

Digital Media Has Fueled an Unprecedented Challenge to the Regime in Belarus

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Belarus's presidential election, which will be held on Sunday, has been unique in many ways. For the first time since independence, the main rivals of the authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenka are women, the scale of protests against the regime has been higher than during previous elections campaigns over the last two decades and united the country's different regions and social strata, and digital media has played an unprecedented key role in spreading objective information and shaping public opinion.

The authorities realized fully the power of the Internet in 2017 when social protests against a law requiring unemployed people to pay a special tax to compensate for their "social parasitism" spread throughout the country. Bloggers took an active part in livestreaming the protests and sharing information about them via their social-media channels.

With limited freedoms, restrictions on independent media, and regular repression against journalists, the Internet and especially social media have become a crucial source of timely and unbiased information in Belarus.

As there is no political pluralism in the country and most politicians are inactive between elections, the presidential polls have always been attracted special media attention despite the fact that since 1994 the result was always the same with Lukashenka winning. This year, the regime again stood ready to deploy its usual scheme combining fines, detentions, and limits on free assembly and independent media—but it underestimated its control over the digital media.

It all started with blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, who had managed to build a huge support for his Youtube channel Strana dlya zhizni (A country for living) within one year when he was traveling around the country and making videos about people who had been oppressed or neglected by the authorities. In parallel, several political bloggers and social-media channels—such as NEXTA, RB Golovnogo Mozga, Maja Kraina Belarus, and Narodnyi Reportyor—were already very active. They achieved a joint audience of millions of Belarusians on different platforms.

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Most of these bloggers and influencers have been arrested in recent weeks and face criminal charges. This includes Tsikhanouski who attempted to register as a candidate for the presidency, which his wife Sviatlana is running for instead.

Independent media such as the Belarusian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and BelSat, which broadcasts from Warsaw, have also attracted millions of users for their livestreams of the opposition's unprecedentedly large election rallies all over the country and of the efforts by candidates to collect voter signatures to be able to register. As a result, regime forces started to beat up, detain, charge, and fine their journalists. BelSat, which is not registered officially in the country had to stop its livestreams temporarily, whereas RFE/RL still operates despite direct threats from Lukashenka and the government of canceling its accreditation.

The authorities miscalculated, though. Belarusians have become accustomed to using social media for informing themselves and for communication, and they followed online the repression against bloggers and independent media. Seeing on livestreams that thousands were taking part in rallies had already encouraged many to join in. Watching online the multiple unlawful detentions and provocations by the authorities then made more people realize they could not bear anymore the injustice and lies in Belarus.

Meanwhile, using Facebook groups, the diaspora organized hundreds of solidarity demonstrations all over the world. It also united to register observers at different Belarusian embassies and to carry out exit polls on election day.

Social-media influencers who had never discussed politics before turned into proliferators of the discontent with the country's politics among teenagers, young mothers, sports stars, performers, and TV personalities. Following the huge solidarity movement among them, those who became very vocal were dismissed from the official media or had contracts with state enterprises terminated. Belarusian comedians living abroad launched Youtube comedy shows, such as Pobedy Shoushenka, to discredit what is happening in the country and to spread the word wider about all the problems the people have been facing for many years.

In the last day, a social-media campaign has persuaded Belarusian, Russian, and Western musicians and artists to refrain from performing at state-organized concerts due to be held tomorrow in several cities and towns across the country as this would mean support for Lukashenka. As a result, the majority of the concerts have been cancelled.

The online activities of the opposition moved offline and seem to be unstoppable. The joint campaign of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya with Veranika Tsapkala (the wife of banned candidate Valery Tsapkala), and Maryia Kalesnikava (representing jailed candidate Viktor Babaryka) has mobilized tens of thousands people in all regions of Belarus by using social-media channels and livestreaming their activities on an ongoing basis. By contrast, the Belarusian leadership is absent from that space.

The three women have followed the most important rule for gaining popularity online, which is to remain authentic. They cry and scream, laugh and joke, they speak about personal issues, and they are not afraid to admit to their failures, fears, and insecurities. Such authenticity has translated into offline support and the increase in their supporters across the country.

All these movements can hardly be stopped in a way the Belarusian regime is used to. Even violence against all the people active in these will not suspend the proliferation of information across social media and digital platforms. The result of Sunday's election is already being falsified by the regime; it is up to the Belarusian people now to keep the fire burning and demonstrate to the authorities who they really are by keeping on fighting for their rights.

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