Social media and (non)democracy:
The analysis of daily Facebook use by political opposition in Belarus

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Abstract

The recent growth of social media and other internet technologies is believed to diminish the control of political elites over information flows and enable citizens to be active participants of political processes. Practice shows, however, that this general tendency acquires different forms in different geopolitical contexts. This master thesis intends to investigate how social media are used for the purposes of daily communication of political opposition in Belarus, where dominant traditional media channels are monopolized by the government. The analysis involves mixed approach methodology, which combines content analysis of Facebook posts of Belarusian opposition representatives and qualitative interviews with them. The research articulates an important role of social media in Belarus as one of a few mediums where opposition politicians can exist without pervasive control of authorities. However, the results show that the presence of opposition on social media doesn't necessarily increase their chances to gain political weight or activates civic participation in the country. The effectiveness of their communication is to a large extent predefined by social and political environment in the country. A practical implication of the study is that potentially effective directions for political communication of Belarusian opposition have been outlined.

Keywords

Social media, prosumption, traditional media, media power, authoritarian regime, democracy, civil society, civic participation, digital political communication, political opposition.
# Table of contents

1. **Introduction** ........................................................................................................... 1

2. **Theoretical framework and earlier research** ......................................................... 4

   2.1. Social media as a tool for political communication ........................................... 4
       
       2.1.1. Social media, 'prosumption' and their implications to democracy .................. 4
       2.1.2. Personalization of politics on social media ............................................... 7
       2.1.3. Facebook: platform specifics and political significance ................................. 9

   2.2. The transformation of political communication in the digital age .................... 11
       
       2.2.1. The redistribution of media power and crisis of authoritarian control of communication ............................................................................................................. 11
       2.2.2. The specificity of digital political communication in non-democratic regimes: cyber-realism perspective .......................................................... 14

   2.3. The political scene of Belarus .............................................................................. 18
       
       2.3.1. Political regime and civil society ................................................................. 18
       2.3.2. Media system and policy ........................................................................... 21
       2.3.3. Political opposition ..................................................................................... 22

3. **Methodology** ......................................................................................................... 24

   3.1. Mixed methodology ............................................................................................. 24

   3.2. Quantitative content analysis: method, sample and pilot analysis ..................... 25

   3.3. Interviews ............................................................................................................. 28

   3.4. The critique of the methods and ways to overcome possible methodological weaknesses ........................................................................................................ 30

4. **Analysis** ................................................................................................................. 33

   4.1. Content analysis ..................................................................................................... 33
       
       4.1.1. Politicians ...................................................................................................... 33
       4.1.2. Facebook profiles and pages .......................................................................... 34
       4.1.3. Facebook posts ............................................................................................. 36

   4.2. Interviews ............................................................................................................. 39
       
       4.2.1. Key platforms and target audience ............................................................. 40
4.2.2. Facebook profiles and pages ................................. 41
4.2.3. The role of social media in Belarusian politics .............. 42
4.2.4. Possible barriers to effective political communication ...... 43
4.2.5. Belarusian authorities and social media ...................... 44

5. Discussion and conclusions ............................................. 46
5.1. The specifics of political communication of Belarusian opposition politicians on social media .................................................. 46
5.2. The aspects of national context and new technologies that influence political communication of the opposition ............................................. 47
5.3. Practical implications ................................................... 48
5.4. Limitations and further research ..................................... 49

6. References ................................................................ 50

7. Appendix .................................................................... 54
7.1. The list of Belarusian opposition parties, movements and organizations .......................................................... 54
7.2. Codebook for content analysis ....................................... 59
7.3. Interview guide ......................................................... 66
7.4. Transcripts of interviews .............................................. 67
    7.4.1. Anatoly Lebedko ............................................. 67
    7.4.2. Denis Tikhonenko .......................................... 81
    7.4.3. Alena Lutskovich ........................................... 92
List of figures

Figure 1: Data visualization of a virally growing political discussion on Twitter over time (case #spill @reply network), which is an illustration of the formation of ad hoc publics around specific topics on social media ........................................................................................... 7

Figure 2: The evolution of public sphere .............................................. 13

Figure 3: The answers to the question 'From which sources do you usually get the necessary information about life in Belarus and abroad?' (the research by the Information and Analytical Center under the Presidential Administration) ............................................................................ 21

Figure 4: Explanatory sequential mixed methods model ..................... 25

Figure 5. The Facebook post of Sergey Kalyakin published on February 18, 2018 ................................................................. 28

Figure 6: The degree of Facebook use by Belarusian opposition leaders .33

Figure 7: The comparison of the Facebook monthly active audience in Belarus and the audience of Belarusian opposition leaders ............... 35

Figure 8: The language of posts .......................................................... 36

Figure 9: The originality of posts ......................................................... 37

Figure 10: The geopolitical focus of posts ........................................... 38

Figure 11: Marketing indicators of political communication efficiency compared to the audience of opposition politicians ..................... 39
List of tables

Table 1: Comparison of regime closure in Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine in the beginning of 1990s and 2000s ........................................ 19
Table 2: The demographic characteristics of the sample ....................... 26
Table 3: The dependence of politicians' demographic characteristics and their activity on Facebook ......................................................... 34
Table 4: The audience of Facebook profiles and pages ............................ 35
Table 5: The frequency of posting per day on Facebook .......................... 36
Table 6: Views of videos produced by politicians .................................... 38
1. Introduction

The rapid growth of social media in recent years had a significant impact on the field of political communication. Being free and accessible tool that allows to reach wide audiences, social media become an essential element of political communication of opposition actors, especially in non-democratic regimes. In such regimes, traditional media channels are monopolized by the government to serve its ideological purposes. In this context, social media become an alternative platform for expressing views and sharing information that wouldn't appear in dominant media channels.

Up until last couple of decades, before the internet gained its power, the communication model had a 'top-down' structure. This meant that political agenda was set by political elites and influenced the choice of content broadcasted in traditional media. Taking this fact into account, it seems logical that the emergence of new media platforms, which led to the transformation of the 'top-down' analogue communication model into a digital networked one (McNair, 2016), should inevitably lead to democratization of societies (Jenkins 2006; Mele 2013; Naim 2013).

In practice, however, the presence of technologies alone cannot be a sufficient factor for social change. There is a growing number of research made by social critics (Morozov 2011, Gladwell 2010, White 2010), who focus their attention on aspects of new technologies and their use that may have rather negative impact on political processes. In particular, the effectiveness of digital political communication depends on how and in which geopolitical context it happens. Morozov argues that there is a need to develop a theory of action “that originates not in what technology allows but in what a certain geopolitical environment requires” (Morozov, 2011:16). Therefore, in this paper we will analyze the use of social media for democratic communication on the example of a particular country – Belarus.

The media system in Belarus is monopolized by the government, which means that dominant traditional media channels are state-subsidized and promote the state view on politics. Independent media, on the other hand, are weak and less influential, partially due to official government policy that created such obstacles as high taxes and censorship. In this context, the emergence of accessible social media, which allows to avoid the filtering process of traditional media system, are expected to facilitate democratic processes in the country.
However, in case of Belarus new technologies seem not to be used effectively enough to cause social change so far, and this situation requires considerable research attention.

In recent years the topic of social media use has drawn much attention of Belarusian researchers due to the wave of protests against the Decree No. 3 (so-called 'Parasite Tax') in 2017. Its uniqueness in comparison to the previous protests was a considerable rise in the use of social media by different demographic groups (Герасименко, 2017). Therefore, researchers tend to focus on the use of social media by citizens, whereas in my paper I suggest to analyze the activity of opposition politicians and their role as engines of democratic processes. In the context of growing practice of effective social media use by opposition leaders in the neighbor countries, this research focus becomes relevant and topical for Belarus as never before.

The aim of this paper is to understand, in which way and under the influence of which factors the political communication of Belarusian opposition develops. The practical goal of this research is to offer possible recommendations to improve the current communication strategy of opposition politicians.

The following research questions have been formulated:

R Q 1 : What are the specifics of daily political communication of Belarusian opposition on Facebook?

1.1. What share of the opposition leaders are active Facebook users?
1.2. What is the dominant format and content of their posts on Facebook?
1.3. How much feedback from audience do they receive (in terms of likes, comments and reposts)?

RQ 2: What aspects of the national context and of technologies can influence the character and effectiveness of political communication of Belarusian opposition on social media, according to opposition politicians?

The first research question will be answered with the help of quantitative content analysis. The data will be obtained from Facebook profiles and pages of Belarusian opposition politicians and systematized based on a developed codebook. Additional insights into how politicians use Facebook and other social media platforms will be provided with the help of another method – qualitative interviews with politicians. Besides, this method will give
answer to the second research question.

In the “Theoretical framework and earlier research” chapter, the theoretical basis for the further study will be created. In its first two parts, the principal features of social media and their implications to democracy will be discussed. The third part will be devoted to the description of the political regime and media system in Belarus. In the methodology chapter, mixed methodology and each method used (content analysis and interviews) will be described along with their potential weaknesses and ways to overcome them. This chapter will also provide an overview of the codebook and operationalization of the concept of effective political communication within this thesis. Following this, the detailed analysis of the collected data will be presented, which will help to answer previously formulated research questions. Finally, in the chapter with discussion and conclusions, the key insights derived from the research will be summarized. As a practical implication of the study, the perspective directions of political communication for opposition leaders will be outlined.
2. Theoretical framework and earlier research

This paper will investigate the relationship between the presence of social media as a tool for political communication and democratization of societies. First, it is important to define the key terms (social media and democracy) and place them in a broader technological and cultural context – this will be done in the first two parts of the theoretical framework section. In the third part, I intend to describe the political scene of Belarus, which will become the case for the empirical part of the paper.

2.1. Social media as a tool for political communication

2.1.1. Social media, 'prosumption' and their implications to democracy

New technologies are being rapidly incorporated into everyday practices of modern society, providing citizens with tools for active political participation and, thereby, changing their self-perception in the processes of government. An idealistic picture of contemporary public politics in the techno-optimistic tradition looks as follows: from passive consumers of politics and its mediated image, citizens become their active participants and creators. The basis for this fundamentally new situation was the development of web 2.0 technologies, which provided internet users with the opportunity to become content creators.

The appearance of the web 2.0 concept is usually associated with an article “What is web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software” by an American publisher Tim O'Reilly. In this article the author described the tendency of the appearance of the new type of websites, the work of which is based on similar principles: they allow users to create and improve their content. It is on this principle that social networks, blogs and wiki-projects work. Among the key features of web 2.0 named by O'Reilly are:

- “Services, not packaged software, with cost-effective scalability;
- Control over unique, hard-to-recreate data sources that get richer as more people use them;
- Trusting users as co-developers;
Harnessing collective intelligence;
Leveraging the long tail through customer self-service;
Software above the level of a single device;
Lightweight user interfaces, development models, AND business models” (O'Reilly, 2005)

No matter whether we see web 2.0 as a new version of the web or as a logical development of previous technologies, which doesn't require a separate name, – for the purposes of this paper it would be more convenient to have a separate term of this concept. This will help to draw attention to the participatory, interactive and user-friendly nature of technologies, which became an impetus for the development of a new phenomenon – ‘participatory culture’.

The concept of participatory culture belongs to an American media scholar Henry Jenkins, who described it as follows: “Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (Jenkins, 2009:8). The important elements of participatory culture are the presence of the platform for free artistic expression and civic engagement, support for creating and sharing of these creations, informal mentorship that implies the transfer of knowledge to community beginners, and belief in the importance of one's contribution as well as social connection between participants (Jenkins, 2009:3). It is not necessarily that every user is an active content creator, but everyone should feel that they can become one whenever they want.

Jenkins also defines key forms, which participatory culture takes: affiliations (to the community, for example, on Facebook, MySpace), expression (as production of new creative forms, i.e. fan media content making, digital sampling, mash-ups), collaborative problem-solving (for example, collaborative work in Wikipedia), and circulations (the production of media flows, such as blogging and podcasts) (Jenkins, 2009:8). In real life, these forms often intersect, that is, they are not mutually exclusive. Collaborative problem solving takes place not necessarily on specially created for these purposes wiki-platforms. Very often collaborative work in different forms can be noticed on social media, where users call on others to help them solve some problem (crowdsourcing). One notable example of this from the politics field, which has recently gained popularity, are digital investigations.
The representative of participatory culture is not just a user, but more specifically, a 'prosumer'. This term has been coined by a futurologist Alvin Toffler. The term is the result of a merger of the two words “producer/professional” and “consumer” - and means the situation of simultaneous consumption and production of content by users (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010:13). The phenomenon of 'prosumption' manifests itself in different forms of user activity on the internet: this includes reading blog posts and commenting them, editing articles on Wikipedia, creating crowdfunding campaigns on special platforms, etc. The idea here is that the practices of consumption and creation merge most naturally, leading to the situation of constant dialogue and interaction – in contrast to the previous communication model, where information was mainly transferred from a producer to a consumer.

