

The Analysis of Web Campaigning and the Use of the Internet by Candidates during the 2008 Parliamentary elections

Abstract

The figures presented in this study show a low level of web campaigning among the opposition and the government-supported nominees alike during the 2008 Parliamentary election in Belarus. The research indicates low personal input from the candidates to Internet campaigning and apathetic online activities on political parties' Web sites.

Key words: the Internet use, web campaigning, Belarusian elections.

Introduction

The Internet usage in Belarus as reported by both domestic and international organizations is sufficiently high. According to different estimates, 30%-57% Belarusians use the Internet. Remarkably, the respected source on worldwide statistical data, CIA World Book, and a bookmark link for international Internet statistics, the International Telecommunication Union, estimates that around 6 million people use Internet in Belarus. Unable to validate these numbers, I have attempted to analyze the Web availability with parliamentary candidates in the 2008 Parliamentary elections so as to compare how levels of Web campaigning reflect the estimated Internet usage in Belarus.

This research indicates that the candidates' online activities were rather limited. The number of personal sites, blogs, and even candidate profiles on party websites were few. The results of this study show that either the candidates ignored the potential of the Internet or we might need to reevaluate the Internet statistics in Belarus to clarify the real picture of Internet penetration in the country.

In contrast to the scarce online picture, most opposition forces did not boycott the 2008 Parliamentary elections. According to the data of the Central Election Commission, in total, 447 initiative groups applied for registration, of which 97 represented candidates from the United Democratic Forces (thereafter UDF). This number,

however, was cut short during the registration process. Consequently, these elections turned to be the most non-alternative in the history of modern Belarus. Only 2.4 candidates contested for a seat in the house of representatives. The elections were non-alternative in 15 constituencies, with one representative of the authorities. The constituencies count made 40, the democratic candidates excepted.

There were no democratic candidates in 9 out of 20 constituencies in Minsk. 263 candidates ran in the elections. 365 people applied for registration. About 80 applicants were not enrolled; more than 20 withdrew their candidatures (Batiukov, 2008).

The abovementioned circumstances conducted toward certain methodological limitations which surfaced during the research. This content analysis has covered only the enrolled candidates excluding many young Web-active candidates who failed to do it through the registration process. Apparently, the levels of Web presence would have been higher if younger and more Web-aware politicians had been enrolled by the electoral commission.

Yet, this study makes the first step to quantitatively measure Web activism of the Belarusian politicians during a Parliamentary campaign. Follow-up research will be essential to estimate the evolution of Web-activism in Belarus.

I. References

The 2008 Parliamentary Elections in Belarus. Prior to the 28 September Parliamentary elections, the Belarusian authorities had given a number of clear

signals of their interest to improve the election process. There were some minor improvements, which could indicate a step forward. But these elections ultimately fell short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections. Promises made by the authorities to ensure the transparency of the vote count were not properly implemented by election commissions. Imperfections in the legal framework underpinned a strictly controlled election environment with a barely visible campaign. The composition of election commissions diminished stakeholders' confidence in the process (OSCE Election Observation Mission, 2008).

According to the OSCE statement, political parties played a minor role in these elections. Most candidates ran as non-party affiliates, partially as a strategy to increase their chances. Yet, the opposition efforts were to no avail. When the final tally was counted, not a single President-opposed candidate won a seat (de Nesnera, 2008).

Web-campaigning. The rise of the Internet as a new efficient medium of political communication has been meticulously researched by scholars and practitioners worldwide. A plethora of research studies provide an in-depth view on the use of the Internet as a communication platform during electoral campaigns.

The Internet has transformed how people get information and is altering the fundamental nature of how ideas are communicated in society (Mossberger, Tolbert & Stansbury, 2003). In little more of a decade, the worldwide web has moved from being regarded as an esoteric electoral distraction to

a mainstream campaign tool, without which no modern election campaign would be complete. In all the advanced democracies, aspiring political leaders have been courting voters (and funding) through the web, from Britain's David Cameron and his "webcameron" to Barack Obama's sophisticated fundraising (Gibson & McAllister, 2008).

In studies on democratization movements, the Internet has the potential to foster the growth of civil society, and as a result leads to liberalization and democratization of authoritarian countries (Hill and Sen, 2000; Putnam, 1993). Belarus being no exception, the 2006 Presidential elections were coined by an anonymous blogger "The Internet Revolution," as a metaphor for the role the Internet played during the campaign and after-vote protests. The presidential candidates, especially in the opposition camp, through their proxies and web administrators, used Internet to promote their cause. In fact, all candidates had their websites up and running. Aleksander Luksahenka, the incumbent, had his official portal president.gov.by serving as a campaign site; Sergei Gaidukevich campaigned on his party site, ldpb.net; while two opposition candidates Aleksander Kazulin and Aleksander Milinkevich used Internet more extensively as both launched personal campaign sites – kozylin.com and milinkevich.org.

