expand, the risks of illicit association become shared and the individual risk incurred in oppositional activity is reduced.

Fourth, the sharing of risks, information, and material enhances social solidarity and increases the likelihood that a collective identity will emerge.

Fifth, as networks expand and take on a more oppositional identity, they begin to substitute for a public sphere. New organizations articulate a variety of positions and pose alternative tactics for confronting the state. Interactions within the network form a context for micromobilization processes: frames and counter-frames are proposed, and adopted or rejected as the population of organizations grows or diminishes.

[Osa, 2003; 77-78]

avenues (mini publics) for influential political debate .

However, pro-democracy actors (both “new” and “old”) have to face the same constraints placed by the institutions of repression and the structure of authoritarian state :

- political opportunities are limited because the state does not permit institutional access to policy makers, the media and the courts;
- the sphere of civic association is restricted to a narrow range of non-political organizations, and social activity is channeled into officially sanctioned organizations, while many forms of association independent from state are considered illegal by authorities;
- repressions push civic activists towards individual work approach;
- policy debates are attenuated through government control of the media and adherence to the 'party line'. The public sphere is replaced by an 'official' one [Pontis, 2006; Osa, 2003]

Conclusion. Meanwhile, lack of communication skills accompanied by absence of encompassing internal and external communication strategies often labeled as “communication cleavage” is described by experts as one of the most important deficiencies of Belarusian civil society. The fundamental goal for civic and political pro-democratic actors in this context is to enable networks with strategies and tools which provide a freer flow of information; strengthen and connect structural elements of the public sphere; mobilize democratic actors for collective political action.

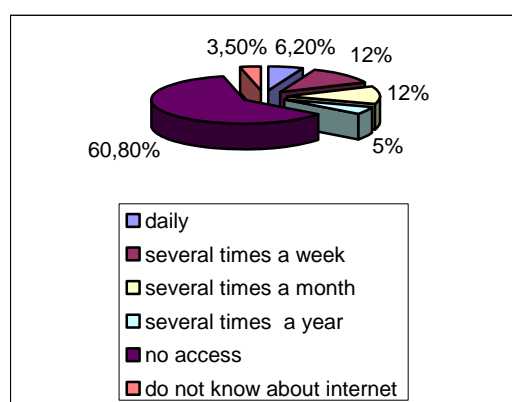
2. DEMOCTATIC ACTORS ONLINE: EMPOWERED BUT INOPERATIVE

The Internet is often seen as a tool for circumventing of authoritarian state pressures and a surmounting ‘communication cleavage’. However, the mechanisms through which this might occur are rarely specified by Belarusian pro-democracy actors. As a result civic and political actors fail to use new ICTs as an effective remedy for cleavages in public sphere, as a catalyst for networking and consolidation of democratic social movement

The Internet and new ICTs are often seen as a means to circumvent authoritarian state pressures, and to overcome impediments for the free flow of information. Many pro-democracy actors (organizations and individuals) have established their presence online. However, web sites are used by them primarily as a top-down information-disseminating tool rather than as a means to increase internal democracy or to enhance relationships between citizens and politicians.

While the potential of ICTs for election campaigning in Belarus has been described as early as 2001, it was only in 2006 that the use of the Internet during elections became visible. Blogs, forums, livejournal online communities, flashmobs have become very new and prominent features of 2006 presidential election campaign in Belarus. Independent online sources managed to compete with "newspapers, radio, and television under state control", at least for those who had occasional access to Internet (see Diagram 1. **Frequency of internet access in 2007**), and for their friends and relatives.

Diagram 1. **Frequency of internet access in 2007 (%)**³



³ Source: <http://baj.by/m-p-viewpub-tid-1-pid-4660.html>

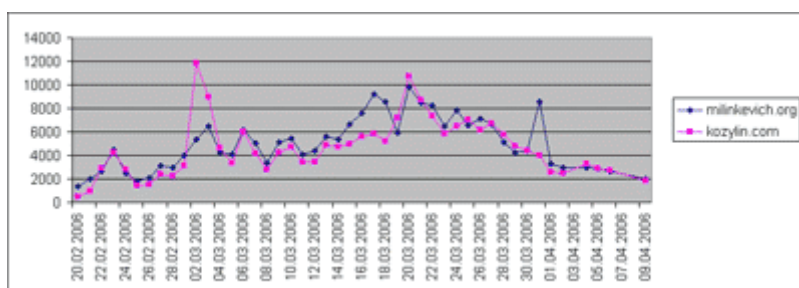
Many writers emphasized the important role Internet has played in recent presidential elections in Belarus. "With newspapers, radio, and television under state control, the Belarusian opposition is using new technologies to get their message out -- in particular the Internet", wrote Valentinas Mite on February 7, 2006 [Mite,2006].

Thus, the four 2006 presidential candidates - A. Milinkevich, A. Kozylin, A. Lukashenko and S. Gaidukevich - had their online venues. Opposition candidates A. Milinkevich (<http://by.milinkevich.org/>) and A. Kozylin (<http://www.kozylin.com/>) launched single-purpose campaigning sites. A. Lukashenko, being acting President, occasionally used official presidential web-site (<http://president.gov.by/>) to cover some election events. While S. Gaidukevich didn't use neither his party's web-site <http://www.ldpb.net/> nor online tools for campaigning.

None of the oppositional political leaders has developed a defined online strategy during 2006 elections, none of the political parties managed to use Internet potential of spontaneous online activism both for presidential campaigns and for party effective operation in general:

- ***Websites are used in an old-fashioned news provision way.*** (for instance, the survey of presidential elections candidates web sites conducted by e-belarus.org during 2006 election campaign period, and up to presidential inauguration (February 20, 2006 - April 9, 2006) show that only in one of seven cases, on 31.03, the peak was originated by political opposition call to online action. All the other peaks registered were a kind of online echo of offline events. The dynamics of the number of <http://by.milinkevich.org/> and <http://www.kozylin.com/> websites' visitors is presented in the diagram below.