Such an environment with high participatory potential is of great political and social importance. At least in theory, it should help to build a stronger civic society and facilitate its interaction with authorities for solving existing problems and defining the future policy. A special role in this process is given to social media as a product of web 2.0 technologies (in fact, social media are the internet apps of web 2.0). Social media combine communication platforms and activities that develop on the basis of these platforms, which are built on the principles of community, interaction, content exchange and cooperation. These include such platforms as social networks, wiki-sites, blogs and microblogs, messengers. The examples of the most famous social media today are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc.

A great research interest in social media as tools for democracy and collective action is unsurprising. At least at first glance, it seems that technologies can provide societies with powerful, fast and relatively cheap means for information distribution, fundraising and movement mobilization (Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheafer, 2013:117). Besides, the democratic potential of social media is based on the fact that these are open and accessible communication tools which can be used by any actor of political process – an ordinary citizen, activist, journalist or politician. These are platforms where topical issues unite unfamiliar to each other people from different social strata and gain visibility due to virally growing discussions (Figure 1). Thus, they provide a space, where active civic participation is possible, which is necessary for the development of a democratic society.
2.1.2. Personalization of politics on social media

In recent years, social media have become an important tool for political communication of individual politicians. One of the first most successful political campaigns, which incorporated social media sites to support the offline communication, was Obama's presidential campaign 2008. This campaign clearly demonstrated how hybrid media system can be used for the purposes of effective political communication, where internet played an important role in mobilization and coordination of face-to-face contact activity (Chadwick, 2013:136). However, social media find a wide use not only during short periods of active election campaigning, but also in everyday communication with citizens, which allows to form more stable relationship with potential voters.

The use of social media by political personas is a sign of the overall trend to the growing role of political leaders as representatives of their political community. Social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties have caused the rise of an era of personalized politics (Bennett, 2013:20). The roots of the politics personalization are to be found in the globalization processes and their consequences for the social order. The group-based “identity politics” of the “new social movements” typical for 1960s have been replaced with more diverse forms of mobilizations, where individuals are gathered around personal lifestyle values to form an individualized collective action (Bennett, 2013:37).

In the 21st century, social media have become a fertile ground for the development of personalized politics. Enli & Skogerbø (2013) argue that social media contribute to this process of personalization due to their design, interplay with different media and opportunities to create more intimate relations with audience. Social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, put more focus on political personas rather than parties and
organizations, thus expanding online space for personalized campaigning (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013:758). In fact, social media can be seen as both – the reflection of the overall trend on personalization and its facilitator.

Social media make a great fit for the political environment, where individual political figures dominate on the scene. They provide semi-public semi-private space for self-representation of politicians, in which borders between private engagement and public debate are blurred (Enli & Thumin, 2012:94). This specificity of social media allows politicians to switch between their public and private roles, which can be also done strategically (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013:759). The private side of politics has a potential to increase engagement and serves well the purposes of marketing a candidacy and mobilizing audience.

Personal characteristics of politicians as well as their place in the system can play a role in the degree to which they are likely to use social media for political communication. Studies show that the way politicians interact with social media correlates with their competitive position: challengers usually become early and active users, whereas incumbents adopt it slowly and more steadily (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013:759). Applying this to the context of Belarus, it must be said that, indeed, opposition actors who have lower chances of being elected are more represented on social media, whereas government officials are rarely to be found on social media (moreover, those who use it for political purposes can be literally counted on the fingers of one hand).

Finally, the role of social media in personalized political communication depends on the political system of a country. In candidate-centered political systems, such as American, social media fit perfectly well politician's needs in image building and direct communication with potential voters; whereas in party-centered systems, for example, in Scandinavia, personalized aspects of social media can contradict the parties' communication strategies (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013:758). Belarus is an example of a candidate-centered political system, where most citizens wouldn't probably be able to name the parties that exist on the political scene, but they may better know the names of personalities that represent them. Also, in Belarus it is often the case that one politician represents the party for decades, and the party becomes associated with their name.

While social media today are an important strategic tool of politicians, quantitative marketing indicators of popularity on social media (friends, followers, likes, reposts, comments) are not
necessarily the reflection of the real state of things. Firstly, popularity on social media can have a negative connotation: users can leave negative comments under posts or be subscribed to a politician only to learn what rivals of their favorite candidates are up to, still contributing to quantitative indicators. Secondly, active social media users are often young - sometimes too young to take part in elections. Thirdly, and this is important in the context of authoritarian regimes, people may be afraid to have any connection to opposition politicians even online, because of losing a job or spoiling reputation, which may be the reason of low popularity of opposition on social media. Finally, social media facilitate affective political alliance, but this alliance does not always lead to the increase of real votes, because the process of voting requires more rationality and information than click on a 'like' button (Erikson, 2008). All of these aspects make it difficult to understand the situation based solely on quantitative marketing indicators on social media.

2.1.3. Facebook: platform specifics and political significance

As long as the empirical part of this paper will be devoted to the analysis of politicians' activity on Facebook, it makes sense to explore the platform in more detail. Facebook is an example of a special type of social media – social networking sites. Donath and Boyd define social networking sites as follows: “online environments in which people create a self-descriptive profile and then make links to other people they know on the site, creating a network of personal connections” (Donath and Boyd, 2004:72). This is a basic definition, which describes the key idea behind this type of sites. Nowadays, social networking sites incorporate complex and broad functionality, which extends their use from communication and entertainment to business and politics.

Created by Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskowits and Chris Hughes and starting as a website for Harvard students, Facebook became accessible for everyone in 2006 and dramatically changed the paradigm of the internet. In contrast to the previous image of the internet as an anonymous site where people choose different identities, Facebook merged the public and the private (Marichal, 2012:4). In this newly created communication space, users were encouraged to reveal their identity and share personal life moments with other people.

One of the aspects that contributes to the success of Facebook and other social networking sites is that they allow to maintain the feeling of connectedness at a reduced cost (with minimum expenditures of time and effort). They use 'public display of connections' as one of
the the key approaches to communication (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). This means that users don't have to engage in communication with every of their friends individually all the time, but they can, for example, make a post accessible to everyone or like a newly uploaded image by their friend. This allows to maintain the feeling of connectedness with people whom you might not even know in real life while not engaging in long private conversations.

A lot of research has been done on the political aspects of Facebook: it becomes the primary source of political news, the platform for election campaigning, the place for political discussion and activism, etc. In fact, despite its primary function as a site of friends, Facebook makes a good fit for professional political activity. Many-to-many mode of communication allows politicians to organize social movements at a high speed and at a reduced cost (Earl and Schussman, 2003). Personal pages of politicians make it easy to share their personal life and thus contribute to their transparency. Therefore, Facebook and similar sites are often viewed by scholars as facilitators of democratic order (Jenkins 2006, Mele 2013, Naim 2013).

Social critics (Morozov 2011, Gladwell 2010, White 2010), however, argue that participatory potential of Facebook may have a negative rather than positive effect on politics. Morozov (2011) uses a term 'slacktivism' to point out the ease of joining communities on social media to satisfy one's need in social connections without resulting in a real social change. In opposition to this argument, it can be said that Facebook's contribution to politics is less about provoking mobilization, but more about creating radical public spheres that give a space for marginalized groups additional opportunity to be heard in public (Marichal, 2012:11). Thus, Facebook should rather be viewed as playing an important role in enhancing political activism than causing it.

The recent Facebook - Cambridge Analytica data scandal has drawn considerable attention to one more political aspect of Facebook – the use of the platform for promoting political personas and ideas with the help of ads that can be very narrowly targeted based on collected user data. The story behind the scandal is that Cambridge Analytica, the data analytics company that worked with Donald Trump's election team, has been collecting the data from millions of Facebook profiles of potential US voters and has been using it to predict and influence their voting behavior (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). The scandal has provoked a wide public discussion on the role of data privacy and ethical standards when using social media for political purposes. While this is an important critical point in relation to Facebook as a political platform, it is not the central aspect of this paper, because these
technologies have been barely used in Belarusian politics by any of the sides – either government or opposition. Still, to receive first-hand insight on the situation in Belarus, in the empirical part of the paper (qualitative interviews) opposition politicians will be asked to comment on their use of ads on social media.

2.2. The transformation of political communication in the digital age

2.2.1. The redistribution of media power and crisis of authoritarian control of communication

Today's internet space offers a wide variety of tools for political communication and participation. Such, at first glance, simple everyday means of communication as social networks, blogs and microblogs are all platforms, which due to their accessibility and orientation to broad masses have acquired considerable political weight. These platforms allow everyone to become not only consumers, but also producers of political content – in accordance with principles of participatory culture. This also means that content distribution happens bypassing the filtering process of traditional media that often prevents the content that doesn't correspond to the political elite's interests from entering public space.

One notable example that clearly illustrates the importance of social media in avoiding the repressive apparatuses of traditional media can be taken from Russian politics. These are YouTube channels of opposition politician Alexey Navalny. In their essence, they are somewhat similar to classic TV channels, where different shows and documentaries created by Navalny's team appear based on a certain schedule. The interesting fact is that news about Navalny and even his name never appears on the state television, whereas on the internet he has managed to acquire significant popularity. It might be quite hard to objectively compare the audience of Navalny YouTube channels and state television due to the specifics of these platforms. But what can be indicative is that the daily audience of the Channel One in Russia is 10,9 million viewers (TNS statistics, 2015), while one 5-15 minute video of Navalny can gather from several hundred thousand to several million views during the first day.

1 Navalny channels on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsAw3WynQJMm7tMy093y37A
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgxTPTFblbCWfTR9l2-5SeQ/playlists
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7Ele-kLydl-NAV4g204pDQ
The possibility of such situation is due to the fact that the logic of digital platforms is different from traditional media: it means unhindered access to media space, and the scale of content distribution is mainly determined by its popularity among audience. Topical content receives feedback in a form of comments, likes and reposts, thus spreading virally. The algorithms that constitute the basis of recommendation system contribute to this effect, offering popular content to new users.

Manuel Castells, the author of the network society theory, challenges the notion of power as control that stems from privilege and resources and draws attention to the fact that the power today belongs to programmers and switchers (Castells, 2009:429). As Des Freedman puts it, “power has shifted from palaces to pipes and from armies to algorithms” (Freedman, 2014:92), meaning that in the information society computer algorithms possess bigger capacity to influence people than dominant ideology. This might be a topic of dispute, taking into account that content on social media can be promoted for financial resources, blocked on a national level, persecution of dissidents can still take place, etc. Nevertheless, the power of algorithms indicates an important shift in the logic of content distribution in the digital age.

From this perspective, new technologies have potential to redistribute the media power and diminish elite's control over information flows. This fact gains special importance in the context of authoritarian regimes, because such regimes strongly rely on the control of information – this is an essential element of their very existence. Authoritarian leaders require media as a tool for building public's loyalty, suppressing alternative ideologies and preventing the mobilization of opposition (Marshall and Cole, 2011:15). Therefore, independent media system – which social media seem to be able to provide – is seen as the foundation for the development of democratic processes in authoritarian regimes.

The changes that happen to political communication in the digital age can be explained with the help of Brian McNair's model of the evolution of public sphere. This model describes the transition from the analogue communication model, which is characterized by centralized, 'top-down' communication on a local or national level, to the digital model, which, on the contrary, means networked globalized media (Figure 2). Accessible media channels available for political communication and geopolitical expansion of democratic ideas lead to the appearance of a globalized public sphere (McNair, 2016:47).
McNair looks at this shift through a cultural chaos paradigm lenses. The cultural chaos hypothesis states that instead of focusing on media as tools of control and domination, we need to focus on the fact that media tend to weaken the elite control of communication and thus dilute power (McNair, 2016:6). Power in the digital age circulates in a chaotic rather than controlled manner, it exists in a state of fluxes and transitions. As a result, “the balance of communicative power has shifted from elite to non-elite, from governments to protesters, from mainstream media to peripheral but clearly powerful outlets such as WikiLeaks” (McNair, 2016:161).

McNair is not alone in his attempts to rethink the role of power in the digital age as not belonging to anyone but shifting. Moises Naim argues that “power is shifting from brawn to brains, from north to south and west to east, from old corporate behemoths to agile start-ups, from entrenched dictators to people in town squares and cyberspace” (Naim, 2013:45). Nicco Mele talks about 'radical redistribution of power' in the age of connectivity (Mele, 2013:5). According to this line of thought, the ability of individuals to connect instantly and regardless of geographic boundaries gives them a crucial advantage in front of big and clumsy governments and corporations.

In this context, the notion of the 'Twitter Revolution' can be used as a proof of the growing role of social media in political life and democratic change. It suggests that social media become the key tool and arena for political discussions and battles. The term itself is often used in relation to the protest wave that hit the Arab world in 2011 - the Arab Spring. The protests of citizens, dissatisfied with authoritarian regimes, took place in many countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria, and led to government changes in many of them.
However, to avoid a one-sided view on these events, the ambiguity of their results should also be mentioned. It turned out that the majority of countries, in which authoritarian leaders were overthrown, didn't manage to remain the course on further democratization and were seized or divided by conflicts of extremist organizations and disagreements between different religious communities. This draws attention to the contextual aspects of politics, which go beyond technological determinism.

