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Live Journal and a local newspaper in the 2007 local elections[1]

Abstract

This article is an attempt to answer the question of how the new technologies of communication were used during the election to the local Councils which took place on January 14, 2007. The way it is possible to compare a solid local newspaper and a web-site with its blogs and virtual communities. What is common and what is different between the readers of the printed newspaper and the participants of various social networks.

Key words: LiveJournal, blog, communities, local election, new media, local newspapers, social networks.

Being optimistic, it is possible to say that during every new political campaign in Belarus, roles of various media and ways of agitation and mobilization keep changing. The authorities' traditional arsenal is the main state-run channels of communication, i.e. radio, TV and the printed media. The opposition still traditionally resorts to modern technologies of communication, first of all, to the Internet.

When I started my work on this article, I understood that it was necessary to carry out two separate studies. The first one was to analyze one of the Belarusian local newspapers, the other one – the Belarusian part of blogs' community[2]. In case with a Local (District) newspaper, all was quite clear – it was necessary to choose one of current editions and therefore the newspaper Naviny Staradarozscyny (News of Staryja Darohi District) was chosen. In case with the second part of my study, there were a number of difficulties: how to define a circle of blogs, communities and other forms of virtual activity in order to review them in the context of local elections?

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1   The source for translation is: Аляксей Крывалап LiveJournal і раённая газета ў кантэксце выбараў – 2007 // "Палітычная сфера" №9, 2007 с. 56–63.

2   What is a "Belarusian blog"? In this article, we consider blogs to be Belarusian when they correspond to one or more of the following characteristics: 1) they are created and supported by the Belarusian citizens; 2) their contents and contexts are oriented on the Belarusian audience; 3) their language is Belarusian; Of course, it is possible to introduce some more points, but in this article it is not crucial.

Our analysis and preliminary conclusions are based on our review of many communities found at the Live Journal.com (LJ), but it is not limited by the LJ only. We have reviewed non-formal associations from many other blog services as well, such as blog.inf.by, for example. We have also considered some Internet projects which call themselves "city blogs", e.g. Hrodna Blog.

New media's appearance always provokes opinions that it is the new media type that will kill all the previous types. Similar views were expressed when TV came into existence; the same was said about the Internet. As for the net, every new service was thought (rather reasonably) to be dangerous for other communication technologies. Thus, email has curtailed considerably the regular letter writing process, while the blog movement is opposed to printed media as it tries to create its own communication space called the blog sphere, or the blog space. *"Still, it is not another kind of media, it would be more correct to name it "an information environment". The blog sphere is a collection of blogs which are naturally equal. However, this environment's typology leads to the state when some blogs happen to be more equal than other ones."* (Verbitsky, 2005)

In case of Belarus, blogs cannot compete with the printed media, but step-by-step they start influencing social practices.

I. Questions this article does not answer

Sometimes, this article concerns social relations in social networks. It seems necessary to somehow explain the limitations of such relations' interpretations in the given context. We do not try to provide social networks' socio-metric definition; this article is not an example of the use of modern sociology's all methodological possibilities (see for more details: Sivukha, 2003: 955-965). It is obvious that in the future, various studies of different social network structures that appear in the newest communication technologies' foundation can be undertaken. We may only hope that the further growth of the number of the global services' users and both on-line and off-line new social connections' growth of influence will make this question's study even more actual.

However in this article, it will be enough to define the would-be further development directions of studying the virtual social networks' influence on the social life beyond the Internet. The very notion "social network" is used here to describe various social relations which appear between users who use different communication technologies. The Internet can even visualize an "invisible" social network, thus one can see the ways information is spread among users of one or another web-service, e.g. the Sledopyt.LJ project.

Hypothesis. Let's compare activities of blog communities (like LJ communities) and Districts printed editions[3].

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[3]   We do not talk about all communities, but only about those which have certain territorial frames: city, village, District (rajon), Region (voblasc) and even the State as a whole.

The audience of Districts editions can be thought to be LJ communities' prototype. Districts editions are similar to blog communities which unite users on the basis of regional problems and interests. Still, blog communities were not used to mobilize voters during the 2007 campaign during the elections to the Local Councils. Furthermore, the rare attempts to transfer communities created on the administrative-territorial base to the on-line space had no success. Why?