Diagram 2. Dynamics of milinkevich.org and kozylin.com websites' visitors⁴



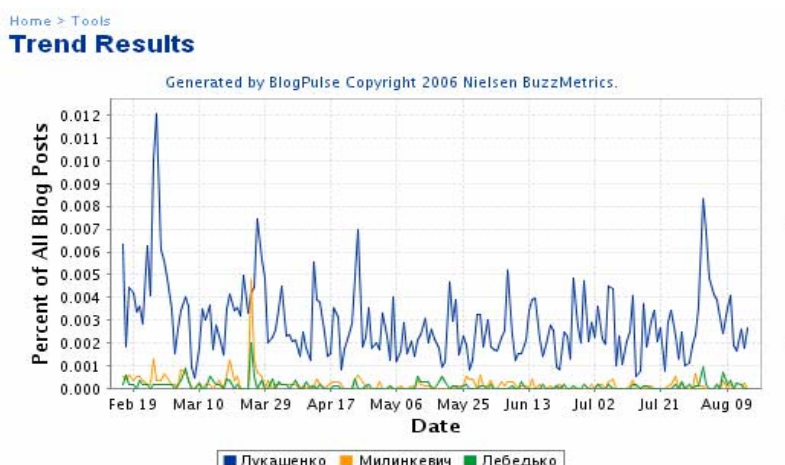
⁴ Source: ePolitics 2006: Online Campaigning in 2006 Presidential Election in Belarus <http://www.e-belarus.org/article/epolitics2006.html>

- Online venues were used by opposition rather actively in order to counterbalance their restricted access to traditional mass media. However, *they adapted online channels of communication to their traditional practices rather than adopted new web-based practices and structures in order to promote the effectiveness of their online and offline campaigns.*
- Oppositional candidates during elections and oppositional parties between elections *fail to establish a targeted online dialogue with different fractions of the society having internet access*
- *Political parties fail to use opportunities provided by online deliberative practices in order to extend their membership and mobilize supporters*
- *Oppositional presidential candidates and political parties during elections fail to use online venues to provide at least partial transparency of their campaigns* as regards financial issues. Even in case of possible governmental charges on violations of legislation, oppositional candidates could have provide some financial information on campaigning in order not only to make their campaign more transparent, but to present counter-arguments before state propaganda about "opposition paid by the West".

Even in the situation of practical absence of Internet [Open Net Initiative, 2006] censorship [Open Net Initiative, 2006] *they are hardly visible online in comparison with the acting president*, and normally become headliners only during mass protest actions (See Diagram 3. **Comparative visibility of Belarusian politicians on the web**)

- The majority *of Belarusian politicians demonstrate “communicational conservatism”* and do not intend “to trim global information network with their lace”[ИВАНОВ, 2007]

Diagram 3. **Comparative visibility of Belarusian politicians on the web**



In the current Belarusian context where the government tries to hold political monopoly over mass media, online venues are often seen as alternative information channels. This sphere of emerging possibilities for informing and engaging citizens is still relatively unregulated, and therefore independent online media developing is defined as one of the key priority areas in the attempts to balance limitations on the free flow of information. As publicist V. Taras has noted,

The internet in general and blogs in particular have been growing rapidly in the past year. This is the sign that the authorities cannot take preemptive action and are losing in the field of technology all the time. It is necessary to take the advantage of this fact in order to prepare for a breakthrough in media freedom in Belarus” [Naras, 2007; 64].

Indeed, **Belarusian online media** is a fast growing field: in comparison to 52 pure online information sources in 2006, the year of 2007 showed a more than double increase of the online information venues - up to 126. However, the growth of online media is not connected to the growth of their “readers”. This situation is due not only to the low Internet penetration rate, but to the fact that in spite of the new possibilities opened up by online tools and technologies, Belarusian online media seem to have based their strategies on traditional journalism techniques. A survey of [Belarusian mass media online](#) conducted by e-belarus.ORG in 2006 revealed that **the number and quality of Belarusian media online initiatives showed them to be in the period of infancy**. The overwhelming majority of them fell within the category of the news sites with very limited editorial news and some form of participatory communication. Belarusian online journalism is more occupied with introducing Web 2.0 technical features than with providing opportunities for citizens' generated content, networking and collaborative practices.

There are only four online venues devoted to citizens' journalism, from which one national <http://101blog.net/> is not operating currently , and the beta-version of another national <http://www.ibelarus.net/> has been launched this year. The remaining two are Vitebsk regional <http://news.vitebsk.cc/> and indymedia project (<http://belarus.indymedia.org/>).

Belarus CSOs use internet and new ICTs in a very limited way, even though doing so would reach out to a substantial number of Belarusian decision-makers, as well as the most politically engaged section of the population. Though majority of the CSOs actively use basic internet services and e-mail, almost 15% of them do not regard computer as a necessary tool in their activities. The major reason behind this relatively limited Internet activities seems to be a combination of a lack of resources, lower awareness of the Internet's potential, and, perhaps as a result of poor awareness, endemic "online-practices illiteracy", despite clear benefits that the Internet can offer.

The lack of awareness of Internet potential within “organized public sphere” of political parties, CSOs and media is counterbalanced by civic campaigns’ online tactics, online communities and individual civic watch online. During the recent years, there has been considerable interest in the apparent upsurge of various Internet tools for information dissemination, electoral and protest activities by various pro-democratic actors in Belarus. However, **Belarusian civic and political activists view WWW as a sphere of autonomous and/or alternative partisan political and cultural practices, as a reservoir of political ideas and experiments rather than a strategic tool for networking and democratic movement consolidation.** That is why there is little evidence of correlation between campaign related internet activities and campaigns effectiveness [Vadalazhskaja et al., 2007]. (For details see APPENDIX 1. INTERNET TOOLS USE IN CIVIC CAMPAIGNING 2004-2007)

Meanwhile, political public sphere understood as a totality of mini-publics represented by sporadic discussions, “organized presence” and media has been visibly extended through the new ICTs and internet development in Belarus. In many cases, online publicity has counterbalanced deficits of free political communication, at least, for a fraction of Belarusian society. It is obvious that creating new avenues for public debates, establishing online communication channels and networking are perceived as imperatives by many agents of democratic change. Therefore they, being in general unaware of the effects of using the Internet, “ nevertheless, climb on the bandwagon” [Maarek,2003] driven by new ICTs. It is indicative that there are no signs of comprehensive vision of new ICTs potential in the strategic plan of the “For Freedom

Movement”. “Working via Internet (promoting the Movement in Internet, web-site of the Movement, Milinkevich’s blog, PDF-periodicals)” is only mentioned as a way of information dissemination in the subsection “Campaigning to raise public awareness”. At the same time, “Civic protest”, “building the Movement’s network’, “Solidarity campaign” and other subsections do not include online activities⁵.

Conclusion. On the whole, though the Internet is often seen as a tool to circumvent authoritarian state pressures, the mechanisms through which this might occur are rarely specified by Belarusian pro-democracy actors. That’s why it is important to develop strategic vision of new ICTs potential as of “possibilities set” for surmounting cleavages in communication and democratic movement consolidation.

⁵ [The Strategy of the Movement for Freedom](http://www.europeanforum.net/news.php/432#2) <http://www.europeanforum.net/news.php/432#2>

3. EFFCETIVE USE OF THE INTERNET AS A TRANSORMATIVE TOOL

Misunderstandings of internet transformative potential often rest on anecdotal evidence, drawing primarily on isolated examples of internet-facilitated popular unrest. However, effective use of possibilities provided by the Internet in Belarusian context depends on comprehensive strategy based on awareness of structural opportunities provided by new ICTs and on international experience of online activities strategic planning. There is a need for an empirically grounded but theoretically informed examination of ICTs potential for pro-democracy social movement in Belarusian context.