There is a growing amount of literature (Freedman, Morozov, Gladwell), which focuses on critiquing the 'power shift' approach and belief in the emancipatory nature of technologies that are supposed to bring democratic change by default. While agreeing that social media do have an affect on power relations, Freedman argues that “the only way effectively to assess their impact is to consider them in the light of the social system from which they emerged and which they continue to shape” (Freedman, 2014:92). By the lack of context the author means that technological determinism fails to recognize the role of capitalism in this much-discussed redistribution of power. He believes that new tech companies that are said to contribute to the power redistribution are determined to accumulate wealth and power, and that the corporate power is flourishing by having managed to adapt to the requirements of digital economy (Freedman, 2014:114).

In spite of accessibility and wide reach of social media, it is quite hard to talk about democratization of societies by default in the digital age. Technologies may create the platform for organization and the investment of time and resources, which political change demands (McNair, 2016:169). But after all, technologies are merely tools, the impact of which depends on by whom, how and in which context they are used. Social media is an extension of the offline world, therefore, they reflect both - the possibilities of democratic exchange and important problems of the world in which they exist (Freedman, 2014:96).

2.2.2. The specificity of digital political communication in non-democratic regimes: cyber-realism perspective

The key argument of cyber-utopians is that improvement of means of communication should inevitably lead to democratization of society. To dispel the allure of Twitter and Facebook as facilitators of protest movements, a promoter of a cyber-realism perspective Evgeny Morozov (2011) argues that new technologies shouldn't be given more credit for this than political, economic or social factors. Even more, in some cases new technologies can be
counterproductive to the idea of democratization. In this part of the paper, I explore the reasons of why technologies do not mean automatic collapse of authoritarian regimes and why their impact should rather be viewed through their interaction with society.

In 2011, almost in parallel with the Arab Spring, the wave of protests swept through Belarus and received among citizens a simple name ‘The revolution through social networks’. The main reason of protests was the discontent with the Belarusian government policy, which led to the financial crisis in the country. People regularly gathered in the squares of different Belarusian cities and silently expressed their peaceful protest without slogans and demands, only occasionally applauding. The active state of the protests continued throughout the summer of 2011 and attracted a considerable number of people. However, despite having social media at their hands, the protesters hadn't managed to achieve any real changes, except for raising public awareness. It would be too naive to put the blame for this failure on the regime only, which, by the way, launched a massive campaign on state television discrediting opposition and initiated arrests. The insufficiency of technological capacity for social change may be due to many factors, among which is a lack of tradition of civic participation, which is a characteristic of authoritarian regimes.

Touching upon the topic of online protest movements, it is worth referring to an iconic essay article by sociologist Malcolm Gladwell “Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted” in this regard. According to the author, the presence of technologies alone cannon ensure social change, as an important role in this process is played by the presence or absence of an organizational structure. The hierarchical organization of communication allows protests to spread more quickly and more efficiently from ideological centers to the periphery and creates a good ground for coordinated actions (Gladwell, 2010). The diverse character of the Arab Spring results in different countries can be a vivid proof of this. For example, in Egypt and Tunisia, the government was overthrown, while in Syria a long civilian war was provoked. Analyzing the organizational structure of the Arab Spring, Donatella Della Ratta and Augusto Valeriani concluded that it was the presence of technological elites performing leadership functions that was the key factor that allowed to “fully develop the disruptive potential of the Web 2.0 cultural fabric” (Ratta & Valeriani, 2014:301).

Some other important factors can appear when considering the results of the Arab Spring from today's perspective. In fact, the only country where the protest wave was the least destructive and which continued its course for democratic reforms was Tunisia. In Egypt, the
elections were won by Islamists, and a year later President Mohamed Morsi was overthrown during a military coup organized by Field Marshal Sisi. In Libya, after Gaddafi was killed, the state broke up into hostile regions. Syria got bogged down in a protracted civil war, which was only intensified by interference of other countries. This list can be continued. Such ambiguous political and economic consequences of the Arab Spring make one think about the consistency of the idea of democratic transit in countries where there is no tradition of democracy, and the role of social media in this process.

One more important factor that determines the limits of democratic potential of digital technology and is related to the cultural characteristics of societies is the phenomenon of 'cyber hedonism' (Morozov, 2011). Many people view the internet as a catalyst of change, which will push young tech-savvy generation to participate in political life of the country. In practice, the use of the internet often takes on completely different forms. Among prior goals of using internet there is no political participation, but there are satisfaction of needs in entertainment, social connections and image building (Morozov, 2009). Technologies can acquire a different social role than the one expected by cyber optimists, due to the fact that people have other habits and interests in life, which are formed by cultural, educational and other factors.

Another aspect to consider is previously mentioned 'slacktivism' (Morozov, 2009) or 'clicktivism' (White, 2010), which leads to the decline of power of left activism. It is argued by many researchers that social media play an important role in reducing the tension in the society and substitute the real action with clicks on a like button, thus leading to the devaluation of media activism as such (Криволап, 2011). Gladwell writes that social media “[make] it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact” (Gladwell, 2010). In other words, new technologies allow users to easily engage in political discussion and activism without resulting in a real social change.

In addition to the risks inherent to technologies and cultural peculiarities that can restrain the democratization of authoritarian societies, a strong political elite aspect should be brought into light here. In the previous section of this paper power shifts and crisis of authoritarian control were discussed, but it doesn't mean that political elites have completely lost control over media. One of the practices of regulating online content, which was passed on from the analogue era, remains censorship. A bright example of censorship is China, where there are a huge number of laws and administrative regulations that allow to block access to undesirable
content and even whole websites. China successfully demonstrates the use of networked authoritarianism through the empowerment of the private sector with function of political censorship and supervision (MacKinnon, 2012:101).

However, censorship is far from the most effective method to control information in the digital environment. Removing content from one source leads to its copying by others, which often only contributes to the spread of undesirable for political elites information. Therefore, in recent years, authoritarian regimes tend to turn to more sophisticated methods of media control. An important aspect of digital technologies is their accessibility, and as McNair argues, they can be used not only by ordinary citizens and insurgents, but also by state apparatuses and governments, which may well have more resources to implement an effective online strategy (McNair, 2016: 70).

This is especially risky in non-democratic environment, where political elites create various strategies for using new technologies to promote their own policies. A good example in this regard may be Russia. According to many experts, during the 2014 Ukraine conflict, Russian authorities resorted to the technique of disseminating disinformation, as well as multiple version of events, through social media with an aim to draw the audience's focus away from undesirable information. This strategy was implemented with the help of hired bloggers that are often called the Kremlin's troll army and whose aim is to promote pro-Moscow rhetoric on the internet (Sindelar, 2014). Indicative for the Russian experience of using social media by the state is the fact that the RT - a state-sponsored TV network – is the most watched news network on YouTube with more than 2 million subscribers (by 17.05.2018) only on the English version of the channel.

Thus, while having a democratic potential, internet and new technologies also carry a number of risks that need to be taken into account. Along with a cyber realism line of thinking, Morozov calls a blind faith in the emancipatory nature of the internet naive and calls for the development of policies that are based on “a realistic assessment of the risks and dangers posed by the Internet, matched by a highly scrupulous and unbiased assessment of its promises <...> and that originates not in what technology allows but in what a certain geopolitical environment requires” (Morozov, 2011:17). Within this paper, I intend to make a contribution to the development of this idea and turn to exploring the relationship between

1 The link to the RT channel on YouTube in English https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpwvZwUam-URkxB7g4USKpg
2.3. The political scene of Belarus

2.3.1. Political regime and civil society

The state of civil society in post-Soviet countries is largely related to the process of state building that started in them after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The key features of this process, according to Grzymala-Busse and Luong (2002), are: first of all, its speed - what took centuries for other countries, occurred within a couple of decades in the newly-formed states. Secondly, informal structures and practices played the same important role in building regimes as did formal institutions. Thirdly, the process of state building took place in the unique conditions of international pressure both from the side of the European Union and demands of globalization (Grzymala-Busse & Luong, 2002:531). All of these features explain the instability of the results and competitiveness that can be observed in all of the regimes to one extent or another.

All post-communist countries met the beginning of the 1990s as relatively open regimes with rather high degree of competitiveness and presence of many actors (both formal and informal) taking part in the political process. It should be, however, noted that the competitiveness of the new regimes was due not so much to a strong civil society and strong democratic institutions, as to the inability of political actors to ensure the unity of political elites and to concentrate political control in one hands. As a result, one can observe a situation of 'pluralism by default', which was a characteristic feature of post-communist counties in the beginning of their independent path (Way, 2005:232).

By the 2000s, all regimes had become noticeably more closed, however to different extents. In one of his papers, Lucan Way compares the degree of closure of regimes in Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine in the beginning of 1990s and 2000s (Table 1). The increase in regime closure in all four countries was due to increased incumbent capacity, caused by improved financial situation, elite organization, and lack of constant pressure from the West (Way, 2005:233). Among the four analyzed states, Belarus turned out to become the most closed regime over time, with a high level of manipulation of elections, state monopolization of media, weak opposition and actual power of executive over the parliament. An important role in the gradual strengthening of the regime's closure was played by a weak anti-state
national identity (which could become the basis for the development of the opposition) and the success of the president Lukashenko in preserving state control over economic actors (Way, 2005:233).

Table 1: Comparison of regime closure in Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine in the beginning of 1990s and 2000s (Way, 2005:247)

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incumbent capacity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian state power</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite organization</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of anti-incumbent national identity</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because of a strong concentration of power around one leader, Belarus is often referred to as 'the last dictatorship of Europe'. The first presidential elections in Belarus took place in 1994 and were won by a candidate Alexander Lukashenko, who promised to fight corruption and return the social guarantees of the Soviet era. Soon after coming to power, Lukashenko managed to establish control over the election process, marginalize the opposition, reduce the modicum of independent press and create mechanisms to control economy and society (Jarabik & Silitski, 2008:102). In 2001, he won presidential elections again, but this victory was strongly criticized, because of the sudden disappearance of several key representatives of the opposition. In 2004, Lukashenko held a referendum, according to the results of which he was able to be elected to the presidency unlimited number of times. He remains on this position up until today.

However, it should be noted that Lukashenko's power and political success are not only due to the mechanisms of control and repression, but also due to strong support of the population. His image of a national candidate who was born in a village and understands the problems of wide masses gave him an advantage in many situations. Bright political style, oratorical skills and ability to speak the language of people, the social orientation of economic policy allowed Lukashenko to find place in hearts of many Belarusians - especially rural and elderly voters, who are nostalgic for the Soviet era (Silitski, 2005:85). In the conditions of weak anti-state
national identity, all of this has developed into the formula of the Lukashenko's success. Despite the support of wide segments of population, the president's policy in the late 1990s and early 2000s can be characterized in terms of 'preventive authoritarianism' – the policy of eliminating even weak political parties and actors (Silitski, 2005:84). This concept was coined and applied to the Belarusian context by a political scientist Vitali Silitsky, who described it as follows: “It removes from the political arena even those opposition leaders who are unlikely to pose a serious challenge in the next election. It attacks the independent press even if it reaches only small segments of the population. It destroys civil society organizations even when these are concentrated in a relatively circumscribed urban subculture. Last but not least, it violates the electoral rules even when the incumbent would be likely to win in a fair balloting.” (Silitski, 2005:84). Unusually high percentage of voters (above 80%) who support the current president according to the results of last elections can be used as an evidence for the final argument.

In this case, one can talk about the lack of space and infrastructure that would contribute to the development of a strong civil society in Belarus. The policy of preventive authoritarianism was aimed at suppressing any sprouts of the organization and movement that act independently of the state and have a political point of view that does not coincide with the dominant ideology. As a result, the most influential actors of civil society in Belarus are pro-government NGOs sponsored by the state to promote their ideology. A good example is Belarusian Republican Youth Union, which is the largest youth organization in the country and is supported by the president. This phenomenon is typical for the civil participation of the Soviet model, and does not fit the requirements of the definition of a civil society.

According to Charles Taylor, in a minimal sense, civil society can exist where free associations are not controlled by state power (Taylor, 1997:208). In a stronger sense, the society should be able to structure itself through these associations and have influence on the course of state policy (Taylor, 1997:208). Today in Belarus there are independent movements and organizations, which often have to act as informal entities to say nothing that they do not possess any capacity to influence politics. Without a legislative and economic infrastructure for development, they are often marginalized and supported by small groups of mostly liberal-minded urban populations.
2.3.2. Media system and policy

As it has been previously noted, state monopolization of media was one of the key aspects that contributed to the regime closure in Belarus. Dominant traditional media channels in Belarus are state-owned. This fact in the context of non-democratic regime results in such media playing an important role in promoting government policy and maintaining the current order. Opposition representatives almost never appear on dominant state media channels (the only exception is a period before presidential elections). Therefore, they primarily exist on the internet.

