

Internet Activism Under Siege in Belarus

Until recently, Internet has been the only oasis of freedom in Belarus' political sphere.

But as Belarusian authorities realise that Internet is a powerful means of communication and mobilisation, more and more effort is being put into suppressing online opposition activities. The events related to the upcoming parliamentary elections prove this trend.

On the 30 August, several moderators of Internet community *Nadoyel nam etot Lukashenka* (We are sick of Lukashenka) were detained. The community exists in the largest Russian-speaking social network V Kontakte and has around 37,000 members. The aim of the Belarusian security services was to get access to the community's administrators and delete its content as well as intimidate activists.

Two of the group's administrators, Paval Yeutsikhiyev and Andrey Tkachou, were sentenced to seven and five days in jail for a misdemeanor charge of hooliganism, which is a typical way to isolate activists in Belarus. Another activist, Raman Pratasevich, was shortly released as a juvenile, but reports of him being physically abused while interrogated have surfaced. Meanwhile, Siarhej Biaspaly and Aleh Shramuk fled abroad. Eventually, KGB got access to community's administrative controls and deleted its members and content.

Persecution of Internet activists garnered a negative reaction within the Belarusian sector of the web and were condemned by the international community. On 4 September the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, expressed her deep concern with the

detentions and arrests of administrators of political social media groups in Belarus, which she described as a crackdown on online dissent.

Preventive Actions on Parliamentary Elections' Eve

A new crackdown on Internet activists looks like a response to pre-election Internet activity, and more precisely to calls to boycott the coming parliamentary elections, which are traditionally regarded as sham in authoritarian Belarus. Internet communities decided to join boycott campaign, started by other political opponents of the regime, and launched it on the web. A closer look at the current foreign policy of Belarus as well as domestic political situation suggests that a mass boycott is not the best scenario for Lukashenka.

The last two years saw a sharp decline in Belarus' relations with western democracies. This caused an imbalance, where Russia became by far the most important and influential partner. Despite numerous public claims of strategic partnership between the two countries, a fear of being seized by Russia is widespread among the Belarusian elite. This makes a need to normalise relations with the West an important foreign policy objective, though not openly proclaimed.

However, if we set aside the foreign agenda and turn to domestic affairs, a boycott is the least desirable outcome for the regime too. In Belarus' case, where no party politics exists and the parliament has lost its political power long ago, many view elections more as a sign of support to the personalist regime. A mass boycott would openly indicate a lack of trust in authorities and their social contract with Belarusians, which has been eroding due to global crisis and economic model effects. To put in a nutshell, public support is badly needed for both internal and external reasons, and anti-electoral propaganda is clearly a challenge to the regime of Lukashenka.

The Echo of “Silent Protests”

As former administrator of the community Maxim Charniauski says, the prosecution of Internet activists began last year during famous “[silent protests](#)”. His online community was one of the online platforms which supported the protests. Such communities sprung up on the Belarusian Internet and were inspired by the Arab Spring. The initiative was named “Revolution through Social Networks” and occurred in a form of weekly peaceful street actions. Social networks, such as V Kontakte, Twitter and Facebook, played a major role in mobilisation of protests.

Although they failed to gain true mass support, the protests brought a lot of disturbance to the regime. They also revealed its repressive nature to citizens not actively engaged in opposition activity. During these events, community administrators were summoned and interrogated by KGB officers, who wanted to know passwords, logins and other relevant information. However, their efforts were not successful. Maxim himself managed to escape and currently lives in Poland.

This time the KGB had more success, but fortunately for the community, the V Kontakte social network is a Russian legal entity. This means that Belarusian authorities can hardly exert administrative pressure on its owners and managers. As a result, the community was fully restored on the 3 September at the request of administrators. The supervisory administrative rights were, as an exception, transferred to a person who did not create the community and who lives abroad.

Social Networks: a New Target for Lukashenka Regime

Until recently, the Internet was believed to be the only space for political oppositional activity and media freedom, not controlled by the Belarusian government. In fact, most of activity on the part of regime’s opponents has occurred online. The Belarusian government did not take any serious

steps against such online activity, for it apparently did not perceive it as a threat to regime's stability. However, in recent years some trends have made Lukashenka regime take the Internet more seriously.

The number of Internet users reached roughly half of the population in 2012, and without a doubt the younger and more active half portion of the population. Recent studies on Internet usage in Belarus shows that it is poorly integrated into the global network and remains oriented towards regional Russian-speaking .ru and .by domains. Hence, Vkontakte is the most popular social network, while such services as Facebook, Twitter and Google+ are still underrepresented in Belarus. It is no wonder Vkontakte has the biggest politically engaged communities, and becomes the primary object of pressure on the part of the regime.

Furthermore, the Belarusian authorities seem to be very "impressed" by events of the Arab Spring, where online media played a significant role. Subsequent "silent protests" only proved these fears. The regime started to introduce some regulative measures towards the Internet before the mentioned events, but after them it seems to pay even more attention to its Internet security. As a result, a policy trend of restrictive regulation of the Internet as well as pressure on active users has taken shape, especially social network activists. The last haven of political freedom is under siege.

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