In spite of the attempts to discuss and evaluate opportunities of online communication and mobilization, and in spite of the fact that organized political actors are often criticized for their failure to take advantage of the democratic possibilities of the Internet, prominent Belarusian teams of analysts grouped around Pontis, BISS and IPM think tanks have never turned to the issue of strengthening Belarusian democratic actors through the internet on a systematic basis. Majority of discussions and evaluations concentrated, as [Shanthi Kalathil](#) and [Taylor Boas](#) pointed out in other context, “on anecdotal evidence, drawing primarily on isolated examples of Internet-facilitated political protest Kalathil and Boas, 2003; 2]. In Belarus, these discussions are And was guided by popular mindsets based on both too low and too high expectations of possibilities provided by online communications.

These misunderstandings followed from the two major deficits:

- structural opportunities provided by internet in general and their limitations have not been theorized;
- international comparative experience often considered to be irrelevant or unfeasible “for a very specific creature” [Pejda, 2007;4] – Belarusian society

For our purposes, structural opportunities provided by new ICTs could be briefly summarized as follows.

1. Low costs of producing, storing and, especially, disseminating information
2. Direct link between sender and receiver
3. Selection of receivers
4. One-to-many, one-to-one, many-to-one and many-to many modes of communication
5. Speed of information

6. Interactive capabilities
7. Decentralized architecture
8. Global presence

These structural opportunities provide a number of benefits for political communication, information exchange and framing, promotion of collective identity, deliberative participation, networks and organizations sustainability.

Particularly, ICTs

- ***significantly reduce the costs associated with political communication:***
Traditionally, engagement in politics and political participation have been limited by the barriers of time, money, or space. With ICTs, the costs of entry on the public sphere are lowered and the communication of ideas is much less dependent on financial and material resources. It is no longer necessary to be physically present at a certain place and time to take part in a political action. People can exchange ideas, build up political organizations, and coordinate their actions without face-to-face contact, which allows dispersed individuals to get involved in collective actions [Maarek, 2003];
- ***generate new ways of interactions between individuals, which in turn produce qualitative effects on political activism:***
ICTs contribute to intensify the actors' sense of involvement for at least two reasons. First, people have the impression of counting more than with traditional means of communication. Second, ICTs give the organization in which they are applied an image of a powerful and efficient agent, able to exert influence on its environment. ICTs also increase the formation of collective identities [Maarek, 2003].

However, if not strategically comprehended, these advantages could turn into threats. B. Barber , for instance, emphasizes four “caveats” of new ICTs:

- ***speed*** (the new digitalized, computer-based technologies are fast);
- ***simplicity*** or simple-mindedness (the new technologies can become reductive, binary);
- ***privileging of users' solitude*** (the new technologies can isolate and atomize us);
- ***pictoriality*** (the new technologies privilege images and sounds over text even though today they are primarily text-based);

- **lateralness** (the new technologies offer a horizontal or lateral medium of communication, point to point rather than vertical);
- **privileging of the *informational*** over wisdom (the new technology privileges raw data, information over knowledge); its immediacy (as a point to point medium it eschews editing, monitoring, teaching and oversight);
- **segmentation** (the new technologies divide audiences into segments, pieces, and groups, instead of encompassing them as a national or communal whole – as the traditional broadcast networks once did) [Barber 1998, 2001].

Therefore, in order to use these benefits effectively it is important to develop mechanisms intended to counterbalance problems associated with them, namely information overload, threats to privacy, push-button decision making and fragmentation of public sphere (For details see Table 1. below).

Table 1 **The potential impact of ICT on political communication**⁶

<i>Properties of ICTs</i>	<i>Potential benefits</i>	<i>Problems or issues</i>
Low costs of producing, storing and, especially, disseminating information	Easy access to the production of information Big amounts of information can be made available to the public	Information overload
Direct link between sender and receiver	Direct communication: media can be bypassed	Risks of propaganda Lack of mediators able to play a critical function
Selection of receivers	Targeted communication Closed group communication	Privacy
Speed of information	Possibility of constant updating Enhanced data gathering	Costs of maintaining systems Push-button decision-making
Interactive capabilities	Feedback from receivers Information can be customized to receiver's needs	Privacy
Decentralized architecture	Possibility of designing systems independent from geographical boundaries	Fragmentation of public sphere Regulation is difficult
Global dimension	Diversification of sources	Cultural conflicts or homogenisation

⁶ Philippe J. Maarek, and Gadi Wolfsfeld, eds., Political Communication in a New Era: A Cross-National Perspective (London: Routledge, 2003) 1, Questia, 12 July 2008
<<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=108422555>>.

Indeed, for politically active Belarusian citizens access to the rich potential of the internet and other ICTs for in-depth info, links and interactive communication has become increasingly important. In a situation of a deliberative deficit, the Internet and other new ICTs may provide a new space for effective communication, issue propagation and civic engagement with lower costs of entry and absence of barriers that traditionally inhibit communication and mobilization

In this light, it is important to turn to analysis of international comparative experience, in order to get a wider view of the range of strategies available and a better understanding of the effectiveness and outcomes of various online tools in different contexts.

Therefore a balanced strategy should take into account an international experience, concentrating feasibility of policy transfer. There is a significant number of institutions providing comparative assessment of new ICTs potential for different political contexts and cultures: DEMO_net: The eParticipation Network (<http://www.demo-net.org/about-the-ePN>); Oxford Internet Institute (<http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/>) ; Association of

DEMO_net is a Network of Excellence project funded under the European Commission's sixth framework programme: Information Society Technologies IST (FP6-2004-27219). The project started 1 January 2006 and will be funded for 4 years. The overarching objective of DEMO_net is to strengthen scientific, technological and social research excellence in eParticipation by integrating the research capacities of individuals and organisations spread across Europe. The intention is to advance the way research is carried out in Europe with respect to quality, efficiency, innovation and impact to overcome the currently fragmented approach to eParticipation in this important European research area. The network with this overall objective will provide a major contribution to the strategic goals set by the European Council.

Internet Reserachers (<http://aoir.org/>); e-governance academy (www.ega.ee/); Institute fir Policy, Democracy and Internet (<http://www.ipdi.org/Publications/default.aspx>), Center for Democracy and Technology <http://www.cdt.org/>; Global Knowledge Partnership <http://www.globalknowledge.org/> - to name just a few of them.

A critical reflection on the significance of the Internet in the specific cultural and political context of Belarus, should be gained through access to the wealth of analytical materials provided by these institutions and other research centers as well as by individual researchers through

The Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet (IPDI) is part of the [Graduate School of Political Management](#) of [The George Washington University](#). Its mission is to promote the use of the Internet and new communication technologies in politics to enhance democratic values, encourage citizen participation and improve governance, at home and abroad; in short, to “democratize democracy.” IPDI conducts research that anticipates and interprets trends; publishes studies and guidelines that show candidates, public officials and activists how to make the best use of the new communication tools; and holds seminars and conferences that advocate best practices, teach new skills and allow for the national and international exchange of ideas on the democratizing uses of the Internet and other new technologies.