It is important to mention that in spite of the development of internet technologies, traditional media still remain the key source of information for citizens, especially when it comes to politics. The research conducted by the Information and Analytical Center under the Presidential Administration (IAC) illustrates that from 2009 to 2014 there has been a stable interest in television as the main source of information about life in Belarus and abroad. The use of internet for these purposes has considerably grown during the years, but in 2014 it still was much smaller than of television (53% and 85.6% accordingly) (Figure 3).

![Figure 3](image)

*Figure 3: The answers to the question 'From which sources do you usually get the necessary information about life in Belarus and abroad?' (the research by the Information and Analytical Center under the Presidential Administration) (Дашкевич, 2014:16).*

This indicates the power over public opinion that the state possess, as long as dominant television channels belong to it. For example, the most watched TV channel in 2016 was the state-owned ONT (67.7% of respondents watched it during the month before the survey by IAC) (Дербина, 2017:116). It's worth mentioning, however, the high popularity of Russian television channels among Belarusian audience. The Russian channel NTV-Belarus was the next in the list with 64.6% of respondents watching it (Дербина, 2017:116).
On the other hand, state media don't have much presence on the internet, which has been gaining in popularity in recent years. At the moment the most visited by Belarusians websites are independent and foreign ones. The most popular website in Belarus is an independent information portal TUT.by, which has 230 millions views per month (it's important to note that it has big subsections that are not related to political news) (Smok, 2018). Belarusian opposition website Charter'97 had 28.3 views in March 2018 in spite of the fact that is has been blocked by the government, while the highest ranking state media, Belta, had 1.7 million views (Smok, 2018).

Understanding the importance of internet for today's audience and low presence of the state media there, Alexander Lukashenko conducted a meeting with the heads and employees of all the biggest state media in April 2018. In this meeting the key media posts were replaced with new people (who are younger than their predecessors) and amendments to the law on mass media were introduced. Among these amendments are voluntary registration of internet resources as 'web resources' (otherwise, they are not able to use the rights of journalists), obligatory identification of those who write anything online (including social media and forums), a ban on publishing foreign media products without permission (Smok, 2018). These amendments are seen by civil society as an attempt to tighten control over the internet space and decrease the influence of Western-financed media in Belarus.

2.3.3. Political opposition

The restrictive political environment of Belarus couldn't but affect the organizational structure and influence of political parties. Since the moment Lukashenko gained his power, a no-party political system has been encouraged, resulting in a minimized role that parties play in policymaking in today's Belarus (Kazakevich, 2017). Some of the opposition parties are constantly denied in registration and have to operate in a 'not registered' mode (Appendix 7.1). Besides, there is only one representative of opposition in the parliament – Anna Kanopatskaya, the leader of the movement 'Forward, Belarus!'. In 2016 she became the first opposition representative in the parliament in many years.

However, even if the party system in Belarus is very weak, the opposition party landscape is quite diverse (Appendix 7.1). Overall, there are 7 registered and 5 not registered opposition parties that represent the whole political spectrum – from left to far right. Left-wing parties have their ideological origins in the communist past, therefore their opposition stance can be
seen as rather surprising (because Lukashenko is often seen as promoter of the soviet order principles in contemporary Belarus). Interestingly enough, the registered Belarusian Party of the Left “Fair World”, which is the successor the soviet Communist Party of Belarus, criticizes Lukashenko for politics that opens a way to authoritarianism. Most of the center parties (left or right) can be characterized as promoting liberal and European values. For right and far-right parties it is common to support nationalism ideas and be more radical in their views, which often results in them being the engine of street protests.

A peculiar tendency that can be noticed in Belarus is that some opposition representatives split from parties to create their own movements. In this paper, there have been defined 10 movements and organizations, which will be analyzed in the empirical part. Conflicts and mutual criticism are also a common thing among opposition representatives. The two aspects that may be contributing to the fragmented state of Belarusian opposition are repressive regime and Western financial support for democratic initiatives (Ash, 2015:1030). Konstantin Ash (2015) suggests a sort of lifecycle that leads to the fragmentation of Belarusian opposition: in the first place, there is a competition for foreign aid, which requires opposition leaders to show their activity by mobilizing citizens; this political activity poses a threat to the regime and often results for politicians in jail or exile; as a result, repressions become the cause for new divisions among opposition structures that seek for new funding.

This paper includes quantitative and qualitative analysis of Belarusian opposition activity on social media. For the purposes of quantitative content analysis, Facebook pages of leaders of all opposition parties, movements and organizations will be analyzed. Three opposition representatives will take part in the interview part of the research: Anatoly Lebedko (the leader of the UCP party), Denis Tikhonenko (the assistant of Anna Kanopatskaya from the 'Forward, Belarus' movement) and Alena Lutskovich (the leader of the 'Young democrats' youth organization). These interviewees provide perspectives of people from different types of organizations and who show different degree of activity on social media.
3. Methodology

The aim of the methodology chapter is to describe the empirical material, define methodological approaches and standards that will be used for its collection and analysis. This chapter will also explain how each of the used methods – content analysis and interviews – will help to answer research questions of this paper.

3.1. Mixed methodology

Having described the problem field of political environment in Belarus, the question arises on what role opposition politicians play in the current situation as potential opinion leaders and engines of civic engagement that exist primarily in the online space. The three research questions have been formulated accordingly:

R Q 1 : What are the specifics of daily political communication of Belarusian opposition on Facebook?

1.1. What share of the opposition leaders are active Facebook users?

1.2. What is the dominant format and content of their posts on Facebook?

1.3. How much feedback from audience do they receive (in terms of likes, comments and reposts)?

RQ 2: What aspects of the national context and of technologies can influence the character and effectiveness of political communication of the Belarusian opposition on social media, according to opposition politicians?

To answer these questions, the data of different types is required, therefore, the research will be based on mixed methodology. The mixed methodology implies collecting both quantitative and qualitative data within one research to acquire deeper and more complete understanding than if these methods were used separately (Creswell, 2014). Two main research methods combined within this paper are quantitative content analysis and qualitative interviews. Content analysis will be used to answer the first research question. Interviews will help to answer the second research question and also provide additional first-hand insights to the first question.
John Creswell (2014) defines several options of research design when using the mixed methodology – depending on what role quantitative and qualitative methods play in relation to each other. Within this research, I use explanatory sequential mixed methods design. It means that first quantitative data is collected and analyzed, then it is followed by qualitative data to provide more insights into questions that the quantitative method is not able to answer (Creswell, 2014) (Figure 4).

![Figure 4: Explanatory sequential mixed methods model (Creswell, 2014).](image)

### 3.2. Quantitative content analysis: method, sample and pilot analysis

Qualitative data will be obtained with the help of content analysis. Content analysis works well for the analysis of media texts and allows to conduct “...systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics”(Neuendorf, 2002:1). Its main advantage is that it offers an objective approach to studying media texts, thus avoiding elements of subjective evaluations that often arise when using qualitative methodology. In ideal world, data obtained with quantitative content analysis should be reproducible. In other words, different people should receive the same data when using the same approach. Some definitions of content analysis (in addition to its function to analyze text's characteristics) also focus on its ability to make inferences from text characteristics to the context, in which communication takes place (Krippendorff, 1980:69).

Within this paper, content analysis implies counting occurrences of specified categories on Facebook profiles/pages and posts of Belarusian opposition representatives. This data should help to define characteristics of their political communication on social media. Facebook has been chosen as a platform for analysis, because it is one of the most politically used platforms in Belarus and many politicians see it as their key communication channel, which will be proved in the interview part of the research.

Content analysis focuses on politicians' daily Facebook use. The period of analysis is 1 month
(from 01.02.2018 to 28.02.2018), which means all posts that were made by politicians during this period will be analyzed. As long as Facebook is a tool for everyday communication, this time period should be sufficient to define its (non)use and key communication strategies. Besides, it will allow to focus only on the most recent data, which is important, because the behavior of people on social media can change over time.

The initial sample includes 23 people (22 politicians and 1 anonymous politician from anarchist organization who don't have formal leaders) – these are leaders of all Belarusian opposition parties, movements and organizations that define themselves as opposition to the current regime. Only leaders get into the sample, because they are representatives of their political entity and also data on other members is not always available. These representatives may have or have no presence on Facebook. Information about those politicians who don't have presence on Facebook is important and included in the research, because it provides understanding of the degree to which Belarusian opposition use social media.

Men and people under 50 years old prevail among politicians in the sample and constitute 73% and 64% accordingly. A curious fact is that whereas among the male group it is more likely to meet politicians that are older than 50 years old, most of the female politicians are younger than this age.

Table 2: The demographic characteristics of the sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic group</th>
<th>The number of political actors in the sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females under 50 y.o.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females of 50 and more y.o.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males under 50 y.o.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males of 50 and more y.o.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The further research implies the analysis of posts made by politicians on Facebook. Overall, there are 19 Facebook profiles and 8 Facebook pages that belong to politicians from the sample. There is a difference between profiles and pages on Facebook: profile is a personal account (when one signs up for Facebook, they receive a profile); page is a business account used for promotion (it also allows to use ads). One politician may have both – profile and page, in this case both of them will be included in the research.
There are three levels of analysis, which are presented in detail in the codebook (Appendix 7.2). The first level implies collecting information about the politician (age, gender, the presence/absence of Facebook page/profile, etc.). On the second level, the information about politicians' Facebook pages will be collected. This includes the last activity date, the number of friends/followers/page likes, the frequency of posting.

Following this, on the third level, Facebook posts will be analyzed. It is important to note that analysis includes only posts made by politicians themselves (not posts where they are mentioned by other users). A list of categories have been defined that will help to understand the specifics of political communication on social media and its efficiency. Among these are 'Language', 'Geopolitical focus', 'Political relevance', 'Mode of persuasion', and 'Engagement'.

On top of this, there have been defined a couple of Facebook-specific categories for analysis, which are relevant for the research:

- First, Facebook gives people the opportunity to reuse the content created by others: reposts and links. This raises the question of originality, because for politicians it is important to produce a sufficient number of original content. I will look at whether the post contains borrowed materials and their sources ('Originality' and 'Sources of borrowed content').

- Secondly, Facebook posts allow to attach visual materials. Visual materials help to make posts more noticeable, which is important for effective communication. Therefore, their presence and absence as well as type will be analyzed ('Visual materials').

- Thirdly, Facebook provides the possibility to interact with the content – like, share and comment. These categories can be an illustration of how much impact political communication has on the audience ('Like', 'Share', 'Comment').

Logically, these categories can be divided into three groups: format (language, originality, visual materials), content (geopolitical focus, political relevance), and impact (the mode of persuasion, engagement, the number of likes, shares and comments) of the post. It is assumed that efficient political communication on social media (based on categories that can be checked with content analysis) implies:

- being active every day and having enough friends/followers to whom this communication is addressed;
• speaking the language of the target audience (however, this is a tricky point, because while for general public the Belarusian language can be a barrier - as they don't use it on a daily basis - , audience with strong opposition views usually have negative attitude to the Russian language);

• presenting original content related to politics (in particular, Belarusian politics);

• using persuasive and engagement techniques;

• receiving considerable feedback from the audience in a form of likes, shares and comments.

Let's conduct a pilot analysis of a Facebook post published by Sergey Kalyakin, the leader of the Belarusian Party of the Left “Fair World”, on February 18, 2018. Language: Russian (2), originality: the post contains original content (1), sources of borrowed content: none (0), visual materials: none (0); geopolitical focus: the post is related to Belarusian politics (1); political relevance: generally speaking, the post tells about falsification during the local elections, meaning it criticizes the regime (1); the mode of persuasion: it provides facts and reasonable arguments to persuade the audience (3); engagement: there are no engagement techniques used (0); like (29), share (6), comment (0).

*Figure 5. The Facebook post of Sergey Kalyakin published on February 18, 2018.*

3.3. Interviews

Qualitative data will be obtained through interviews with politicians, which will help to
understand the motives and other aspects that determine the character of their social media activity. As previously mentioned, the interview method is chosen primarily to answer the second research question: what aspects of the national context and of technologies can influence the character and efficiency of political communication of Belarusian opposition on social media, according to opposition politicians? To a certain extent, this question has been answered through the literature review (at least, this chapter set a direction for further research), but politicians can provide additional first-hand insights into this issue.

Brinkmann notes that qualitative interviews suit well for examining issues connected to personal experiences, society and culture, but they “lend themselves most naturally to the study of individual lived experience” (Brinkmann, 2013:47). This means that with the help of interviews, I intend to obtain data that will describe how politicians see the discussed issues through the prism of their own experiences, knowledge and beliefs. It may lead to the appearance of subjective evaluations of the situation in the research, but this is a natural cost of this method. The advantage of this method is that it allows to move the focus from technical aspects of political communication to deeper questions that are related to social and political circumstances, in which this communication takes place.

