

Human Rights Organisations and the Internet in Belarus

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Introduction

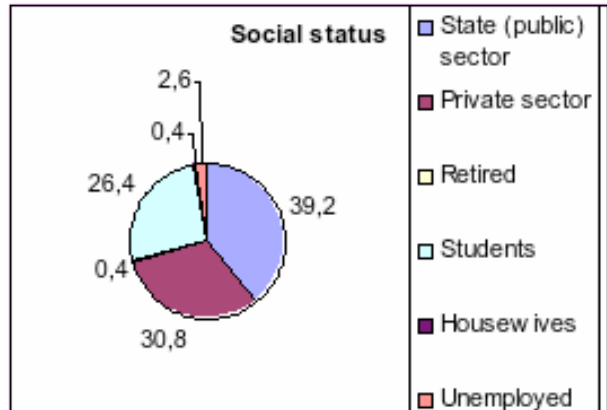
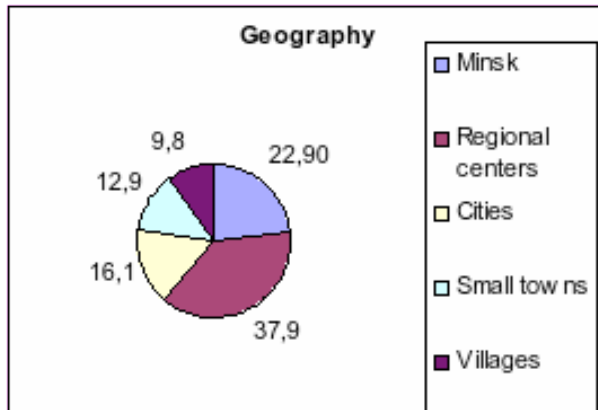
It is now generally accepted that the Internet has a great capacity to expand public access to information and to strengthen civil society through building national and international networks. Importantly, the Internet allows two-way communication: all Internet users can be at once speakers and listeners. “The Internet allows responsive communication from one-to-one, from one-to-many, and from many-to-one”. [1] Accordingly, human rights activists are becoming more and more motivated to take into account the Internet’s growing force, and to exploit its potential for communicating and sharing information.

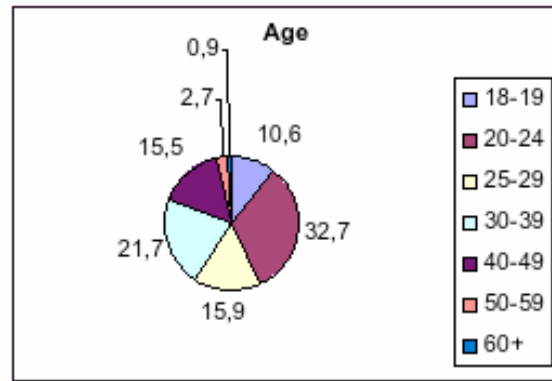
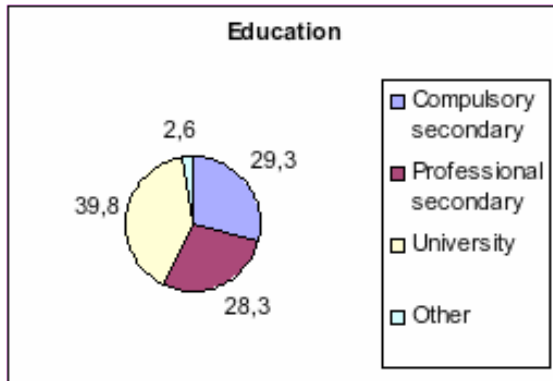
Interactive policy forums and email have become a major communication tool on human rights issues. The potential impact of the increasing use of the Internet to foster participation in policymaking processes is also tremendous: it is a means of speedy, inexpensive, relatively easy-to-use, difficult-to-restrict, informal medium which could spur public interest and desire to shape policy. [2]

This article will analyse to what extent human rights activists in Belarus have begun to tap into power of the Internet, what is largely missing, and what has yet to be done.

The Internet in Belarus: who has it?

In Belarus, according to statistics compiled by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), [3] there are 1,409,780 Internet users. [4] This accounts for about 14 percent of the country’s total population. A recent survey, conducted by the Belarusian Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research, indicates that people aged 20 to 24 (one third of the respondents) are the most active Internet users, and 50 percent of all respondents are university graduates. Remarkably, 40 percent of the Internet users are government officials. The majority of users (45.6 percent) live in regional centres, and 22.9 percent are inhabitants of the capital of the country. [5] So, the “average” Internet user in Belarus is a young governmental employee in his or her early twenties, with a university degree, and living in a regional centre (see diagrams below).