- translation of relevant publications;
- systematic participation in international conferences and workshops;
- membership in relevant networks;

Establishing expert network “tailored” to answer challenges of Belarusian context and to provide efficient policy transfer in the field.

Conclusion. In short, effective use possibilities provided by internet in Belarusian context depends on comprehensive strategy based on awareness of structural opportunities provided by new ICTs and international experience of online activities strategic planning.

4_GENERAL FRAMEWORK FOR ONLINE STRATEGIES

It is certainly not the zealots of technology alone who are to blame for the fact that the democratic potentials of technology have not yet been exploited. Cyber-enthusiasts riding the electronic frontier understand technology well enough but misunderstand democracy completely; democrats tend either to ignorant enthusiasm or Luddite fearfulness. But in the end, the real challenge is political not technological, and if democracy is to benefit from technology we will have to start not with technology but with politics[Barber,2001].

As it has been shown before, pro-democracy actors have tested many online techniques recently. However, very few of these attempts managed to generate visible return. That led to a kind of disappointment, frustration and, in many cases, loss of credibility by those who instigated the activity. Consequently, though agents of democratic transition in Belarus have become aware of the internet potential, actors interviewed often responded with one or more of the following rationales for not pursuing this important technology as part of their strategy:

- We have too many other priorities and can't focus on online strategy
- We don't know how to do it
- It's not part of our vision
- Internet penetration in Belarus is too low, that is why internet cannot become a n instrument or mobilization
- We can't afford to spend money on website and other technically savvy innovations

It is indicative, then, that there have been very few attempts to “put together” lessons learned from online activities. And those few ones were based, generally, on description rather than analysis of single cases. That brings us to the fact that systematic thinking about internet usage in order to contribute to sustainability of pro-democracy actors’ efforts, and to affect authoritarian regimes is a must or Belarusian democratic actors.

Such a strategy understood as a set of decisions that enable and/or transform movement or organizational policies, must be concerned not just about technology choices but also about the relation between technology choices and strategic choices of a movement or an organization. Such an approach differs from both passive attitude and ad hoc operational planning by the awareness that:

- online activities could be really effective only in case online strategy is aligned with actors’ general strategic visions and plans (definition of strategy);

- careful planning of online activities requires leadership to be knowledgeable about how the new technologies can be integrated into organizational activities (leadership);
- strengths and weaknesses of the technologies in question and their policy related implications are to be carefully weighed to set priorities;
- technically savvy people should be involved into discussion of strategic priorities (skills);
- comparative international expertise rather than intuition of domestic self taught and self appointed experts should lay theoretical basis for strategy development rather than (competence, expertise).

The suggested approach should also include various levels of online strategy planning:

- Program strategy – major directions of internet structural opportunities adoption to expand , improve and modernize or transform pro-democratic social movement;
- Recourse support strategy – ways to maximize the supporting human, financial, and technical resources essential to achieving goals defined by strategic plan
- Operational strategy – developing capabilities to carry out strategic initiative through analysis of barriers to overcome, designation of avenues for action, and through expertise enhancement.

Furthermore, the resulting advantages of the strategic approach are presented in Table 2. outcomes of strategic alignment of online practices and movement policies compared to passive and ad hoc attitudes.

Any careful and detailed strategy should address the challenge of “digital divide” understood in terms of Internet access and computer literacy in Belarus. Though, as Nick Couldry states, the answer to the question what will be solved if the digital divide were ended is still unanswered [Couldry,2007]⁷, we argue that effective online strategy should combine both online and offline activities to counterbalance digital divide. Table 3 - **Assessment of the efficiency of online and offline practices for communication and mobilization** - provides some important online/offline linkage advantages which the internet and new ICTs can potentially bring .

⁷ “Where the term has an economic focus, the answer is market functioning; more people online would increase the size, scale, and, perhaps, efficiency of markets. Where the terms points to pre existing social inequalities...the answer is also clear...But if we use digital divide to pint a political lack, the answer is uncertain: a digitally more connected citizenry would result in what exactly for democracy” [Couldry,2007;390].

Table 2. Outcomes of strategic alignment of online practices and movement

	Passive attitude. Website as a shop window.	Ad hoc activities	Policy aligned online strategy
Effective use of structural opportunities provided by Internet			
Movement/organization empowerment	Little	Partial	Significant, transformative
Counterbalance to weaknesses and threats (censorship, surveillance, lack of competence and awareness)	No	No	Balanced approach taking into account threats of surveillance and preparatory measures
Quality of debate			
Equality	Reproduce existing inequalities of access to public debate	May temporarily transcend existing inequalities if designed for that purpose	Designed to include all voices on permanent basis through various techniques, including combination of online and offline activities to counterbalance digital divide
Reasonableness	Does not foster ideal deliberation	Often falls short of ideal deliberation due to short term purposes and lack of skills	Aimed at creation of structural opportunities for ideal deliberation
Information	Static, often obsolete or irrelevant	Based on specific agenda solely, may provide partial or ill- considered information	Aimed to inform citizens by offering on- demand access to current information and by encouraging the indiscriminate circulation of claims
Aligning policies with preferences			
Linkages between the actors	No	Yes, if it is important for definite campaign	Sustainable networking
Transmitting preferences	Declarative statement of preferences	Yes, as a byproduct of campaign or if campaign is designed directly with this purpose	Aimed at transmitting interests after they have been appropriately articulated and combined into a social choice
Solving particular public issues			
Solving particular public issues	No	Probably as a result of an effective campaign. Sometimes unbalanced or impartial	Yes, based on balanced social choice achieved through strategically planned online debates and consultations
Recurrence			
Recurrence	Rare, centralized, one shot	Frequent , one-short, centralized or decentralized	Frequent, sustainable, planned as centralized or decentralized
.Added value in terms of influence and long term consolidation			
Added value	Insignificant	Possible single issue influence, short-term consolidation	Produce new structural opportunities for influence on decision- makers (both in government and in movement), long term consolidation of civic and political actors through carefully designed online deliberative participatory practices and networking

Table 3. Assessment of the efficiency of online and offline practices for communication and mobilization