I approached the leaders of opposition parties, movements and organizations on Facebook by adding them to friends and sending them a personal message with an invitation to an interview. I also managed to find a couple of personal emails of politicians on their organization's websites and sent them personal emails. Two of the politicians agreed to be interviewed (Anatoly Lebedko from the United Civic Party, and Alena Lutskovich from 'Young Democrats'), one more politician (Anna Kanopatskaya, 'Forward, Belarus!') provided a contact of her assistant (Denis Tikhonenko). Overall, three interviews have been conducted: the transcripts and information about their date and place are attached to this paper in appendix 7.4.

All of the interviewed politicians allowed me to record our conversation and use their real names in the paper. Interview questions can be found in appendix 7.3. A semi-structured approach to interviewing have been chosen, which means that although the structure of questions is created in advance, during the interview deviations from it are possible. This approach allows to gather deeper insights while not going too far away from the research problem.
After conducting interviews and transcribing them, important for analysis information given by politicians was fact-checked with the help of the internet and by comparing interviews to each other. Overall, there haven't been noticed any instances of discrepancy. Following this, common topics, which provided insights into content analysis data and the second research question, were defined in the interviews. The positions of the three politicians related to these common topics were compared to each other and summarized in the 'Analysis' chapter to provide a balanced view on researched issues.

3.4. The critique of the methods and ways to overcome possible methodological weaknesses

During the discussion of the methods some of their advantages and disadvantages have already been mentioned. The critique of the methods is important as it develops a more meaningful approach to the process of data collection and analysis and helps to prevent making misleading conclusions in the end. In this section, I will discuss some of the methodological weaknesses of the chosen methods and ways to deal with them.

When talking about content analysis, internal validity (reliability) and external validity (validity) can be defined (Krippendorff, 1980:71). Each of these types of validity includes several aspects, but here only those that are the most relevant for this particular research will be discussed.

Unlike in case of political communication on mass media, on social media there are no clear standards that every political message should follow. They can be brief, vague, accompanied by links and references, which leads to intertextuality. This can be an important critical point for such aspect of internal validity as reproducibility. The high level of intertextuality of Facebook posts can lead to the situation when different coders will interpret texts differently. To avoid this, detailed instructions are provided in the codebook. In addition, all the coding will be done by one coder, which ensures a single line of material interpretation.

One more aspect of internal validity is stability. Communication on social media (its frequency and character) can change over time. If the same methodology is be used in relation to data from different time periods, there can be differences in conclusions. This is a natural fact, and it's important to understand that conclusions made in this research are relevant only for the period of time when this research is conducted.
From the point of view of external validity, there can appear questions to the sample (sampling validity): to which degree does the collected data represent the whole Belarusian opposition? There are 19 Facebook profiles and 8 pages chosen for analysis, which belong to the leaders of opposition parties, movements and organizations. In practice, there are more opposition representatives that are opinion leaders on social media, but who might not belong to any of the political structures or not occupying leading positions there. To limit the sample to only leaders of political structures was a necessary measure that ensured a logical approach to collecting data and helped to avoid missing any of the representatives who fit the defined conditions, because data on political leaders is always available on the websites of their organizations.

The key criticism of qualitative interviews as a method is that they rely on the subjective knowledge and human assumptions, and, therefore, lose their reliability. It must be recognized that, indeed, interviews rely on subjective thinking and evaluations, but it doesn't mean that it can't be an objective method of analysis of subjective knowledge. In response to the method's critique, Brinkmann notes that the presence of human factor – human conversations, interactions and interpretations – doesn't eliminate the fact that their analysis and discussion can have a rational character (Brinkmann, 2013:143).

One more point of interview critique is the singularity of the analyzed cases (as a rule, an interview sample includes less people than quantitative methods do), which doesn't allow to make generalized conclusions based on data collected. In case of this paper, this aspect is clearly visible, because interviews are conducted with three politicians. However, first of all, it is important to bear in mind that these are interviews with politicians, which are the people who are usually hard to reach, but who can add valuable first-hand insights to the researched issue. Secondly, qualitative interviews do not imply questions about generalizability: ideas expressed during interviews are considered significant if they manage to demonstrate something typical (but that hasn't been paid attention to before) or something completely new (Brinkmann, 2013:144).

It is also important to consider the fact that, as a rule, interviewees want to be presented in the best light, which may influence their answers and behavior during the interview. They can lie for any purpose or make unintentional mistakes, which also threatens the accuracy of collected data. It may become even more tricky when you are talking to politicians, for whom participation in the interviews is a part of their job. The only way to avoid wrong data or
prejudiced evaluations is to check what is said with other external sources (for example, internet) and compare interviews of politicians against each other in search for contradictions, which has been done in this paper to ensure data reliability.
4. Analysis

The development of democratic processes in authoritarian regimes is directly connected to the activity of opposition politicians as promoters of alternative ideas. As long as traditional media space in Belarus is inaccessible for opposition representatives, internet, and social media in particular, became the key platform for their political communication. This chapter is devoted to the analysis of opposition politicians' activity on social media.

One of the task of this chapter is to define the specifics of political communication of Belarusian opposition on Facebook. For this purpose, content analysis of Facebook profiles/pages and posts will be conducted. Interviews with politicians will help to gain deeper understanding of what stands behind this communication, what motives guide politicians in their choice of strategies, and what aspects of technologies and national context influence their activity on social media.

4. 1. Content analysis

4.1.1. Politicians

The analysis showed that Belarusian opposition is very well presented on Facebook. 91% of political actors from the sample have either Facebook profile/page or both. 74% of opposition representatives were active (had at least one post) on Facebook during the analyzed period (01/02/18 – 28/02/18). Such high numbers may be due to the fact that traditional media space in Belarus is restricted for opposition politicians.

![Pie chart showing the degree of Facebook use by Belarusian opposition leaders](image)

*Figure 6: The degree of Facebook use by Belarusian opposition leaders*
There is no clear dependence between demographic characteristics of politicians (gender and age group) and their activity on Facebook (Table 3). Partially, this is due to a small sample size (for example, there is only one representative of the group 'Females of 50 and more y.o.'). However, a preliminary conclusion that can be made from this sample is that men under 50 years old seem to be the most active Facebook users among politicians.

Table 3: The dependence of politicians' demographic characteristics and their activity on Facebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic group</th>
<th>The number of political actors in the sample</th>
<th>The number of political actors who have a Facebook page, profile, or both</th>
<th>The number of political actors who were active during the analyzed period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females under 50 y.o.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females of 50 and more y.o.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males under 50 y.o.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males of 50 and more y.o.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As previously mentioned, political actors in the sample use personal Facebook profiles and pages to communicate with their audiences. 62% of politicians that have presence on Facebook have only profiles, 9% have only pages, 29% have both.

4.1.2. Facebook profiles and pages

The further analysis is based on data collected from Facebook profiles and pages. For profiles, I was interested in the number of friends and followers that a politician has. For pages, these were the number of likes of the page and its followers. Taking into account that the number of monthly active users on Facebook in Belarus is 0.9 million (Gemius SA, 2017), the audience of opposition leaders can be considered rather small (far less than 1%) (Table 4, Figure 7).
Table 4: The audience of Facebook profiles and pages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Average value</th>
<th>Max. value</th>
<th>Min. value</th>
<th>More than average</th>
<th>Less than average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The number of friends (profile)</td>
<td>4200</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>67.00%</td>
<td>33.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of followers (profile)</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36.00%</td>
<td>64.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of likes (page)</td>
<td>3572</td>
<td>6422</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>67.00%</td>
<td>33.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of followers (page)</td>
<td>3702</td>
<td>6438</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>67.00%</td>
<td>33.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7: The comparison of the Facebook monthly active audience in Belarus and the audience of Belarusian opposition leaders.

There is no drastic difference in how often politicians make posts on Facebook pages and profiles: the average number of posts per day for a profile and page - 1.06 and 1.08 accordingly (Table 5). However, in most of the profiles and pages the posting frequency was lower than the average value. On a positive note, this still indicates that Belarusian opposition leaders post on Facebook quite frequently – once a day on average.
Table 5: The frequency of posting per day on Facebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Max. value (the average value of the most active politician)</th>
<th>Min. value (the average value of the least active politician)</th>
<th>More than average</th>
<th>Less than average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The frequency of posting (profile)</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>43.00%</td>
<td>57.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The frequency of posting (page)</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>33.00%</td>
<td>67.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.3. Facebook posts

In terms of form and content of the posts, the study illustrates that communication of Belarusian opposition leaders on Facebook corresponds to what has been defined as efficient communication in the methodological part. Most of the posts are written in the Belarusian and Russian languages (Figure 8), which means they are addressed primarily to Belarusian audience. This is an important fact, because at least one of the analyzed politicians has a Twitter account, where he writes only in English, which means he aims primarily at Western public.

Figure 8: The language of posts

A large majority of the posts are based on original content (Figure 9). Producing sufficient amount of original content is important for politicians, because this is what audiences expect from them – first-hand insights, ideas and opinions.
The largest part of borrowed materials is taken from news media (39%) and from different channels of political organization, to which the politician belongs (26%). Much less of borrowed materials are taken from different channels of other political structures (6%), bloggers and journalists (5%). These results are quite expected, because political communication, as a rule, focuses on the personality of the politician (or their organization) and takes information from reliable sources, which news media offer. However, increasing connections with opinion leaders, such as bloggers and other politicians, could be beneficial for their communication.

Understanding the importance of visual materials for better perception of material, politicians quite often include different types of visuals in their posts. The study showed that 84% of all posts include some type of visuals. While most of the posts have images attached (78%), it has been noticed that videos created by politicians themselves is quite a common thing (11%). These videos can be divided in two groups based on their style: action videos (where a politician performs as a cameraman and commenter simultaneously, and often some events are unfolding on the eyes of viewers) and stable videos (where the video is made in a studio-like environment).

While self-created videos are obviously a trend among politicians, the interesting question is how effective they are. The average number of views of such videos is 838. This number is not very high, taking into account the size of Facebook monthly active audience in Belarus. But, on the other hand, it is considerably higher than the average number of likes under posts (this data will be presented later in this section), which indicates that the actual audience reach of politicians' communication is higher than showed by people's feedback. This means that while many people are interested in the content posted by opposition politicians, not
many of them want to engage with it.

Table 6: Views of videos produced by politicians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Average value</th>
<th>Max. value</th>
<th>Min. value</th>
<th>More than average</th>
<th>Less than average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Views under one video</td>
<td>838</td>
<td>8600</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>26.00%</td>
<td>74.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The communication of opposition politicians is Belarus-focused. The majority of posts (84%) are related solely to Belarus (Figure 10), which may be an indicator of politicians' vision of Belarus as an independent country rather than oriented on partnership with Russia or West.

Figure 10: The geopolitical focus of posts.

In terms of themes mentioned, most posts describe the activity or political position of the politician or their political organization (44%). Another common topic is a critique of the Belarusian regime (32%). Some of the posts (6%) are devoted to personal life of a politician, which may be an important technique for image building and establishing closer relationship with the audience. Interestingly enough, there are also posts where politicians criticize other opposition representatives (the indicator of opposition fragmentation) – however, such posts constitute an insignificant part of the sample (1%).

Where it is possible to clearly define the mode of persuasion used in the post, most of these posts are appealing to people's emotions ('pathos') (37%) rather than to logical reasoning and facts ('logos') (4%) or politicians' authority ('ethos') (2%). It might be due to the fact that opposition politicians have a controversial image and low political weight in Belarusian society, which almost completely eliminates the possibility to ground their political communication on authority. The emotional mode of persuasion, on the other hand, can be very common among opposition politicians and reflect their critical stance to the current regime.
Engagement techniques are sometimes used by the politicians: 22% of the posts include some engagement technique (these can be an invitation to an event, question to the audience, survey, etc). Besides, during the analysis an observation has been made that some of the politicians actively involve in discussions in a comment section under their posts. This means that opposition politicians try to interact with their audiences rather than turn to a top-down strategy of communication.

In spite of this, their marketing indicators of communication efficiency (likes, reposts and comments) can be considered rather low. The average number of likes under one post is 49, which means that political communication of opposition is consciously consumed by a tiny part of their friends and followers on Facebook (Figure 11). It is obvious that the number of actual post views is higher than the number of likes. But as long as there is no way to check it, I assume that it can't be significantly different to have an influence on the conclusions.

![Figure 11: Marketing indicators of political communication efficiency compared to the audience of opposition politicians.](image)

4.2. Interviews

The content analysis has showed that while Belarusian opposition leaders try to use social media effectively, their communication reaches the smallest share of Facebook audience and their marketing performance indicators are very low. Interviews with politicians allowed to explore the situation from another angle: to understand what inner (motives, beliefs) and external (social and political context) factors influence their communication on social media. In other words, these personal conversations helped to cast a light on an important question 'why?' that was constantly arising while working with quantitative data.
4.2.1. Key platforms and target audience

As expected, Facebook was mentioned as one of the key social media platforms used by politicians. However, along with it they stressed an important role of Odnoklassniki - one of the oldest and most popular social networks of Runet (the Russian-speaking part of the internet). The content posted on these platforms can differ, because they provide access to different audiences.