We think that the answer to this question is to be found in the conceptual difference between the on-line and off-line roles played by the above-mentioned communities' users. The most important difference is that the audience of a District newspaper is readers, or consumers, of information which can be obtained in the one-sided communication conditions, while in the blog space, the users are no longer divided into those who write and those who read, unlike the traditional media where there are journalists and readers. We shall try to support this point of view. In this context, to start with, we shall analyze the presence of the 2007 elections campaign to the Local Councils in the newspaper of the Executive Committee of Staryja Darohi District, Naviny Staradarozscyny, and then review what was going on in the Internet.

II. Naviny Staradarozscyny

In order to demonstrate local authorities approach to the 2007 electoral campaign, we have analyzed the Naviny Staradarozscyny[4] from November 2006 to January 2007, i.e. from the moment the electoral campaign to the Local Councils was announced to the day the official voting results were published.

The thing which attracts immediate attention is that the conventionally Belarusian language newspaper used the Russian language for the most ideologically filled articles concerning the elections. The campaign starts with a huge article on the front page titled "The Local Elections Is The Most Important Stage In Strengthening the Belarusian Democracy" (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 16 November 2006). It seems like the article was prepared and distributed by the "ideological executives" channels. The text sets certain borders, or even tonality, of almost all further articles dedicated to the local elections. A rather extensive article for a small District newspaper presents several simple thoughts which can be presented as follows:

1. The Belarusian democracy is the real democracy, unlike the European one: "Unlike local representative bodies of the Western European countries, the Local Councils in the Republic of Belarus and their activities are controlled by the citizens who live on its territory", or "In Belarus, all the conditions needed for fare, equal and truly democratic

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[4]   The Naviny Staradarozscyny is one of many Belarusian District newspapers, issued three times a week, on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, A3 format, 8-16 pages, two colors, 3,000 copies.

elections are created" (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 16 November 2006).

2. The 2007 local elections campaign is a regular "examination for the authorities", which is simultaneously a step toward "the bright future": "Success in implementing the country's grandiose development plans accepted by the Third All-Belarusian Assembly (Усебеларускі народны сход), depends on local bodies of power and self-government" (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 16 November 2006).

3. Everything is alright and stable, no changes can occur. The opposition contradicts people's will, but people are smart as they know who is who and that's why the opposition has no chances: "The previous Local elections (March 2003) demonstrated the real positions of the political forces in the country. The opposition's results were unpromising. Thus, among 24,000 elected candidates, there were only 1,1% of the opposition. Belarusian voters naturally supported the candidates who stand for constructive and creative path of the state development" (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 16 November 2006).

The Naviny's editorial staff's attitude to the electoral campaign was very serious, still there were some mistakes, e.g. they muddled up the election's date, January 15th instead of January 14th. After a "strong start" in November, the election's topic was no longer important for a month, but then, a month before the elections, the newspaper introduced a column devoted to this event which opened every issue.

The authorities' "invisible" figure is on the newspaper's pages in the context of an educational seminar with partici-

pation of the Heads of local Executive Committees and local territorial electoral Commissions, as well as Heads and Secretaries of precincts' electoral Commissions. The article "We're Experienced" states that "inhabitants of Staryja Darohi District are experienced in carrying out important political campaigns on the high ideological and organizational level, and it is important to use it again, to settle all the matters, including small ones, before the election, in order to realize successfully the local elections on 14 January 2007 according to the law" (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 14 December 2006).

The newspaper reported actively about elections on the district and regional level. There are grounds to think that these two parallel campaigns did not confuse readers, as the newspaper wrote about one candidate to the Regional Council only, S. V. Maroz, Head of Staryja Darohi District Consumers' Society, who was then elected to the Regional Council.

The newspaper's traditional column Countrymen with a photo on the front page was replaced with a new one – Elections: People Trust Them (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 21 December 2006), with candidates' photos – at work, on the street, other places - and an article describing how beautiful a person X is. If before that, a photo had to attract people's attention or to show interesting people who live in District, then during the elections, a photo played another role, i.e. to advertise candidates "trusted by the people". Well, it is difficult to say whether or not such texts helped a candidate's image. There is a sample of such texts, *"his heart belonged to steel*

mechanisms, that's why he decided to be a skinner. Since then, he's been successfully working as a tractor driver. [...] It's no wonder that his countrymen chose him to be a candidate..." (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 23 December 2006).

As usual, a lot of attention was paid to the early election's possibility, e.g. the first issue of 2007. One of the most interesting issues was published on the eve of the Orthodox Christmas (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 6 January 2007); where the election's topic was more extensive than congratulations. By the way, the newspaper's staff did not notice Roman-Catholic Christmas at all.