	Offline	Online	Strategic Combination
Character of participation and deliberation			
Capacity of meetings and their frequency	Low	Moderate-High	High
Participation bias (representation)	Depends on design affected by absence of interests in younger generation	Depends on design Overrepresentation of digitally empowered (digital divide). More interest of younger people	Digital divide counter balanced
Deliberative quality	Depends on subject and design. Not inclusive (often self-selected participants who are ready to take the costs of time and etc.), not equal. Makes additional information available	Depends on subject and design. Equal but not inclusive (in their opportunities and capabilities to produce ideas and claims (writing, asynchronous communication). Epistemic advantages-knowledge sharing. Recurrence and monitoring increase the rationality of deliberation	Depends on subject and design More equal and more inclusive
Information pooling and individual transformation			
Informing collective and institutional actors	Low. Depends on subject and design	High moderate. Depends on subject and design. Easy to gain information for all actors of considered interest values and preferences. More informal possibilities to officials to gain information on public choice.	High. Depend on subject and design Interest of young people stimulated
Informing citizens	Low . Information gap. Accountability deficit.	High Fills the information gaps, counter balances absence of access to mass media Ability to monitor digital divide	High. Digital divide counterbalanced by media mix tactics
Democratic skills and socialization	Low	High. Educative forums, skills of proposal formulation and justification. Recurrent deliberation is more likely to contribute to development of democratic skills and dispositions. Interaction increases both incentives and opportunities or cooperation	High
Popular control			
Official accountability	Low	Moderate. More possible in the situation of the information gap	Moderate.
Justice of representation (balance)	Low. Enhancing the voice of disadvantaged requires their presence and accessible models of deliberation. Barriers for political opponents	Moderate. More opportunities but digital divide	High
Effectiveness of public participation	Low. Infrequent opportunities for those who will be subjected to a policy to criticize it publicly and to modify it	Moderate. More opportunities but digital divide	High
Political effects			
Popular mobilization	Low	Moderate – High. Can contribute to the mobilization of citizens when related to more encompassing agendas Policy positions receive more thorough attention. Channels of voice or those who were included may mobilize support for its continued existence May establish higher quality of deliberation and empowered to act upon the results of deliberation	High. Digital divide balanced. Offline advertising of online campaign. Wider mobilization

The procedure for developing policy-technology aligned strategy should go through the following stages [Luftman, 2003]:

- *Setting goals and establish a team.* Obtaining appropriate representatives from organization/movement leadership, organization members and technically savvy people is critical to the success of the process. The purpose of the team is to evaluate policies /online practices alignment. Assessments can be done via interviews, group discussions, questionnaires, or a combination of approaches. The time demanded depends on the number of participants, the approach selected (interviews, group discussions, questionnaires), the degree of consensus required, and the detail of the recommendations to carry out.
- *Understanding the internet – politics linkage* both in terms of comparative international experience and national context.
- *Analysis of gaps and setting priorities.* Recognize that the different opinions raised by the participants are indicative of the alignment opportunities that exist. The gap between where the organization is today and where the team believes it needs to be based on the structural opportunities provided by internet are the gaps that need to be prioritized.
- *Specifying actions (project management).* Naturally, knowing where the organization is in regard to alignment will drive what specific actions are appropriate. Assign specific remedial tasks with clearly defined deliverables, ownership, timeframes, resources, risks, and measurements to each of the prioritized gaps. *Developing and implementation of success evaluation procedures* This step necessitates revisiting the project plans. The review of the measurements should serve as a learning vehicle to understand how and why the objectives are or are not being met.

•

Conclusion. By and large, to sustain the benefit from new ICTs, an “alignment behavior” must be developed and cultivated. The continued focus on understanding the alignment of general policy planning and ICTs implementation priorities could open new windows o opportunities for agents of democratic change in Belarus. Therefore systematic thinking about internet usage in order to contribute to sustainability of pro-democratic civic and political actors’ efforts and to affect authoritarian regimes is a must for consolidation of democratic social movement in Belarus.

5. CONNECTING MOVEMENT PRIORITIES AND ONLINE PRACTICES

Having a strategic alignment of movement policies and ICTs in view opportunities provided by new ICTs are to be interpreted within the two distinct but interrelated frameworks: movement “online presence” (communication and position propagation) and civic engagement (participative deliberation and collaboration.) Engaging citizens is a key factor for pro-democracy movement sustainability. Agents of democratic change should also provide venues for citizens deliberative participation, including online practices of eParticipation, which should become a distinct but integrative part of their strategy.

5.1 General remarks

As it has been shown in the previous sections, Belarusian pro-democracy actors face the tasks of providing organizational and technical recourses to fill the gaps in communication and to foster democratic movement consolidation. In an online strategy context, these challenges can be translated into a set of possibilities based on effective use of structural opportunities provided by the Internet and new ICTs, namely:

- Information exchange
- Framing
- Reducing participation costs (introducing online participatory practices for “discontented groups” of citizens)
- Promotion of collective identity
- Organizational sustainability

In terms of communication and information exchange, online tools could be used to increase a person’s ability to integrate and retain new political information, thereby facilitating increased participation, specifically:

- to offer on-demand access to current information (allowing an individual to access relevant information quickly and easily when she is most receptive to it may facilitate information absorption);
- to create a flexible information environment, in which an individual may tailor how he encounters content so that the experience best suits his learning style (for example, content may be provided in a range of modalities, including text, images, audio, and video, and with a variety of levels of interactivity, from static documents and reports to dynamic user-controllable models);

- encourage the indiscriminate circulation of claims;
- facilitate cross-referencing and fact checking.

In terms of framing (shaping the language in which movement is discussed, crafting narratives used to describe a movement with the objective of this process is to justify activists' claims and motivate action using culturally shared beliefs and understandings[McAdam, McCarthy, Zald, 1996]), new ICTs make information flows less constrained, more rapid, and provide tools for user generated and collaborative content, which enables

- to enhance the perceived legitimacy of activist claims;
- to provide flow of carefully crafted movement information, in the form of frames, across networks of influence;
- to exert pressure on the mass media;
- to create activist news media as a means of bypassing gatekeepers;
- to develop global reach ICT-mediated dissemination strategies;
- to generate publicity and news coverage(activists who provide information in a format that is easy-to-use and easily verified are more likely to have their views and interpretations presented alongside those forwarded by elites.

In terms of participation costs new ICTs could facilitate creating of new low cost forms of participation as well as group formation, retention and recruitment. Particularly, online communities can

- significantly reinforce existing social networks;
- allow them to connect with those who hold different views;
- provide the largely passive support base

In terms of promotion collective identity online strategy should be formulated so that it could

- foster collective identity across a dispersed population, which organizers can then mobilize in collective action;
- influence online forums for issue-based communication which can potentially strengthen the participants' identification with the movement
- to integrate and aggregate small contributions (**microcontribution strategies**) : "having contributed to a movement, an individual is likely to feel more committed to the issue and more certain that action was required"[Kelly, 2006]

In terms of organizational sustainability online strategy could provide mechanisms

- to maintain organizational ties online so that fewer supporters were needed to keep movement active;

- to coordinate globally as the national context actions function as apart of a larger international collective movement;
- to produce sustained action comprised of many brief, local protest and enhance movement identity by connecting them together;
- to build up networks of a movement entrepreneurs(individuals who are motivated by individual grievances to undertake social movement activity and who rely on their own skills to conduct their actions) network;
- to develop capacity for integration transient, fragmented, and pluralistic issue groups that exist only for the duration of a single political effort;
- to build up and support networks of individuals in order to ore effectively use small scale acts of support;
- Be able to set up hybrid organizational forms, combining hierarchical and nonhierarchical structures as fit their needs [Kelly, 2006].