Facebook is perceived by politicians as a place where audience is more likely to have higher education and be residents of urban area. They also often refer to it as a community of opposition representatives, activists and bloggers who know each other quite well. This creates a situation when one of the reasons to use Facebook for political communication is that on this platform politicians are more likely to receive positive feedback from like-minded people.

“Facebook is mostly <...>our political fellowship. These are people who have more or less same values, these are people with a certain level of education and so on” (Appendix 7.4.1).

“Facebook is our community, if we can say so. We all know each other there” (Appendix 7.4.3).

Denis Tikhonenko, who together with the leader of “Forward, Belarus!” Anna Kanopatskaya has chosen Facebook as a primary channel of communication, also stresses the advantage of Facebook from the point of security. Unlike Odnoklassniki or VKontakte, Facebook is located outside the territory of Russia and there is less chance that the content is deleted or the network is blocked (Appendix 7.4.2).

In spite of the advantages of Facebook, politicians are considering Odnoklassniki to be a perspective and in some cases more effective platform. This is because, first of all, there are more Belarusians on Odnoklassniki than on Facebook: 1.6 million and 0.9 million monthly active users accordingly (Gemius SA, 2017). Secondly, politicians call the audience of Odnoklassniki “an average Belarusian citizen” (Appendix 7.4.1) or “an average voter” (Appendix 7.4.3). These are middle-aged people who represent different parts of the country including rural areas, with income that is average or below average. These people constitute the electoral basis of Belarusian society.

The presence of Belarusian opposition leaders on VKontakte is rather low. They may be
registered there, but they are not as active there as on other platforms. The reason is that the audience of VKontakte are primarily young people, many of whom are under the voting age. Therefore, the interviewed politicians see no point in investing resources there unless these are projects somehow related to young people.

Twitter is actively used by two out of three interviewed politicians, and they describe its role as important mostly for image-building (Appendix 7.4.2). Most Western politicians have Twitter accounts, and Belarusian politicians consider it important to be included in the world community. In terms of audience reach, this is the least used by Belarusians platform: there are 0.5 million monthly active users (Gemius SA, 2017).

Quite often the same content is duplicated across all platforms that politicians use, but not always. Politicians note that the success on different platforms may depend on the choice of topics and style of communication.

“Lebedko has many views on Odnoklassniki, and there is strong reaction to his messages. But he has a different style [than “Forward, Belarus!”], he is a brawler-politician, and this catches attention of this audience” (Appendix 7.4.2).

“If I need to choose topics for posts, on VKontakte this would be a topic aimed at young people, on Odnoklassniki this would be another topic - our local problems, on Facebook there is a world community who like to discuss geopolitics” (Appendix 7.4.3).

### 4.2.2. Facebook profiles and pages

In addition to a Facebook profile, many Belarusian politicians create a separate page. Some of them transfer all their political communication to the page and leave the profile for more personal purposes; others combine political activity both on profile and page. In any case, Facebook page is becoming a necessary element of political communication of active politicians who are looking to promote themselves on social media.

One of the reasons to switch from the profile to page is a limit of 5000 friends on the profile (while on the page there is no limit for followers). In fact, there can be followers on the profile, but, according to politicians, people are reluctant to become followers on profiles and prefer to be friends or have no connection at all (Appendix 7.4.2). Another reason is that pages give politicians more opportunities for management, moderation and promotion (Appendix 7.4.1). Besides, a page can be a way to separate personal life and politics.
Profiles and pages that interviewed politicians have are managed by politicians themselves: they post new content there, support the discussion in comments, promote their pages with the help of ads. Using ads is not yet the most common practice among Belarusian politicians: only one of the interviewed politicians says he uses ads quite often, one more politician has tried to use them once. Among reasons mentioned that can prevent politicians from promoting their page are the lack of skills and finances (Appendix 7.4.3).

Overall, all of the interviewed politicians notice that managing a page of an individual politician is more successful than managing a page of a party or organization. This supports a thesis made in the theoretical part of the paper that Belarus is an example of a candidate-centered political system. In case of Belarus, this situation is caused by a very weak party system that has been being consciously destroyed by the government throughout the years (Appendix 7.4.1). Connected to this, a paternalistic structure of Belarusian society plays its role: having no tradition of civic participation, Belarusians seem to be more inclined to place their future in hands of one leader who will decide their fates for them.

“They [Belarusians] are looking for some leader; the organization should go somewhere behind, in the background. They need some person, some guide, who will generate ideas, push to some actions” (Appendix 7.4.2).

4.2.3. The role of social media in Belarusian politics

In the context of Belarus, where traditional media are restricted for opposition politicians, internet, and social media in particular, become one of few channels, where politicians can reach wide audience. This undoubtedly contributes to the importance of social media for Belarusian politics.

“For politicians, especially in an authoritarian country, where we have many taboo and many things are prohibited for politicians, social networks become a great opportunity to communicate their thoughts” (Appendix 7.4.1).

The change of a communication model of from an elite-driven typical for broadcast era to digital networked one (McNair, 2016) facilitates an ongoing change of dominant roles in the media space. Politicians stress the capability of social media to bypass ideological filters inherent in traditional media that allow only a certain type of content to reach wide audiences. The advantage of social media is that every individual can be the main editor and the media
on their own (Appendix 7.4.1).

Among successful examples of social media use for activating political participation in Belarus, rallies against the Decree No. 3 (also known as 'social parasites' tax) have been most often named. These series of protests have been happening throughout the whole 2017 year and resulted in an initial suspense and further transformation of the text of the Decree. Instead of charging a mandatory 'parasite' tax from all unemployed citizens, the new version of the Decree obliges them to pay state-subsidized services at their full cost starting from January 1, 2019.

Despite a high level of optimism expressed in relation to the role of social media in Belarusian politics, one of the interviewees was rather skeptical towards it. The mentioned concerns can be especially relevant for politics on a more local level. It often happens that in small towns and villages - but not only - people seem to be more likely to use social media in search for entertainment rather than for political participation. Therefore, personal communication with voters, for example, coming directly to their homes or conducting group meetings, occupies an important place in the work of a Belarusian politician (Appendix 7.4.3). Online and offline activities are to different extent combined in their political strategy.

4.2.4. Possible barriers to effective political communication

Besides a so-called 'cyber hedonism' (the tendency to use internet for entertainment rather than political purposes) (Morozov, 2011), there were other aspects defined by politicians that could be obstacles to an effective political communication on social media.

Among them, 'clicktivism' (White, 2010) can be mentioned, which creates the situation when people interact with content online quite easily, but their likes do not convert into real actions. However, this aspect requires some clarifications. First of all, politicians consider it to be a norm, when people show their interest in political issues, but only a few of them do something in real life. They say it worked this way long before social media appeared, for example, when they used leaflets for communication (Appendix 7.4.2). Secondly, the content analysis showed a rather low level of feedback even online, to say nothing of the offline space.

People's activity on social media is in some way a reflection of their offline behavior, interests and values. Therefore, the reasons of the small level of political participation on social media should be searched for in the social and political context of the country. Authoritarian regime
is not a fertile ground for the development of a successful civil society, which requires an autonomy from the government. The result of a strong role of the government in all spheres is that people get used to the fact that they can't influence political decisions and become politically apathetic.

"Many people want some changes, but most of them want these changes to take place without their personal participation. This is a peculiar feature of the Belarusian mindset" (Appendix 7.4.1).

The presence of the government on social media is extremely limited. This might be both an advantage and disadvantage for opposition leaders. On the one hand, they have more chances to attract attention of audiences of social media. On the other hand, the absence of the government on social media contributes to their image as a politics-free zone. The government doesn't encourage people to go online and be politically active (Appendix 7.4.3), because this doesn't correspond to their goal to bring up obedient and silent citizens (Appendix 7.4.1).

Some users might be reluctant to be politically active on social media, because of the fear to be noticed in the surrounding of opposition or saying something that will cause questions from the side of authorities (Appendix 7.4.1). It becomes even more actual with the amendments to the law on mass media, which require obligatory identification of those who post anything online. Interestingly enough, so far there have been no cases when undesirable activity on social media led to arrests (only a couple of cases with administrative fines). Therefore, it seems that existing restraints in self-expression online to large extent come from people themselves, their own self-censorship.

"We are living in the country of self-censorship, everyone has it" (Appendix 7.4.1).

4.2.5. Belarusian authorities and social media

All of the interviewed politicians agree that authorities can't influence their activity on social media in any way: they can't delete posts or forbid to raise certain topics (unless politicians break the law). One of the politicians mentioned situations when he and his colleague were approached by pro-government deputies and given hints that they shouldn't be so sharp in criticizing the government (Appendix 7.4.2). However, these statements were never made in a form of orders and had no consequences for opposition politicians.

However, it doesn't mean that authorities don't try to control the social media space. First of
all, the new amendments to the law on mass media are seen as having a prohibitive-controlling character in relation to social media (Appendix 7.4.2). Besides, the fact that the government can't influence the online activity of politicians doesn't mean that they don't monitor it. Politicians claim that KGB (the Committee for State Security) and other authorities visit their pages and can even contact their friends on social media with the purpose to collect necessary information (Appendix 7.4.1).

There are also attempts from the side of authorities to influence online agenda. The Information and Analytical Center is supposed to be an organization, one of the purposes of which is to monitor and influence the agenda on social media (Appendix 7.4.1, 7.4.2, 7.4.3). Politicians argue that, similarly to the Russian army of trolls, pro-government employees in Belarus try to discredit the image of opposition by leaving negative comments under posts and promoting defamatory materials (Appendix 7.4.1).

However, these attempts to control the information space on social media are said to be not yet systematic:

> If we look at Russia, we see that these processes are very systematic and professionally implemented there. In Belarus they have a more chaotic character. If someone gives an order, the activity appears, then it decreases and there is a complete silence. It all appears again when a new order is given (Appendix 7.4.3).

Belarusian authorities are rather slow at adapting to the new information realities and prefer to focus on reliable traditional media channels. It will for sure take some time to put new strategies on a conveyer, but the direction has already been set.
5. Discussion and conclusions

In the following chapter the results of the research will be discussed in accordance to the research questions. Thus, first, key characteristics of politicians' activity on Facebook will be described from the perspective of their influence on the effectiveness of political communication. After this, the aspects of national context and new technologies that shape the character of political communication will be summarized. Practical implications part will provide a theoretical advice for improving the effectiveness of political communication. Finally, limitations and ideas for further research will be mentioned.

5.1. The specifics of political communication of Belarusian opposition politicians on social media

The study has showed that the majority of Belarusian opposition leaders are active Facebook users (74%). More than this, they make posts quite frequently (1 post per day on average), which allows audience to be constantly updated on relevant political issues.

They mostly write in the language of the target audience (Belarusian and Russian) and post a sufficient amount of original content (texts or visual materials created by themselves, which have a value for audience for their uniqueness).

Visual materials are better perceived by people than pure text, which is recognized by politicians who frequently attach visuals to their post. A recent trend among politicians is to create videos, and it proves to be quite an effective tool, because such videos receive quite many views.

In terms of topics, the majority of the posts are devoted solely to Belarus. Politicians frequently express their political views and describe their professional activity. Also, quite often they criticize the current regime.

From time to time politicians use persuasive strategies (mostly those that appeal to emotions of audiences) and engagement techniques (such as invitations to events, questions to the audience, surveys, etc.).

In general, there haven't been noticed any serious deviations that would decrease the value of
posts for the audience. In spite of this, the indicators of marketing effectiveness of political communication (friends, followers, likes, reposts, comments) of opposition leaders on Facebook have been found to be extremely low. The aspects of national context and of technologies themselves are supposed to provide more insights into the situation.

5.2. The aspects of national context and new technologies that influence political communication of the opposition

Overall, politicians express a lot of optimism in relation to new technologies. They see social media as an opportunity to bypass ideological filters inherent to traditional media and consider it important for democratic processes that now every person can now become media on their own. In the context of Belarus, where dominant traditional media are state-owned and opposition politicians have no access to them, this principal change in the model of communication from elite-driven analogue to digital networked one (McNair, 2016) brings an important advantage for communication of opposition politicians.

Certainly, the negative influence of technologies on politics stressed by social critics (Morozov 2011, Gladwell 2010, White 2010) has a place to be in Belarus to some extent. In particular, during the interviews the signs of 'clicktivism' and 'cyber hedonism' have been mentioned in more situational wording. However, these are not considered to be the key factors that cause low effectiveness of political communication of opposition.