The less time there is before the election, the more attention is paid to the campaign. An example of District's "PR" can be a programme of a candidate to the Regional Council and a sugary article about the Belarusian state's successes during the previous year, "Belarus: 10 main events of the past year" (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 9 January 2007). When the early voting started, the newspaper wrote about it, *"The day before yesterday, at 10 a.m., Piershamajski Polling Station No 2 affably opened its doors. [...] Valiancina Barysienka, the Head of the polling station Commission, said that during the first hour of their polling station's work, seven people used their right to vote early"* (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 11 January 2007).

In order to attract people's attention to the electoral process, on the eve of the elections' day, i.e. 14 January 2007, the newspaper's title page presented "Visits' schedule of amateur talent groups of the District's cultural and educational departments to the polling Stations during the Election Day to the Lhocal Councils of the 25th convocation" (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 13 January 2007), as well as the information that 10,1% of District's population had already voted during the two days of the early voting (January 9th and 10th). The indirect answer to the question what makes people vote earlier, is in the articles dedicated to the election's results, *"Inhabitants of Staryja Darohi went to the polling stations to perform their civil duty mostly during the first part of the day because in the evening they would deal with their domestic cares or will have rest"* (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 16 January 2007).

Considering the facts that Staryja Darohi is infamous for being the capital of the Belarusian "bootleg industry" and that there is no modern Sport Palace, it is difficult to imagine what other kinds of "having rest" there can be. Meanwhile, the newspaper has almost no feedback from its readers. It is rather impossible to find out "a small person" among official articles. Some rare "voices" cannot let you see whether they understand or not what is going on during the election and whom they elect.

"– What do you expect from your elected candidate?

– Well, we live quite well. Of course, it would be nice to live even better, not to lose connection with people, pay attention to every person, his/her needs and problems." (ibid)

The final article dedicated to the elections was dated 18 January; it reported the campaign's successful completion, *"On 14 January 2007, all members of Local Councils of the 25th convocation have been elected in Staryja Da-*

rohi District" (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 18 January 2007).

According to the official data, 94,4% of the inhabitants have taken part in the election. Still, it is not a record, *"District's inhabitants have shown the fourth result in Region (voblasc)"* (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 18 January 2007).

Another interesting fact is that there is no opposition in Staryja Darohi at all, according to the local newspaper. There are only good and best candidates whom people "trust". Thus, Staryja Darohi District carried out a good campaign: all members were elected; there were no unwanted people among them. The Naviny Staradarozscyny newspaper proved to be an excellent propagandist, agitator and organizer, even though there was no readers' feedback at all.

By the way, the newspaper does not still have its own web-site. However, there are Internet users in Staryja Darohi. Thus, according to the newspaper's article, during 2006 the growth of Internet users in the town of Staryja Darohi is 61% (Naviny Staradarozscyny, 16 January 2007). *"More than 320 families have used the Internet, 9% of them live in the country."* 320 families are approximately 1,000 people, while the newspaper's circulation is not bigger than 3,000 copies. Unfortunately, there is no more detailed data about the Internet users. It is possible to think that some of them read the local newspaper too. Still, we know nothing about their interests and belonging to various social communities. In such situation, it makes no sense to seek for the information about their own town in the Internet.

III. Internet optimism

While working with virtual communities and blogs, it seems beneficial to use the idea proposed by Benedict Anderson concerning an imagined social formation. Thus, a nation's oneness is imaginary because "representatives of even the smallest nation will never know all their compatriots – however, in the minds of all of them, there is an image of their oneness" (B. Anderson, 2001: 31). The same can be said about social formations with a greatly less number of participants. The Internet movements and communities stipulate that there is some common understanding of their participants' unity, but at the same time nobody thinks that there is someone who can know personally all the participants of a community.

Still, these imagined communities influence a person's activity, and it means that, in a sense, they turn from virtual into real ones. According to Akavita's data (Internet activity…, 7 February 2007), the biggest activity was noticed during the 2006 Presidential elections. It was then when the Internet became the space for alternative information about the events which took place in the state. The intensive growth of the Internet usage led to an appearance of various forms of social activity and actions which participants were coordinated and mobilized with the help of the Internet. Such groups can be divided into specific groups. One of the possible classifications is based on the principle of their organization and activity: 1) ad hoc group; 2) closed group; 3) open group; 4) network movement,

or supergroup (Mieljancou, 2006: 38). We are interested most of all in the massive and system group, i.e. the network movement, or supergroup.