Having a strategic alignment of movement policies and ICTs in view, these possibilities are to be interpreted within the two distinct but interrelated frameworks: movement “online presence” (communication and position propagation) and civic engagement (participative deliberation and collaboration).

5.2 Movement online presence

Online venues for a movement or an organization should expose points of collaboration between supporters and staff, and open channels of communication to all interested parties. A movement (and a party) cannot be successful without clarity on the guiding principals the organization

or network holds. These definitions and guiding principles can be enhanced and reinforced by audience participation and user-created content. A network of various types of online venues focused on specific issues can be established by a movement. These venues should be propagated across a variety of media in order to attract more interest to a movement or a party. Furthermore, in the context of lack of unbiased information and of declining civic participation, in order to engage and inform citizens, it is important to focus on non - partisan online venues

A good online venue is a network node with dense links, high site traffic and high online community activity.

What makes a web-site bad? Confused design, unclear authorship, frequent dead links, frequent pop-up advertising, failing to provide what your audience is expecting; slow loading graphic and features, too many layers of information.

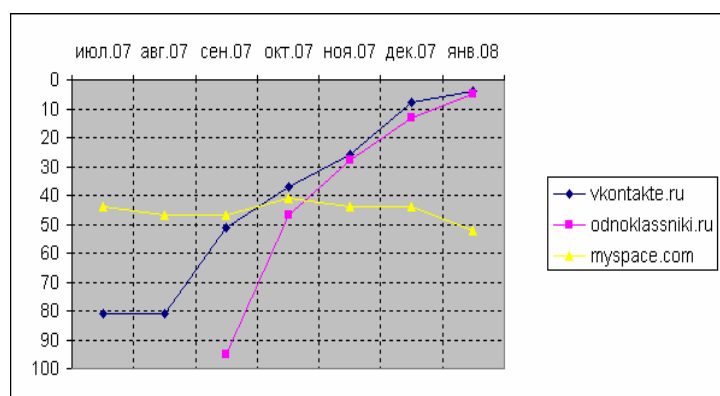
Nonpartisan political websites. Best practices primer handbook for individuals and small organizations publishing political information online. Institute for politics, democracy and the internet. Published in conjunction with the Pioneers in Online Politics Project. http://www.ipdi.org/UploadedFiles/nonpartisan_political_websites.pdf

which are explanatory, informational and collaborative. **Strategic guidance principle for development user centered online venues are summarized in Appendix 1.**

Social networking.

As Wikipedia explains it, “social network service focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Most social network services are web based and provide a variety of ways for users to interact, such as e-mail and instant messaging services”⁸. MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube are the most popular social networking websites and rank among the top 10 visited sites on the WWW⁹. It is important to note that during the last year, the popularity of social networking sites *vkontakte.ru* and *odnoklassniki.ru* has grown. Now *vkontakte.ru* holds the 4th place among the most visited by Belarusians, and *odnoklassniki.ru* holds the 5th place¹⁰ (See Diagram 4 below)

Diagram 4. **Rating of the most popular social networking sites in Belarus**



According to Shivani Aneja organizations can benefit from social networks through simple efforts, such as:

"Shared bookmarking" allows members to save links to their favorite online content and automatically share them with their friends. If a user reads your content and bookmarks it on their social networking site profile, you have gotten a word of mouth recommendation that will generate interest in your site.

Tracking the users who have bookmarked your content can offer insight about your support base, or perhaps more valuable, a target group that you have not yet reached. You'll have access to their likes and dislikes, favorite movies, books, music, websites, activities, and more. You can use this data to your advantage (showing the appropriate respect to the users' privacy) when planning mobilization and campaigning activities

http://www.navigationarts.com/insight/social_networking_sites/

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_network see at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_sites Russian at <http://www.social-networking.ru/>

⁹ Traffic rankings data were obtained from <http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top_500>.

¹⁰ Top100 websites in Belarus (July 2008) <http://www.e-belarus.org/news/200807161.html>

- providing relevant content to existing communities within social networking sites
- starting a group for your company that employees can join and outsiders can “friend”
- exploring targeted advertising opportunities that link to content on your own website, or within the social networking site
- Creating a widget, or organizing a promotion around an existing application [Shivani, 2008].

As C. Williams and G. Gulati have shown, on MySpace, for instance, supporters can create a page about themselves and explain why they like a particular party or movement leader, and etc. As Christine B. Williams notes, social network site could (1) connect supporters to issue collaboration tools, financial contribution channels, and peer and contributor networks, (2) propagate grassroots news and causes, and create a sense of ownership to the campaign through a defined channel. While political actors could use their online social networks (1) to expand the contribution pipeline and volunteer pool, and (2) communicate targeted event news and fundraising ideas, eliminating the need to send spam email to an already connected audience [Williams and Gulati, 2007].

User generated content is any content produced by the user – text, audio, video, categories or ranks, networks: blogs and vlogs (includes, posts, comments, photos/images, video, podcasts), photosharing sites, video sites, social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook (profile content and networks created), Wikis, Dating sites, sites where users tag, categorize, “dig” or rank items/people/services, classified ad sites, auction sites, MMPOGs, Second Life and etc.

In order to be effective and sustainable, political, non-profit, foundation, and association websites strive to recruit supporters, to build community and raise funds, points out John Sutton User generated content, he stresses, can be used to engage members, to recruit supporters, and to allow donors to preview the activity, compelling them to participate, as well [Sutton, 2007].

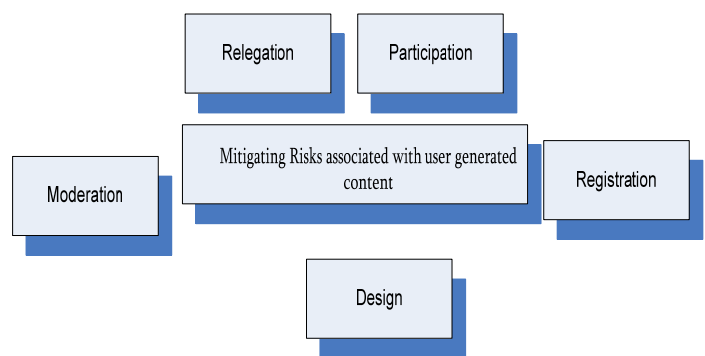
Effective user generated content implementations can add richness to content and value to the site through

- allowing users to contribute may provide more content than the staff can create;
- add depth and breadth by allowing users to provide additional details or insight that an internal staff may not have considered;
- improving site’s search rankings: users may include additional key words and phrases that help with search engine marketing;

- providing ideas on new tactics or issues or feedback on existing ones: users are usually very willing to share personal experiences with you and other citizens;
- increasing visitors' engagement with the website through facilitation community-building and increased loyalty to the organization;
- breaking down the communication barriers between the organization and the public [Sutton, 2007].