It has been noted that neither politics nor human rights issues are considered a priority among average Internet users. According to a survey conducted by the analytical service of TUT.BY,[6] only ten percent of TUT.BY portal visitors are interested in politics.[7] But taking into account that only an estimated eight percent of the entire population of Belarus are interested in politics,[8] it appears that the Internet audience is still more politically engaged than the “offline” population of the country. The analysis of 350 “political” forums on TUT.BY that have taken place between December 2003 and September 2004 (which were in fact spontaneous chats) shows that human rights-related forums make up for less than five percent of the total discussions.[9]

The Belarusian bureaucracy, which has resources more easily at its disposal, appears to have increased its use of Internet communication technologies: at present, more than 60 (out of about 200, or almost one third) of the Belarusian governmental institutions have their own websites.[10]

Belarusian legislators, as of October 2004, have launched five sites: the upper chamber of the parliament (the Council of the Republic),[11] the lower chamber (House of Representatives),[12] a deputy group at the lower chamber *Respublika*,[13] and two personal web pages of deputies. Of the 18 officially registered political parties seven (that is, over one third) have their own websites.

The majority of the official websites give thematically-organised content, which essentially duplicates information disseminated offline, and only six percent of them present some specific information accessible only online. Only three percent of these websites make governmental bodies more accessible to the public, and only four percent provide selected online services.[14]

The wealth of official websites does not necessarily break the informational gap between citizens and governmental institutions. Still, the governmental institutions are overall better presented online than either political parties or NGOs, and in many instances the government sites provide higher interactivity than other politically oriented sites. Moreover, online discussions on the governmental websites receive more publicity through government-controlled newspapers, radio and TV programmes.

Among the NGO community, out of the total of 530 organisations indexed by the NGO.BY portal, only about 64 (or 12 percent) are represented one way or another online, that is, have either a homepage, or a website, or an email address presented at NGO.by.[15] Out of 23 active Belarusian human rights organisations, only ten can be contacted online (that is, by email or on some online forum); only three of them have their own websites: the Belarusian Pen-Centre, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee[16] and the Belarusian Association of Journalists.[17] The other seven prominent human rights NGOs (the Belarusian Association of the Victims of Political Repressions, “Children Not for Violence”, the Belarusian Centre for Constitutionalism, Judicial Assistance to Citizens, Law and Action, Women’s Challenge, Law Initiative) provide only their e-mail addresses at NGO.BY portal.[18]

These figures illustrate that in Belarus NGOs seem to lag behind the official structures in using the Internet: the NGOs are almost three times less likely to rely on the Internet, even though doing so would reach out to a substantial chunk of Belarusian decision-makers, as well as the most politically engaged section of the population. The major reason behind this relatively limited Internet activities by the Belarusian human rights community 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.

Although the Belarusian government so far has not had a clearly defined practice of Internet censorship or interference with online activity, during the 2000 presidential election campaign and the parliamentary elections and

referendum of 2004, access to websites and online forums of the political opposition was allegedly blocked.[19] This may indicate that the government has already begun to impose controls on the Internet, threatening the potential of this new medium, and the NGOs would have to make an effort to catch up with the official structures to survive online.

The tasks at hand

Among major tasks before human rights activists in Belarus in this context are: (1) promoting the human rights agenda for the Internet audience (reaching out to both fellow human rights NGOs and the policy- and decision-makers), and (2) making more and better use of the Internet's potential for stimulating dialogue and advocacy on major human rights issues.

Promoting the human rights agenda and stimulating public dialogue are particularly important in light of the fact that the wider public in Belarus generally associates human rights with respect for civil liberties (rather than "social" rights), and even here the very understanding of "civil liberties" appears limited. Thus, only an estimated five percent of the population of the country see freedom of expression as the most important issue, while 13 percent regard participation in political decision-making as a priority.[20] These issues also top the agenda of the political opposition. The respect for political rights and civil liberties, including freedom of the press, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, are the main issues monitored by the country's major and most active human rights association, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee.

By contrast, other fundamental rights, such as freedom from discrimination (whether based on gender, religion, language, disability, or social status), human dignity, rights of the child, as well as social rights, rarely feature in human rights debate, and are apparently not considered "rights" the public at large. Therefore, the Belarusian NGOs should use the Internet's potential to raise public awareness of, and advocate the respect for, the wider range of human rights.

Further, Belarusian human rights activists have so far concentrated only on information gathering and dissemination, while the Internet offers many more benefits for human rights movement.[21] There are several other crucial aspects of human rights work, such as: activism, supporting and protecting human rights defenders, human rights research, education and training, and networking. However, these are still only possibilities, which have not been yet actualised by Belarusian human rights activists.