Of course, the above-mentioned spontaneous groups do not include all socially active citizens, but only those who use actively the Internet. Thus, according to Russian sociologists' studies, today it is already possible to talk about the existence of the LJ generation (Sheikhetov, 2007). Maybe, a lot of Belarusian users belong to these LJ children as well.

The communities which appeared or were very active during the 2006 Presidential elections were not interested in local electoral campaigns. The community of the movement 'For Freedom!' did not notice the elections. The most populated Belarusian political community "by_politics" which was grounded on the already legendary community "by_vybary2006", ignored the 2007 elections too. There were only a few unsuccessful attempts to draw its participants' attention to the local elections and their predicted results (by_politics, studying the results…, 22 January 2007).

By the way, it is interesting to see how "by_vybary2006" turned into "by_politics". First, there was a short announcement, *"Dear participants of by_vybary2006, this community was devoted to the "upcoming 2006 Presidential elections", however the elections are over, just like the year of 2006. I propose the participants to move to "by_politics" which is dedicated to the modern Belarusian politics. The more so, as recent messages of the old community (vybary2006) are just cross-posts of the messages of the members of "by_politics"*

(by_vybary2006, 17 January 2007). After that, the participants shifted.

As for the created local communities based on the territorial principle, communities of this or that town, they are mostly de-politicized or ignore the political process. The LJ community "grodno" did not notice the election, but concentrated all its attention on the information concerning the way the authorities were destroying the historical downtown of the city of Hrodna (Grodno in Russian). It is notable that the elections to the Local Councils were not considered to be a tool of influencing what was going on in the city. These campaigns existed and still exist concurrently.

The community "vitebsk_by" from the city of Vicebsk (Vitebsk) saw no elections either. The community "mahiliou" from the city of Mahilou (Mogilev) distinguished itself by asking its participants, "Do you know candidates of your electoral district? ("mahiliou", 09 January 2007). Still, the number of those who answered was about 10 people, i.e. no real conclusions can be made. Probably, the biggest activity was shown by the Minsk community "minsk_by". It may be explained by a bigger number of Internet users if compared to other cities. Besides the information about the way the elections were carried out in Minsk, there was some information about the Local elections all around Belarus. Still, the information concerning the elections was placed along with numerous posts like "Where can I buy this or that in Minsk?" or "Who knows where N is". An interesting example of creating a themed LJ community is from Brest – "Brest elects!", but this idea

did not survive. The community was created in the end of 2006, but it drew no attention. An attempt of organizing a virtual community which could unite inhabitants of one city brought no desired results. At the same time, LJ communities which united those interested in "pleasant stuff" are more attractive and less politicized, e.g. communities of sauna or beer lovers ("by_banya", "by_beer"). While communities devoted to sexuality or just sex have the biggest number of participants.

Of course, beyond the LJ borders, there are also Belarusian blogs which are situated on other sites and web services; communities can be found here as well. Still, their influence and attractiveness for participants is minimal yet. Belarusian attempts of blog services (www.blog.inf.by; www.blogs.tut.by) do not try to politicize their informational space – their catalogs offer all possible pleasures of life, while the topic of politics or elections is not welcomed. Even though there is no official ban. By the way, such systems, unfortunately, do not allow people to create communities, private diaries only. Other services (http://www.blogs.mail.ru; http://www.liveinternet.ru/top/community) are oriented on the Russian audience and are less interesting for the Belarusian users. There are no communities dedicated to the Local elections on January 14th, either.

There are Internet projects left, which exist separately from big blog services and try to be a city community or blog. They must be considered closer. Among such services, there are many small private projects like http://borisov-e.info/ where there is almost

nothing but links to the news from other sources on the elections to the Local Councils. "Haradzienski Blog" (http://s13.ru/) is more substantial, it has a separate column called Elections. Still, the elections here failed to be a mobilizing point, but vice versa, "Today, there are elections to local Councils, and at the same time, there are no elections at all. I did not go to vote purposefully, and there are reasons for that, regardless the fact that 41% of livestock farmers and machine operators of the local farm Vertilishki-Hrodna had voted earlier" ("Haradzienski Blog", 14 January 2007).