However, it is important to be aware of the risks related to it, namely poor quality of content, information overload and losing control over content which may be harmful to a movement or organization. Therefore movement leadership has to manage the risks through

- **Moderation:** Depending on the level of activity on your site, you may be able to monitor submissions and remove inappropriate content. High



traffic sites often allow users to moderate one another through a "report abuse" link. Strategies for moderation need to carefully balance the goals of the user with the goals of the organization, because users will become discouraged if they suspect that your open forum really isn't open. "In effect, user-generated content with an overly restrictive approval process will simply become another form of engineered content".

- **Relegation:** As demonstrated with the corporate and government examples above, many organizations want to leverage the power of UGC but in separate forums. You might create a distinct website that provides a less formal forum for engaging your users.
- **Participation:** Use negative posts as opportunities to create a dialogue with your users. Let them know that a real person inside the organization sympathizes with their frustrations and takes them seriously.
- **Registration:** Many sites require some type of registration (creating an account) and authentication (signing in) before allowing users to submit content. Sites like Amazon.com, Target.com, and WashingtonPost.com all require visitors to sign in before posting reviews, likely as an effort to reduce fake submissions. While there is no way to completely eliminate fake submissions, and an arduous registration may deter legitimate

users, it is more likely that serious visitors will take the time to register. Orbitz.com took this one step further, only inviting users that recently visited a hotel to submit a review.

- *Design:* User generated content does not have to be the main focus of your site. Comments from blog visitors are typically hidden behind a link: "Comments (8)". You can also design for situations where no one has posted any content yet, not drawing attention that the site is not active [Sutton, 2007].

As a result, appropriately integrated user generated content will help to reach audiences and to operate online effectively.

Control over the resources and individuals

There are two major approaches to website strategies 1) institutional (formal politics) - official presence, official organization's or movement's website, including, for instance collective blog or a number of individual blogs; 2) individual activist – initiative is left to activists with or without movement leadership knowledge or consent; 3) official presence and control through "harvesting" from individual blogs, for instance. It is t to control over such resources as blogs, wikis, you tube, podcasting, RSS. (Consult APPENDIX 4. WOKING WITH BLOGGERS as an example).

5.3. Civic engagement

Engaging citizens is a key factor for pro-democracy movement sustainability. Therefore agents of democratic change are also actors which seek to provide venues for citizens deliberative participation. It is obvious than, that enhancing citizens participation through online tools – eParticipation - should become a distinct but integrative part of their strategy, as it has a potential

- to foster movement or organization transparency;
- to mobilize citizens through deliberative participation;
- to establish a new kind of collaboration with citizens incorporating citizens' needs thus extending movement supporters network.

The available range of eParticipation practices can be sorted out in respect of specific types of participation, areas of participation, stages of policy process and computer-mediated communication and interaction tools.

Types of civic participation (related both to government and movement leadership) are defined by the aims of participative intervention [Mejer, Burger, Ebberts, 2008].

Political participation - actions of citizens that aim to influence the selection and behavior of political decision-makers. Political participation may focus on influencing formal political arenas or on protest against other actors. In this case the use of the new ICTs lowers costs of participation: small specific interests can be accumulated ("the long tail" effect); more venues for political participation can be created; cheap and accessible tools for comparison of political actors are available. Furthermore, online venues are used to enable citizens to organize political action; to hold a plea for broad political changes; to discuss political issues within their own social networks or in the wider online public sphere; to provide assessment tools of , or instance, their voting decisions.

Policy participation – influence on implementation of policies. Citizens can form the 'eyes' of decision-makers and this enhance the effectiveness of policies. They can also help each other to avoid certain forms of control, or to support other actors policies. Online practices (e-government) may provide transparency. For instance, citizens could send a letter of complaint to local or national authorities , and through the Internet the general public can also read these complaints and follow whether governments take timely and appropriate action. Naming and shaming of offenders has become much easier now, as such reports can be published on the Internet without a minimum cost or effort. New ICTs , particularly mobile phones and Internet, enables citizens to form easy accessible and open communities around policy participation. Online actions can be used in order to facilitate and support citizens' pressure on government to implement policies accurately; citizens support to each other in issues related to government policies; to expose offenders of legal norms; to consolidate citizens' efforts to undermine the implementation of government policies.

Social participation - interactions between citizens, connections within and between social networks are supported. The anonymous character of the Internet facilitates interactions on themes that are not commonly accepted in society. Wikipedia and Linux form fascinating examples of citizens not only providing each other with information and support but actually developing products which make life easier for everybody. Online venues could provide citizens with possibilities to maintain contacts with other citizens in the same area; to maintain network contacts within their social networks (bonding); to build networks of friends; to help each other through support or concrete advice; to exchange (digital) goods and services; to develop public goods together; to form social networks in virtual world.

At different stages of policy-making cycles, citizen can be provided with specific ranges of online tactics and tools listed in Table 4. **Online tactics and tools.** It is obvious from the table that while blogs and web portals are major venues and tools for participation, there is a great number of other interactive instruments, which, if properly applied, could engage citizens into influential dialogue both with government and movement leaders, and to provide incentives for movement networks extension and strengthening

Furthermore, in the framework of strategic planning, one cannot stop at this point, but rather will proceed to the issues of correspondence between distinct tools and stages of policy cycle, supported by thorough evaluation of specific features and access requirements for every tactical toolset. It is also important to remember that various channels of communications, not only the Internet, are available for any particular decision. Therefore a media mix issue should always be taken into account. And, finally, in order to be able to improve online activities, and through that, strengthen the movement, evaluation techniques to measure effectiveness and efficiency of a chosen tactical option are to be developed. These evaluation techniques may include number of subscriptions, analysis of usage statistics, inbuilt evaluation data collections, polls, focus groups and etc. Summary of interrelated tactical options, specific features, channels of communication and evaluation techniques is presented in APPENDIX 4. DESCRIPTION AND EVALUATION OF ePARTICIPATION TOOLS.

Table 4 **Online tactics and tools** (Source: DEMO_net ,<http://www.demo-net.org/what-is-it-about/eparticipation-areas>>)