What is more likely to have a defining role for the situation are weak civic society and controversial image of opposition, which both are directly related to the government policy continually implemented throughout decades (starting from the soviet times and continuing with the Lukashenko rule). Authoritarian regime doesn't provide a ground for the development of a strong civil society, where people feel that they can take part in decision-making process and have influence on politics.

Politicians are inclined to believe that most Belarusians are used to giving the responsibility for their future in the hands of other people, and that the government does nothing to encourage them to go online and become active participants of social and political life. The top-down logic of traditional media better fits the goals of the authoritarian regime to brings up obedient and politically passive citizens. This might explain why Belarusian authorities still rely primarily on traditional media in their communication strategy.
Belarusian opposition has a little political weight on a political scene and is excluded from key decision-making processes in the country. Continuous work on discrediting opposition politicians conducted by the government, fragmentation and conflicts within opposition itself contribute to a controversial image of the opposition. This leads to a low level of interest or reluctance of citizens to be noticed in the field of opposition activity on social media.

The difference in the financial state of the opposition and the government also plays an important role. The lack of finances, which opposition politicians receive mostly from Western funds, limits the range of tools for promotion. On the other hand, the government provides financial support to state-owned media that are ideologically dependent and has recently outlined the course on mastering the internet space. At the moment their attempts to influence political agenda online have a chaotic nature, but the direction has already been defined.

5.3. Practical implications

As long as internet is practically the only space with wide audiences where opposition politicians can exist, the need for incorporation of social media into their political strategy should be well recognized. More than this, the distribution of activity across different social media platforms and adaptation of content to their audiences may have positive influence on the effectiveness of their communication.

The study showed that Facebook represents a 'comfort zone' for opposition politicians - a close community of like-minded people. Therefore, it may be too risky to stake solely on this platform, and the social media strategy should be diversified. The potential of Odnoklassniki should be further explored, because its audience seems to be the closest to the image of an average Belarusian voter than audience of any other platform. VKontakte, which is often ignored by politicians due to its younger audience, is the biggest in terms of the number of active users platform in Belarus. So it can be used as a strategic tool with a perspective to raise a politically active younger generation.

Contemporary information space requires politicians to use targeted advertising on social media for self-promotion. Organic traffic can't ensure a rapid growth of politicians' popularity, especially in a situation where these politicians exist only in the online space and people rarely hear about them from other channels. Ads on social media should become an
important element of the media strategy of Belarusian politicians. Videos as a creative form of political communication have proved to be an effective tool that attracts attention of the audience. Therefore, it makes sense to further explore its potential and increase the level of professionalism.

Despite a crucial role that social media play for opposition politicians, offline practices shouldn't be left aside. Social media can't reach some audiences, which constitute a considerable part of electorate, - especially older people and residents of rural areas. In the context of limited access to traditional media, personal meetings and events may be one of a few effective tools to reach these people.

5.4. Limitations and further research

Some conclusions in this paper are based on the results of interviews with politicians. Interviews as a method rely on what other people tell a researcher, which makes obtained data a subject to distortion and in some cases lie. Not everything can be checked with the help of external sources – either because it is based on personal experience of politicians or because it is confidential information that authorities wouldn't reveal. In this case, I tried to present it as a story or opinion of a politician, not a proven fact. As long as this data has a value for the research, it can't be excluded but its limitations should be recognized.

Collected insights are focused on the product of politicians' activity on social media and politicians themselves. An important element of this communication – audience - is missing. Their feedback on social media (likes, reposts, comments) have been analyzed with quantitative content analysis. But this method cannot define people's inner motives and opinions, their regular media practices, which may provide direct answers to why the effectiveness of political communication of opposition leaders is rather low. Therefore, the study of Belarusian audiences can become an idea for further research.
6. References


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52


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7. Appendix

7.1. The list of Belarusian opposition parties, movements and organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The name of a political entity</th>
<th>The name of its leader</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parties registered in the Republic of Belarus</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| The Belarusian Party of the Left “Fair World” | Sergey Kalyakin | Political position: left.  
  Ideology: communism, Marxism, socialism.  
  Was founded in 1991 as a result of suspension of activity of the Communist Party of Belarus. The part of members who supported Lukashenko separated from the party in 1996 and formed a pro-president The Communist Party of Belarus. |
| Belarusian Green Party | Anastasiya Dorofeeva | Political position: centre-left to left-wing.  
  Ideology: green politics, eco-socialism.  
  Established in 1994. |
| Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly | Stanislav Shushkevich | Political position: centre-left.  
  Ideology: Social democracy.  
  Established in 1991. |
| Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Assembly) | Irina Veshtard | Political position: centre-left.  
  Ideology: social democracy, liberal socialism, pro-Europeanism.  
  Established in 2005 after the split within the Belarusian |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Name</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Political Position</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| United Civic Party of Belarus                                        | Anatoly Lebedko | Political position: centre-right.  
Ideology: liberalism, liberal conservatism.  
Established in 1995 by merging two parties United Democratic Party and the Civil Party. |                                                                           |                                                                         |
| Belarusian People's Front (BPF) Party                                | Ryhor Kastusiou | Political position: right-wing.  
Ideology: Belarusian nationalism, Christian democracy, conservatism, pro-Europeanism.  
Formed as a result of the split of the Belarusian Popular Front movement in 1999. |                                                                           |                                                                         |
| Conservative Christian Party - BPF                                   | Zianon Pazniak  | Political position: right-wing to far-right.  
Ideology: Belarusian nationalism, conservatism, Christian right.  
Formed as a result of the split of the Belarusian Popular Front movement in 1999. |                                                                           |                                                                         |
| Parties not registered in the Republic of Belarus                     |                 |                             |                                                                          |                                                                          |
| National Bolshevik Party of Belarus                                  | Evgeniy Kontush | Political position: syncretic, left-wing.  
Ideology: national Bolshevism, socialism, communism, Eurasianism, populism. |                                                                           |                                                                         |
| Belarusian Social Democratic Party (People's Assembly)               | Mikalay Statkevich | Political position: centre-left.  
Ideology: social democracy. |                                                                           |                                                                         |
Was founded in 1996 and presents itself as the successor of Belarusian Socialist Hramada (established in 1903). In 2004 it was refused in registration, and some of its members formed Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Assembly), which was registered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party/Group</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Political Position</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belarusian Liberal Party of Freedom and Progress</td>
<td>Vladimir Novosiad</td>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>Liberalism, pro-Europeanism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarusian Christian Democracy</td>
<td>Vital Rymasheuski Paval Sieviaryniets</td>
<td>Centre-right</td>
<td>Christian democracy, liberal-conservatism, social conservatism, pro-Europeanism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarusian Freedom Party</td>
<td>Sergey Vysotskiy</td>
<td>Far-right</td>
<td>Belarusian patriotism, conservatism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Movements and organizations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Aim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell the Truth!</td>
<td>Andrey Dzmitryeu</td>
<td>Civil campaign</td>
<td>To achieve peaceful democratic changes in Belarus through the support of this idea by the majority of Belarusians. The date of foundation: 2010.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Belarus</td>
<td>Andrei Sannikov</td>
<td>Civil campaign</td>
<td>Release of the prisoners of conscience, free democratic elections and EU membership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Young Democrats” YD</td>
<td>Alena Lutskovich</td>
<td>youth organization of the United Civic Party.</td>
<td>Aim: engagement of members in political life of Belarus to strengthen democratic standards. The date of foundation: no data available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Aim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Social Democrats</td>
<td>Nasta Gerylovich</td>
<td>Youth organization of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Assembly).</td>
<td>Aim: to increase social, cultural and economic level of Belarusian society through the principles of social democracy with the help of social, civic and educational activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward, Belarus!</td>
<td>Anna Kanopatskaya</td>
<td>Civil campaign.</td>
<td>Aim: free people, strong family, rich Belarus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionary action</td>
<td>No leaders</td>
<td>Anarchist organization.</td>
<td>Ideology: anarchism, militant-communism, illegalism.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.2. Codebook for content analysis

A) Politician

1. Politician's name

Record the name of the politician: ______________________ .

2. Political party's / organization or movement's name

Record the name of the political party / movement or organization, which the analyzed politician is the leader of: ______________________ .

3. Gender

Record the politician's gender:

Female: 1
Male: 2
Not known (in case of anarchists): 99

4. Age group

Record the politician's age group:

Up to 49 years old: 1
50 or more years old: 2
Not known (in case of anarchists): 99

5. Facebook profile presence

Record whether or not the politician has a Facebook profile:

No: 0
Yes: 1

6. Facebook page presence
Record whether or not the politician has a Facebook page:

No: 0
Yes: 1

B) Facebook profile / page

7. Facebook profile link

Record the link of the politician's Facebook profile (e.g., https://www.facebook.com/belarusian). In case of absence of a Facebook profile, write '-' :

______________________ .

8. Last activity (profile)

Record the last activity date of the profile in the format DD/MM/YY (at the moment of February 28, 2018). In case of absence of a Facebook profile, write '-' :

______________________ .

9. The number of friends

Record the number of friends of the profile. In case of absence of a Facebook profile, write ' - '. If the list of friends is hidden from public, write 'hidden' :

______________________ .

10. The number of followers (profile)

Record the number of followers of the profile. In case of absence of a Facebook page, write '-' :

______________________ .

11. The frequency of posting (profile)

Record the average number of posts per day made in the profile (the number of posts for N days divided by N days). In case of absence of a Facebook profile, write '-' :

______________________ .
12. Facebook page link

Record the link of the politician's Facebook page (e.g., https://www.facebook.com/belarusian). In case of absence of a Facebook page, write '-' :

______________________ .

13. Last activity (page)

Record the last activity date of the page in the format DD/MM/YY (at the moment of February 28, 2018). In case of absence of a Facebook page, write '-' :

______________________ .

14. The number of likes

Record the number of likes of the page. In case of absence of a Facebook page, write '-' :

______________________ .

15. The number of followers (page)

Record the number of followers of the page. In case of absence of a Facebook page, write '-' :

______________________ .

16. The frequency of posting (page)

Record the average number of posts per day made on the page (the number of posts for N days divided by N days). In case of absence of a Facebook page, write '-' :

______________________ .

C) Facebook post

17. Date

Record the date when the post is published in the format DD/MM/YY :

______________________ .

18. Language
Record the language of the text of the post. In case of several languages used in one post, choose the dominant one (according the the hierarchy: the language of post, the language of hashtag, the language of visual material or link).

Belarusian: 1
Russian: 2
English: 3
Other: 4

19. Originality

Record whether the post has original (created by the politician) content:

No: 0
Yes: 1

20. Sources of borrowed content

In case of presence of borrowed content (repost, link) in the post, please specify what is the source of this content:

Only original content: 0
News media (its website or social media page): 1
Official page (social media page or website) of the political organization (or its representative), to which the analyzed politician belongs: 2
Official page (social media page or website) of the political organization (or its representative), to which the analyzed politician doesn't belong: 3
Social media page of a blogger or journalist: 4
Other: 5

21. Visual materials

Record whether the post includes visuals and of what type. If the post contains several categories simultaneously, choose several of them:
No: 0

Video produced by politicians themselves: 1 (Please, specify the number of views on Facebook in brackets ‘(N)’)

Borrowed video: 2

Picture: 3

Text with a graphic layout (Facebook feature): 4

22. Geopolitical focus

Record if the post mentions (or implies) any country:

Only Belarus: 1

Belarus and Russia: 2

Belarus and West (EU or USA): 3

Other countries or combination of countries: 4

Geopolitically neutral: 98

23. Political relevance

Record which issue is presented in the post. If the post contains several categories simultaneously, please choose the dominant category:

Critique of the Belarusian regime (government, its representatives on all levels and supporters, state symbols): 1

Sarcastic or humorous attitude to the Belarusian regime (government, its representatives on all levels and supporters, state symbols): 2

Activity or political position of the politician or organization, to which the politician belongs (or of opposition in general): 3

Personal life of the politician: 4

Positive evaluation of the Belarusian regime (government, its representatives on all levels and supporters): 5

Critique of Russian/Soviet politics and regime (government, its representatives on all levels
and supporters): 6

Topical political information / news without opinions: 7

Other type of content (connected neither to politics nor personal life of a politician): 8

Critique of Western (EU or US) politics: 9

Pride for successful representatives of the country: 10

Critique of other opposition representatives: 11

24. The mode of persuasion

Record which mode of persuasion is used in the post. If the post contains several categories simultaneously, please choose the dominant category:

Ethos – appeal to the authority or credibility of the politician: 1

Pathos – appeal to the emotions of the audience: 2

Logos – appeal to logic: 3

Difficult to define: 0

25. Engagement

Record if the tweet contains any engagement technique. If the post contains several categories simultaneously, please choose several:

No: 0

Question to the audience: 1

Survey: 2

Invitation to an event: 3

Invitation to join the political party, movement or organization: 4

Suggestion to subscribe to a page on social media or repost the content: 5

Asking for help (both financial and actions): 6

Proposal to contact the politician to receive help: 7
26. Like

Record the number of likes under the post. In case it is a repost, write 'repost':
______________________ .