There was no preliminary information either. Instead, as always in blogs, there were lots of private impressions of what was going on around. These emotions lay the foundation for further understanding of the political process. One's own experience during the electoral campaign is interesting to the person who wrote it, but it seems senseless to all others who did not take active part in the process, *"If we talk seriously about this election, then it was a new experience – the experience of working in a sub-totalitarian state."* Now, a music pause:

In a dirty house, there are no windows,
My neighbor's been drinking for the third week,
His kids do not go to school,
As there are ELECTIONS there!
("Haradzienski Blog", 16 January 2007).

Another city blog is "People's News from Viciebsk (http://news.vitebsk.cc) which presents itself as a daily non-cen-

sored interactive newspaper or blog. Still, there are no traces of any community. It seems like the word "blog" is used there as it is a popular word now. The site offered its own information concerning the elections in the Vicebsk Region, as well as other sources (BelaPAN, Radio Liberty). However, the news could appear on the site only after the editor-in-chief's corrections, therefore we cannot talk about the equality in presenting the information. Usually, the texts were similar to newspapers' articles, *"According to the preliminary data of the Central Election Committee, there are 79% of those who have voted all across Belarus. The absolute record is in Vicebsk Region: more than 90,4% of those who have voted. During the early elections on 9-13 January, 28,6% of Vicebsk Region's inhabitants have voted. During the basic voting day, there were 61,8% of those who voted. It was already possible to say that the elections were successful at 12 a.m. on January 14th. Till that time, nearly the half of the Region's voters (48,7%) had already voted"* (People's News…, 15 January 2007).

At the same time, the Internet space allows to create a certain virtual space of one's own freedom, a temporal shelter for those who want to escape from the reality. E.g. it is possible to organize a virtual state: *"Community of the virtual state "Our Country" is an association of the Belarusian Internet users who create an alternative virtual state of Belarus. Virtual state of Belarus is a national self-determination movement"* (LJ-community Our Country). Well, it is quite possible that they can stay in this shelter forever…

IV. Dinosaurs in the net

Right now the blog sphere is still perceived as another pulpit or a high tribune which allows one to address to the nation, to greet the whole world, to announce "a two-day all-Belarusian flash mob in the Internet" (LJ of academician Alexander Voitovich, 9 January 2007) or to appeal to all LJ participants:

"Dear participants of LJ communities and visitors of my page! Following your numerous appeals, as well as in order to build a direct communication and dialog with you, I have decided to open my page in the LJ. Regardless of the fact that I have my own site (http://www.voitovich.com/), I think it is necessary to start a more active dialog with the society. I call all adherents of changes in Belarus to join this active dialog concerning the situation in Belarus with the help of the Internet and to work out decisions which would help it. Create your pages in the LJ and invite your friends to participate in the dialog" (LJ of academician Alexander Voitovich, 6 January 2007).

By the way, a search for dinosaurs in the net can lead to very paradoxical conclusions. While participants do not understand that the new technologies require new cultural forms, the Internet is thought to be a huge newspaper with numerous pages. It is so strange to read that one more Belarusian politician has decided to become a blogger. They do not understand that their pages cannot compete with the main net diary – the official Internet site of the President of Belarus (www.president.gov.by). Of course, the official sites of state officials cannot be perceived as conventional

blogs, but in this case (no matter how strange it is) the traditional and slow state-run informational projects used quickly the new communication possibilities. This blog is supported by almost all state-run mass media, both printed and electronic. The state-run TV and most official printed media have been working for several years as the President's diary. By the way, silence in the Internet space during the elections can be interpreted as stability or silence at the swamp (see more: Lubimau, 2007).

V. Conclusions

Now it seems possible to somehow sum up all the information and review critically our first hypothesis. Neither our comparison of blog communities and local newspapers' audience was successful, nor our attempts to unite people in the virtual space by their off-line territorial closeness. Our opinion concerning the conceptual difference of the on-line and off-line roles played by the above-mentioned communities'

participants, was justified just like our thought that it is important to have people's feedback and their participation in creating blogs or communities' contents, when the border between the author and the reader becomes almost invisible, and there is no longer a traditional for media division into authors and readers.

The state-run regional editions have a rather substantial potential in creating local Internet resources, but not communities. The local communities in the net almost did not notice the electoral campaihgn. The communities failed to leave the virtual space, thus proving once again the thesis that the modern technologies do not unite, but separate people. The net structures' mobilizing practices and potential were not used during the electoral campaign. There is no understanding of modern communication techniques' possibilities. Everything is still on the level of leaflets and electronic "samizdat" (underground press).

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Alexei Krivolap. Live Journal and a local newspaper in the 2007 local elections

37

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