An important phenomenon available in many Internet-related studies and which is especially relevant to Belarusian realities, is *the digital divide*, the gap between the people with effective access to digital and information technology and those without it. Explored

by scholars starting in the late 1990s, the digital divide literature considers the systematic bias between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not, including users who have knowledge to use these technologies and users who do not. Authors such as Mossberger et al. (2003) make a strong argument towards the biasing power of the digital divide, describing how access to the Internet and knowledge to use it is skewed towards white, middle to upper class men (Cohen, 2005).

The studies on the digital divide in Belarus are yet to come. The problem is underresearched and demands a much greater attention from the intellectual community. ProBelNet.com, a research site aimed to study the Belarusian Internet, offers some analytical data on the growth of the Belarusian segment of the worldwide web and the regional gap of Internet penetration (for example, see works of Nikitenko, Vinokur and others). However, it lacks a much needed statistical verification of the qualitative analyses it contains.

No doubt, there is the digital divide in Belarus; it has an element of generation gap, as well. Iryna Vidanava, an independent researcher with a special interest in new media, offers some insight how new media has become a popular tool for youth dissent. Vidanava writes,

"Virtual activism has become an inseparable part of Belarusian reality, especially when it comes to our generation of digital natives. According to the statistics from December 2006, 32 percent of the working population of Belarus regularly uses the Internet. Of that figure, half are people younger than 30 years old. As reported by Be-

larusian Ministry of Statistics and Analysis, while in 2000 there were only two computers per 100 families, in 2007 the number of computers per 100 families increased to 26. For the families with children younger than 18 years old, the figure is even higher, reaching 40 computers per 100 households. The number of Internet users 16 or older has increased from 16.2 % in 2006 to 20.7 % in 2007 and the number of mobile phone users topped seven million last year” (Vidanava, 2008).

Vidanava has been a longtime editor of *Studenckaja Dumka*, a youth magazine which actively explores new digital formats of distribution after it was thrown out of the government-controlled distribution system in 2006. In her work, she indirectly acknowledges that the explosion of online activism in Belarus is mainly a youth phenomenon.

Summing up the available references on the web campaigning, we can single out the following functions of the Internet in political campaigns: 1) information supply, 2) volunteer recruitment, 3) mobilization, 4) fund-raising, and 5) participation and interactivity (Bentivegna, 2002). Whereas in the Western research papers these functions are fully explored, the cases of web campaigning in Belarus yet need to be studied and evaluated by web-focused quantitative and qualitative research.

II. Methods and Research Questions

The previous section detailed the available references on web campaigning and the role of the Internet in Belarus during elections. Given the current

study is focused on the 2008 Parliamentary Election in Belarus, the following research questions were addressed in this analysis:

- 1) Did political candidates have their personal blogs and campaign sites?
- 2) Which political forces were using web-campaigning more actively?
- 3) Are there age or regional differences in terms of online activism among the candidates?

The method used for this research is content analysis. The lists of candidates were retrieved from the sites of the Belarusian Central Election Commission (CEC), the United Democratic Forces, and Party Web sites. All persons registered by CEC were included in the analysis. Google, Yandex, and Akavita catalogs and search engines were searched, as well as Livejournal and vKontakte.ru services scrutinized so as to single out personal pages of the political candidates.

The unit of analysis was a personal page (at least, one HTML document with personal information about a candidate). Coding categories included a candidate's name, age, region (where he or she ran), party affiliation, political block, presence on vKontakte.ru, Livejournal presence, availability of a personal campaign site or blog, availability of a personal page on the candidate's organization site.

Some of these categories need to be explained. For convenience, I singled out three political blocks: the United Democratic Forces (ADS), government-endorsed candidates, and others. All candidates that won the election were labeled as “government-endorsed.” Others included all candidates who ran in-

dependently (were neither on ADS list nor on the circulated via the independent media “list of officially approved candidates”) and lost the election.

The category “Availability of a personal page on the candidate’s organization site” fixates whether a candidate has a personal page on the site of the organization he or she represents (political party, regional executive committee, an enterprise, etc.).

III. Results and Analysis

An important implication of the Internet is that it can give all candidates another means for circumventing the media, party leaders and other information gatekeepers in order to present their message, unfiltered, directly to the voters. In this medium, candidates are not constrained by time or space, permitting them the opportunity to offer details on their policy proposals. Candidates can present more personal information about themselves and other information about their past experiences (Gulati, 2003). To do so, many American, Polish, Ukrainian, Lithu-

anian politicians report to blogging, launching their personal sites aimed to promote their cause.