The overview of the Belarusian human rights organisations' websites based on Website Attribute Evaluation System[22] shows that while the data density (that is, organisational and operational information) of these sites is reasonably satisfactory, the interactivity of the sites leaves much to be desired. All the three sites belonging to the NGOs (mentioned above) present clickable, easy-to-download mission statements and information on various activities of the organisations, as well as clickable links to some other issue-related websites. The Belarusian Association of Journalists and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee websites provides in addition a searchable index of archived newsletters, laws, and selected other documents. But there are neither forums for the members of the organisations, no chat services for visitors on any of these websites.

The undeniable strong point of the Belarusian human rights organisations' websites is alternative information about political situation in the country, which otherwise is unavailable from the traditional and government-controlled media. Yet at the same time the NGO websites remain parochial, and provide virtually no information about human rights issues abroad.

The Internet audience in Belarus, accordingly, remains passive recipients of information concerning selected human rights issues, rather than active participants of a broad, ongoing and inclusive human rights debate. There is not a single online venue, which could provide an open platform for Belarusian Internet users to raise issues and questions, and exchange opinions and concerns relating to human rights issues and official policies in Belarus. Such a venue, if established, could create an online community of mutual support, and a space for properly organised online consultations supported by comprehensive background information. An action alert network similar to the International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX) is a particularly relevant model. This could not only bring to a public discourse the whole range of human rights issues, but could also help Belarusian human rights activists to gather evidence to inform authorities of the impact of their decisions and activities, and to reach the agenda setters for the purpose of domestic advocacy for democracy and human rights.

Conclusion

The analysis of the current situation in Belarus indicates that, at present, the official structures are seemingly more active and effective users of the Internet than the human rights NGOs. Even though such Internet literacy of the

administration creates opportunities to reach policy-makers online, the Belarusian NGOs nevertheless have yet to use all the advantages that the Internet can bring.

This limited Internet activity of Belarusian NGOs is not only due to governmental restrictions or limited resources, but also due to failure of NGOs to keep up with the official websites, and be pro-active and inclusive. There is a clear need for an open and interactive online venue that could become a powerful tool for overcoming the threat of a growing governmental grip on the Internet, for educating the public on the full spectrum of human rights issues, and for building and mobilising public opinion in Belarus.

The Internet provides an opportunity for establishing an online network involving the wider audience in human rights-related debate, by-passing the government-controlled media, and creating necessary preconditions for consolidation of democratically-minded forces for joint action.

Footnotes

- [1] J. Dempsey and J. Weitzner, Regardless of Frontiers. Protecting the Human Right to Freedom of Expression on the Global Internet, available at: <http://www.gilc.org/speech/report/>.
- [2] R. Gualtieri, Impact of the Emerging Information Society on the Policy development process and democratic quality, 1998, available at: <http://www.oecd.org/puma/>.
- [3] ITU communications data come from annual questionnaires sent out to telecommunications authorities and operating companies. These data are supplemented by annual reports and statistical yearbooks of telecommunications ministries, regulators, operators and industry associations. In some cases, estimates are derived from ITU background documents or other references.
- [4] See: <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/>; also: <http://www.e-belarus.org/news/200409281.html>.
- [5] See: <http://iiseys.by/>.
- [6] TUT.BY portal is a major traffic generator and the most visited web-site in Belarus (considered a “Belarusian Yahoo”).
- [7] See: <http://tut.by.com/article/analysys/7.html>.
- [8] L. Titarenko, Paradoksalny Belarus (Paradoxical Belarusian), available at: <http://newsletter.iatp.by/ctr8-1.htm>.
- [9] The most popular topics are evidently computers, mobile phones and other technologies, rather than ideologies. See: <http://forums.tut.by/postlist.php?Board=socleader>.
- [10] See: <http://www.e-belarus.org/>.
- [11] See: <http://pravo.by/StateLaw/parliament.htm>.
- [12] See: <http://www.house.gov.by/>.
- [13] See: <http://www.dgrespublika.org/>.
- [14] See: <http://e-belarus.org/article/egov-june04.html>.
- [15] See: <http://www.belngo.info/cgi-bin/i.pl?d=as&i=2>.
- [16] See: <http://bhc.unibel.by/>.
- [17] See: <http://www.baj.ru/>.
- [18] See: <http://www.belngo.info/>.
- [19] Source?
- [20] L. Titarenko, Paradoksalny Belarus (Paradoxical Belarusian), available at: <http://newsletter.iatp.by/ctr8-1.htm>.
- [21] Lannon, for instance, enumerates six key benefits; in addition to information dissemination, these are: activism, supporting and protecting human rights defenders, research, human rights education and training networking. See: J. Lannon, Human Rights Movements and the Internet: New Tools, New Tactics. Available at: <http://www.highwayafrica.ru.ac.za/2004Presentations/JohnLannon/HWA.ppt>.
- [22] M. La Porte, C. Demchak, M. Jong and C. Friis, Democracy and Bureaucracy in the Age of the Web: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Speculations, 2000. Available at: <http://www.cyprg.arizona.edu/waes.html>.