Campaigning - ICT in protest, lobbying, petitioning and other forms of collective action (except of election campaigns, see electioneering as participation area)	Quick polls, surveys, online newsletters, online surgeries, ePetition tools, blogs, web portals
Community building/collaborative environments - ICT to support individuals come together to form communities, to progress shared agendas and to shape and empower such communities.	Quick polls, surveys, decision making games, virtual communities, eParticipation discussion forums, eParticipation chat rooms, blogs, web portals
Consultation - ICT in official initiatives by public or private agencies to allow stakeholders to contribute their opinion, either privately or publicly, on specific issues	Quick polls, surveys, decision making games, eConsultation tools, webcasting tools, wikis, , eParticipation discussion forums, eParticipation chat rooms, blogs, web portals, ePanels
Deliberation -ICT to support virtual, small and large-group discussions, allowing reflection and consideration of issues	Quick polls, blogs, web portals , eDeliberative polling tools, Argumentation support systems
Discourse - ICT to support analysis and representation of discourse.	Quick polls, blogs, web portals, Argumentation support systems, decision making games; eParticipation discussion forums
Electioneering - ICT to support politicians, political parties and lobbyists in the context of election campaigns	Quick polls, surveys, online newsletters, decision making games, online surgeries, e-participation discussion forums, eParticipation chat rooms, blogs, web portals
Information provision ICT to structure, represent and manage information in participation contexts.	Quick polls, search engines, online newsletters, FAQ (frequently asked questions), webcasting tools, wikis,Argumentation support systems, podcasts, blogs, CIS tools (map server for plans and maps, alert mechanisms - e-mail and RSS feeds, web portals, content management systems
Mediation - ICT to resolve disputes or conflicts in an online context	Quick polls, surveys, Decision making games, eParticipation discussion forums, blogs, web portals
Polling - ICT to measure public opinion and sentiment	Quick polls, surveys, Decision making games , eDeliberative polling tools, webcasting tools, blogs, web portals
Voting ICT in the context of public voting in elections, referenda or local plebiscites.	Decision making games , eVoting tools, web portals
<i>Areas of participation (tactics)</i>	<i>Tools</i>

Conclusion. Effective use of structural opportunities provided by new ICTs could establish set of advantages for pro-democracy movement in Belarus, namely: freer information exchange, more possibilities for framing and promotion, reduction of participation costs (through introduction of online participatory practices for “discontented groups” of citizens), greater organizational sustainability. Having a strategic alignment of movement policies and ICTs in view, these possibilities are to be interpreted within the two distinct but interrelated frameworks: movement “online presence” (communication and position propagation) and civic engagement (participative deliberation and collaboration). Online presence connected to social networks and able to successfully integrate user generated content while having control over it would enable

movement leadership to offer on-demand access to current information; allow the creation of a flexible information environment; encourage the indiscriminate circulation of claims; enhance the perceived legitimacy of activist claims by raising their profile to a level comparable to that of elite claims online; to provide flow of carefully crafted movement information, in the form of frames, across networks of influence; to integrate and aggregate small contributions (microcontribution strategies) : "having contributed to a movement, an individual is likely to feel more committed to the issue and more certain that action was required; to maintain organizational ties online so that fewer supporters were needed to keep movement active; to coordinate globally as the national context actions function as apart of a larger international collective movement. Agents of democratic should also provide venues for citizens deliberative participation, including online practices of eParticipation - should become a distinct but integrative part of their strategy, as it has a potential as it has a potential to foster movement or organization transparency; to mobilize citizens through deliberative participation; to establish a new kind of collaboration with citizens incorporating citizens' needs thus extending movement supporters network.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Before summarizing specific recommendations on strategic planning of online activities, some general remarks are to be made.

Firstly, it is important to note that pro- democracy collective actors in Belarus (“new opposition”) try to circumvent state pressure through social networks which become substitute both for organizations and mass media, forming thus necessary foundations for mobilization by opposition groups. Consequently they face the necessity to enable networks with communication strategies and tools providing a freer flow of information, to strengthen and to connect structural elements of public sphere, to foster qualitative and participative deliberation, to mobilize citizens for collective political action

Secondly, the Internet is often seen as a tool for circumvention of authoritarian state pressures and a leverage of ‘communication cleavage’. However, the mechanisms through which this might occur are rarely specified by Belarusian pro-democracy actors. As a result civic and political actors fail to use new ICTs as an effective remedy for cleavages in public sphere, as a catalyst for networking and consolidation of democratic social movement

Thirdly, misunderstandings of internet transformative potential often rest on anecdotal evidence, drawing primarily on isolated examples of internet-facilitated popular unrest. Effective use of possibilities provided by the Internet in Belarusian context depends on comprehensive strategy based on awareness of structural opportunities provided by new ICTs and international experience of online activities strategic planning. There is a need for an empirically grounded but theoretically informed examination of ICTs potential for pro-democracy social movement in Belarusian context.

Therefore systematic thinking about internet usage in order to contribute to sustainability of pro-democratic civic and political actors’ efforts, and to affect authoritarian regimes is a must for consolidation of democratic social movement in Belarus.

1. This strategic thinking is only possible in the framework of alignment of policy planning and online practices designing. More specifically, online activities could be really effective only in case

- Objectives of aligned strategy are clearly defined;

- Leadership is knowledgeable about how the new technologies can be integrated into organizational activities;
- Priorities are set through mapping strengths and weaknesses of the technologies in question and their policy related implications ;
- Skills providers are informed (technically savvy people should be involved into discussion of strategic priorities);
- International comparative expertise is consulted: comparative international expertise rather than intuition of domestic self taught and self appointed experts should lay theoretical basis for strategy development rather than;

2. The strategy should also be developed with the regard of various levels of online strategy planning:

- Program strategy – major directions of internet structural opportunities adoption to expand , improve and modernize or transform pro-democratic social movement;
- Recourse support strategy – ways to maximize the supporting human, financial, and technical resources essential to achieving goals defined by strategic plan
- Operational strategy – developing capabilities to carry out strategic initiative through analysis of barriers to overcome, designation of avenues for action, and through expertise enhancement.

3. It also should go through distinct stages:

- Setting goals and establish a team.
- Understanding the internet – politics linkage
- Analysis of gaps and setting priorities..
- Specifying actions (project management).
- Developing and implementation of success evaluation procedures

Having a strategic alignment of movement policies and ICTs in view opportunities provided by new ICTs are to be interpreted within the two distinct but interrelated frameworks: movement “online presence” (communication and position propagation) and civic engagement (participative deliberation and collaboration.)

5. Online presence connected to social networks and able to successfully integrate user generated content while having control over it would enable movement leadership to

- offer on-demand access to current information;

- create a flexible information environment; encourage the indiscriminate circulation of claims; enhance the perceived legitimacy of activist claims by raising their profile to a level comparable to that of elite claims online;
- provide flow of carefully crafted movement information, in the form of frames, across networks of influence;
- integrate and aggregate small contributions (microcontribution strategies): "having contributed to a movement, an individual is likely to feel more committed to the issue and more certain that action was required;
- to maintain organizational ties online so that fewer supporters were needed to keep movement active;
- to coordinate globally as the national context actions function as apart of a larger international collective movement.

6. Engaging citizens is a key factor for pro-democracy movement sustainability. Agents of democratic should also provide venues for citizens deliberative participation, including online practices of eParticipation - should become a distinct but integrative part of their strategy.

Agents of democratic should also provide venues for citizens deliberative participation, including online practices of eParticipation. Online participatory practices designed with regard to area of participation, stage of policy cycle, communication channels and specific context of general policy planning of organization or movement should become a distinct but integrative part of their strategy, as it has a potential to

- foster movement or organization transparency;
- mobilize citizens through deliberative participation;
- establish a new kind of collaboration with citizens incorporating citizens' needs thus extending movement supporters network.