Political Affiliation and Web Campaigning. The current research shows that the personal involvement of the 2008 parliamentary candidates in online campaigning was rather limited. The following figure (Figure 1) shows the number of personal blogs and campaign sites by candidates of three main political “blocks:” The United Democratic Forces (ADS), the government-supported candidates (government), and others (who have either ran independently from both political spectra or were appointed to run so as to distract votes from opposition candidates (see Figure 1).

The data indicate that the number of personal sites was small. However, ADS was clearly more active in web-campaigning. 13 candidates on ADS list had their campaign sites or blogs. The government-endorsed candidates with one exception provided no personal input to web campaigning. The numbers are even more telling as it comes to political blogging (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Personal Blogs and Campaign Sites

Political block	No	Yes	Total
ADS	57	13	70
Government	110	1	111
Other	80	3	83
Total	247	17	264

Figure 2. Candidates with or without a Livejournal blog

Political Block	Without	With	Total
ADS	65	5	70
Government	111	0	111
Other	80	3	83
Total	256	8	264

Figure 3. Candidate personal pages on their organization sites

Political Block	No	Yes	Total
ADS	58	12	70
Government	98	13	111
Other	78	5	83
Total	234	30	264

Figure 4. Candidate Personal Pages on Party Sites

Political Party	No	Yes	Total
BAP	1	0	1
BNF	11	2	13
BSDH	1	0	1
BSDP	11	0	11
KPB	2	3	5
LDP	8	0	8
AHP	16	2	18
PKB	8	12	20
RPPiS	3	0	3
Total	234	30	264

Here we see that ADS was again the most active player on Livejournal platform with five candidate blogs, independents had three blogs, while the elected candidates (labeled in this research as government-endorsed) had no Livejournal presence at all.

A totally different picture we see in the number of personal pages on organization sites (see Figure 3).

Here we see that the elected are in the lead. This is primarily explained by the status they had before they ran for the Parliament. Many of the candidates were directors of large enterprises

or chairpersons of executive committees. In recent years, all Belarusian local municipalities, local governments launched their regional websites. Many included a personal page for the chair of the local executive.

Party affiliation also provided a more unified web presence for those candidates who either could not or did not want to campaign online (see Figure 4)¹.

Interestingly, both Communist parties demonstrated decent campaign efforts on their party sites, while the center-right spectrum of the Belarusian political field was more decentralized

<> Belarusian Agrarian Party (BAP, Беларуская Аграрная Партыя), Belarusian Popular Front (BNF, Беларускі Народны Фронт), Belarusian Social and Democratic Hramada (BSDH, Беларуская Сацыял-Дэмакратычная Грамада), Belarusian Social and Democratic Party (BSDP, Беларуская Сацыял-Дэмакратычная Партыя), Communist Party of Belarus (КРБ, Камуністычная партыя Беларусі), Liberal and Democratic Party (LDP, Ліберальна-Дэмакратычная Партыя), United Civil Party (АНР, Аб'яднаная Грамадзянская Партыя), Belarusian Communist Party (РКВ, Партыя Камуністаў Беларуская), Republican Party of Labour and Justice (RPPiS, Рэспубліканская партыя працы і справядлівасці).

Figure 5. Number of Personal Sites by Party

Political Party	No	Yes	Total
BAP	1	0	1
BNF	9	4	13
BSDH	1	0	1
BSDP	10	1	11
KPB	5	0	5
LDP	8	0	8
AHP	15	3	18
PKB	20	0	20
RPPiS	3	0	3
Total	247	17	264

in terms of web-campaigning strategies (see Figure 5).

The figure above shows that BNF and AHP candidates were more personally active on the web than the leftwing parties. It is also noteworthy that BNF launched a special blogging section for the party's most prominent members on the party site. However, the section remained inactive throughout the campaign. Some of the party's younger candidates preferred to campaign separately (either via Livejournal and personal campaign sites or via local media sites).

Age and Regional Differences. The digital divide in Belarus is still awaiting its study and needs to be statistically analyzed. Here we resorted to the analysis of web activities of all Belarusian candidates registered by the Central Election Commission. The age variation is demonstrated on the following charts. Figure 6 shows the average age groups with or without a personal blog or a campaign site.

Clearly, the younger are more apt to web activism. As for the representation of the candidates on organization sites is not that striking, the age groups in this case are distributed more-or-less equally.

The regional variations are revealing of the regional divide as it comes to web activism. The graph below (Figure 7) shows the number of personal candidate sites according to the regions they represent. The city of Minsk and Minsk region showed more web activities than the rest of the country combined.

The following tables further clarify these variations (see Figure 8, 9).

Conclusion. The 2008 Parliamentary Elections in Belarus can be characterized by a low level of web-campaigning by candidates from throughout the political spectrum. The ADS candidates were more personally active online than the rest. Party affiliation and sometimes belonging to the top ranks of the regional executives and enterprises provided some web presence to those candidates who did not personally campaign online. The regional divide and generation gap was also noteworthy as far as personal input to web campaigning was concerned.

The use of the Internet in this Belarusian election was practically devoid of such important features of web campaigns in the West as fund-raising and volunteer recruitment. The use of Web 2.0 goodies for feedback between politi-

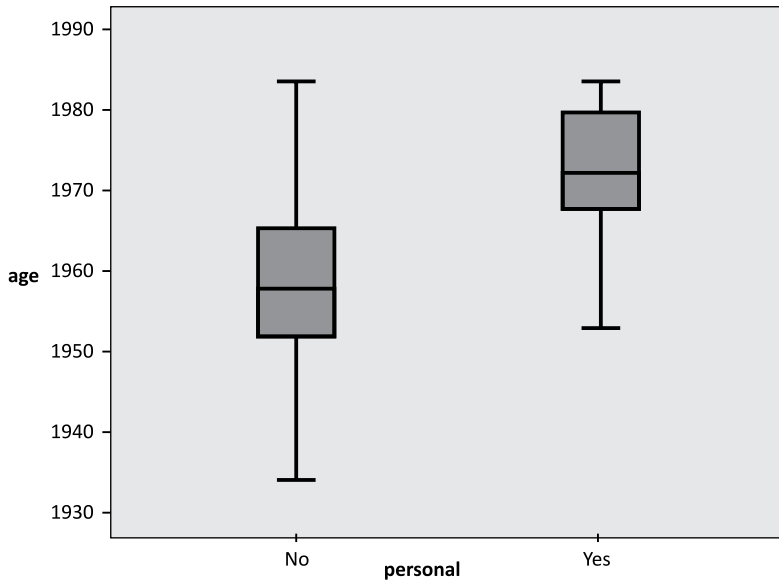


Figure 6. The average age groups with or without a personal blog or a campaign site

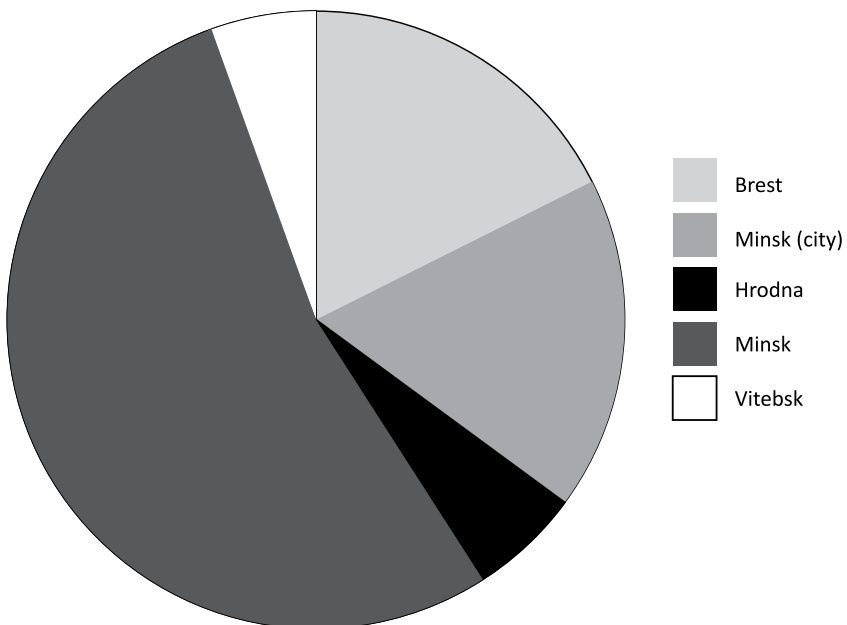


Figure 7. The number of personal candidate sites according to the Region (Voblast/Oblast) they represent

Figure 8. Personal Candidate Sites by Region

Region	No	Yes	Total
Brest	37	3	40
Homel (Gomel)	38	0	38
Hrodna (Grodno)	20	1	21
Minsk	32	9	41
Mahilou (Mogilev)	36	0	36
Vicebsk (Vitebsk)	31	1	32
Minsk City	53	3	56
Total	247	17	264

Figure 9. Candidate Personal Pages on Organization Sites by Region

Region	No	Yes	Total
Brest	37	3	40
Homel	32	6	38
Hrodna	17	4	21
Minsk	39	2	41
Mahilou	34	2	36
Vicebsk	27	5	32
Minsk City	48	8	56
Total	234	30	264

cians and the electorate, too, was limited to few blogging candidates.

This study focused solely on the registered candidates; many web-active politicians, not registered by the election commissions, were excluded from the analysis. Apparently, the statistical data would have been higher had the younger and more Internet-savvy

successfully made it through the registration threshold. It is worth noting that this study is just a first step in the analysis of nascent web campaigning in Belarus. Additional longitude research will be necessary to track how web activities by Belarusian politicians will have evolved over time.

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