27. Share (not applicable to reposts)

Record the number of shares under the post. In case it is a repost, write 'repost':
______________________ .

28. Comment (not applicable to reposts)

Record the number of comments under the post. In case it is a repost, write 'repost':
______________________ .
7.3. Interview guide

1. Are you registered on social media? If yes, which ones?

2. Do you use social media for the purposes of political communication? What are your key political communication platforms?

3. In your opinion, what role do social media play in Belarusian politics at the moment?

4. Can social media be used to activate civic participation in the context of Belarus? If yes, how?

5. Does official Belarusian politics influence your activity on social media? In which way? Do you feel pressure from the government's side?

6. At the moment the key strategy to control internet used by the Belarusian government is censorship. In your opinion, is there a possibility that the Belarusian government will soon develop more advanced and contemporary tools to control political agenda via Internet?

7. What might be the reason of a rather low level of political participation of Belarusian citizens on social media?

8. Do you think that such platforms as Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki have potential to activate civic participation in Belarus? Are you planning to increase your presence on these platforms?

9. Is there anything that you would improve in your communication on social media?

10. What are the plans for the future regarding the social media strategy?
7.4. Transcripts of interviews

7.4.1. Anatoly Lebedko

Name: Anatoly Lebedko
Nationality: Belarusian
Place of residence: Belarus
Party: United Civic Party
Position: Chairman
Date of the interview: 05/04/18
Place of the interview: UCP's office (Minsk, Belarus)
Language of the interview: Russian
Name of the interviewee: Yuliya Ilyuk
Transcript made by: Yuliya Ilyuk

Transcript:

Yuliya Ilyuk: So, our today's conversation will be developing within the framework of such concepts as social media and politics. In particular, I am interested in how you use social media. As far as I know, you are very active on social media. You have accounts in Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte, all social networks, which...

Anatoly Lebedko: But I don't develop my VKontakte account.

Y.I.: So you just have it. Therefore, I would like to ask you: can I say that Facebook is some sort of your key platform for communication? We can say so.
A.L.: Yes and no.
Y.I.: Why?
A.L.: This is the result of my practical presence on social networks. I have diversified my approaches. In the beginning, I primarily used Facebook and Twitter, and Facebook was the key platform. As the time went by, I changed this from the standpoint of efficiency. Now the main social networks for me are Facebook and Odnoklassniki.
Y.I.: Odnoklassniki.
A.L.: As surprising it may be. Why have it happened? First of all, these are different target audiences. Facebook is mostly, I stress mostly, our political fellowship. These are people who have more or less same values, these are people with a certain level of education and so on. They can be close relatives or not so close neighbors, but this is one community. Odnoklassniki are totally different. There you can say who is the target audience is. These are average citizens of the Republic of Belarus. And they are completely different, very different in many ways. There are not many activists, political structures, organizations or NGOs. You can rarely meet them there. Therefore this social network is important for me if I want, for example... Let's say I want to conduct my own not scientific but sociological research or survey. On Facebook I will not get a mirror reflection of the society. But on the social network... Again, I don't claim this to be a scientific research, but it is close to what society is and how an average Belarusian thinks.

Y.I.: Yes, I remember you have recently conducted a survey about the elections in Odnoklassniki.

A.L.: Yes, yes. The last survey was... Around 1200 people took part in it. It was about the people's choice, what they prefer on the 25th of March: some sort of theatrical performance with a concert near the Opera theater, which is allowed, or an unauthorized rally in the center of the city. If people on Facebook were mostly in favor of a festive format, that it should be Opera and so on, on the social network 60% of respondents said that they would prefer an unauthorized rally, which means that people on Odnoklassniki, average Belarusian citizens, face much wider complex of social and economic problems, their lives are harder, they are more opposition in a way. Many of them don't know what 100 years of BNR is. Their life experiences guide their choices. This helps me, to say nothing about that on Odnoklassniki I can reach wider audiences. This is related to the strategy of the social network. For example, one of the biggest posts that I had on Odnoklassniki had 1 300 000 views. It is impossible to reach such wide audiences on Facebook, because there you either pay money, this is a commercial approach, but if you simply have a post there you will have much wider audience. And I already see the difference. I understand what post – of course, I can be wrong - but in general I can orient myself. On Odnoklassniki, it will be well received, on Facebook – not so well, for example. And vice versa.

Y.I.: So your style of communication differs depending on the platform?
A.L.: Exactly. That is why they are important for me. I lead all my accounts by myself, I don't have people who write posts for me on social networks. I do it by myself, therefore, it requires some time. Of course, as time goes, this becomes a routine and much easier to do. Wherever I am – on public transport, wherever – I always find time to look at and react to. On Odnoklassniki it is more difficult, on Facebook I try to answer everything.

Y.I.: Why?

A.L.: On Odnoklassniki, because there can be two, three, four thousand under posts. I can't physically process it. So some of my volunteers appear, they sometimes write to me: “A new portion of bots, trolls have appeared”. Because posts are open and sometimes they come from Russia. And they interfere with the discussion, they do not comment on the topic of the post, but come with a single aim to disrupt the discussion. In such cases, I already checked how right it is, I simply delete them. Such type of volunteering at work.

Y.I.: I see, one more technical point that I wanted to clarify. On Facebook there are profiles of users (usual profiles with friends and so on), and there are pages of users.

A.L.: Yes, account and page.

Y.I.: Yes, account and page.

A.L.: I use both.

Y.I.: Yes, you have both. But what is the difference for you in terms of aims?

A.L.: I don't understand it completely, I am not an expert on this. In the party we send people to some trainings, they teach them so that they are good at it. I use the method of trial and error. I see that the audience is not always the same. The page is relatively new. Therefore, I see that not everyone visits my page. Some prefer to read my account. They are not on the page. However, new people have already appeared who follow my page, not account. Therefore, what I do now, I sometimes duplicate the content. Sometimes I repost my post there, and in such way. This is for me some sort of a transfer period, but at the moment I need it. I see that, when I make a post in the account I see that people appear that are not on the page.

Y.I.: So does it mean that in the end you are planning to use only page?

A.L.: Yes, of course. Because there are more possibilities, there you can find some volunteers, helpers that can moderate a discussion. And in the account you have a limit – five
thousand. And on the page you can..

Y.I.: Five thousands friends. And how many followers can you have there?

A.L.: On page there can be an unlimited number of followers. In the account you can have five thousand and that's it. If you have made friends, you can only delete them and add new ones instead of them.

Y.I.: Okay, I see. You also have a general page of the party on social networks.

A.L.: Yes, of course.

Y.I.: I have a question: in your opinion, what works better in Belarus – promotion of a politician or of a party? Personalized politics or party.

A.L.: Unfortunately, our politics is personalized. This is not very good, not very right, but it is as it is. On your own, you can have some opportunities, but there is no a multiparty system. Our whole system works against parties, against multiparty system. And, therefore, the interest is low. I was in parliament in the beginning of the 90s, twice in the elections, back then the interest to politicians and parties was on rise. Because people understood that if a party is the parliament, in the real parliament, that they pass laws, and laws become the rules of life for us, it is extremely important. Now they don't see the connection between parties, their presence in the parliament, and therefore the interest to political parties as tools that has a real influence on our lives is low. There are people on their own – it doesn't matter if they are politicians, or bloggers, or activists, or writers – if their pages are promoted they are much more popular than pages of public organizations or political structures.

Y.I.: Okay, let's talk a bit about social media and civic participation in Belarus. In your opinion, what role do social media play in the political life of Belarus?

A.L.: Networks play a huge role, obviously. Their advantage is the the fact that every individual, citizen, person can be the main editor, can be the media, can perform this function. In other words, if previously people had to somehow build their relationship. For example, print press, there were papers. You had to find the path to reach the editorial office, to persuade them that you are interesting, that your publications... If you are writing something there. This was a tremendous task, problem. Then websites appeared and they have widened the space, but still... There always was an editorial policy and people who defined whether the content fits or not. And in this or that way they play the role of good or bad censors. In this situation, in our situation when there are social media, you are your own director, editor and
censor. You can without other people, without using someone's lobby of your interests, create yourself on your own. It is enough to be simply talented or get into the trend and expectations, moods of people. Because not all smart and educated are popular, no. This depends on the demand in the society. If there is, if there is a demand on serious analytics, yes? If there are some funny things or some popular things among masses – then you also get into this trend.

Y.I.: Okay, haven't you noticed such a tendency that since social networks more people have appeared in the politics, civic participation have risen, but real changes have stayed on the same level or have declined? Because social media play the role of such where people can easily express themselves, like something, but in the end these likes do not convert into real actions.

A.L.: Yes, yes. This can also be noticed that for many people the number of likes becomes the most important goal. People don't care whether there will be changes or not, what they care about is that their page, their post was liked by as many people as possible. It has been noticed not once that if you publish such an information that there is some event and whether you visit it – the number of people who expressed their interest and the number of those who actually come, not in the virtual space, but in real life – these are percents. The difference will be not in percents but in several times. Conditionally speaking, there may be a thousand people who registered their interest and only 5-6 people will come. That is why these are two parallel worlds, and they actually exist. But if we put them on the scales, this is my principle, I put everything on the scales, there are no ideal solutions. There are no solutions where there is a 100% guarantee. And when you weight this, you understand that in any way to be with social networks or without them – of course, the first option is more preferable. Because for politicians, especially in an authoritarian country, where we have many taboo and many things are prohibited for politicians, social networks become a great opportunity to communicate their thoughts. Because opposition politicians are forbidden on the state television, if you appear in the “Soviet Belarus”, you appear there in the dark light. On every official media channel you have taboo. And despite some attempts to control information space, internet leaves some opportunity and gives a chance. Here you just need to manage your own time, find your priorities, what you want, set goals and tasks. In any case, I have a rather positive opinion about social media, for me this is the audience, this is the opportunity to learn people's attitude to our ideas, the opportunity to manage actually... A very good
example is 'the march of non-parasites' in 2017, a notorious Decree #3. Actually, we were involved in 14-17 marches, all the organizational work was made on social media. Some of the regions appeared in the following way. There was a huge interest, first of all. Posts were gathering tens and hundreds of thousands views. Every day in this period I was spending 40-50 minutes only to reply to people. These were unknown to me people, but they wrote me, asked, consulted. And some people went out. 'Why don't you come to us?', 'Why don't you come to Molodechno, Pinsk?', 'Why are you not in these cities?'. Okay, no questions. But we can't do out of Minsk what you can do in Pinsk or Molodechno by yourselves. We can provide you with a layout of a march with the place where you call people to come. But you have your own local groups. You have social networks and local online media. If you take upon yourselves the responsibility to spread this, we can cooperate. This was an example when not everything happens in the virtual world. We didn't have any other opportunity. Financial resources are limited. I have already mentioned the situation with the state media. And this was the only opportunity to communicate with people and for organization. Now it's very easy... And the last example. March 25 – the Freedom day. This is also a part of the internet, the part of social networks. It is created and... In which way, now we are organizing Chernobyl. Previously we had to gather all people together in one place. It took some time to come from the regions. It is also important, you can't substitute the live communication. But when you need to make some decisions quickly – this saves a lot of time, it is very effective. You can include almost everyone. Now you can teach even elderly people not only to type with one finger, but to be proficient in it.

Y.I.: Yes, do you have a feeling, maybe some sort of, that there is a fear from the side of citizens to be somehow noticed in some oppositional activities online – for example, to like something or something else. Does it influence such marketing indicators?

A.L.: Of course, I believe that for many people even those who are in the government. I think officials are heterogeneous, and they live in this system, they even serve this system, but they never reveal their real political views. But they wouldn't do it under their names, they know that now special structures research – and we have a lot of examples when employees of special services come to a person and say: 'Well, dear, you are noticed, you had such a bad post'. It is obvious that the government tries to seed the virus of fear on social media as well. Why it scares people now – many people do not use their real surnames – and now there are new rules were introduced that everyone should be, should say who is who. This scares many
people. If we are talking about this group of people, who really want to do something, because it is connected to their profession. He is a doctor, he is a teacher, to say nothing about officials. He also has a desire to express himself: wages, employment, security and so on. And he maybe has a vantage when he uses not his real name. For them this new rule will be a threat and risk.

Y.I.: So, it actually exists.

A.L.: Yes, of course. Now the government pays more and more attention. Just a few years ago they were dummies in this respect. And even now. If we look at official media... We are working on such a program called 'Burbalki', we analyze the press. What we notice, I haven't faced this topic before. When we started looking at local press like 'Grodnenskaya prauda' or 'Bobruiskiy (some) courier', I have just come up with these. But what I mean is that it is a regional paper. We see that their printed press is ok, but their internet pages is something awful. They posts appear there once a week. They don't consider it important or actual, that it is every day, every hour. They have this... They are told that it is necessary, they do not yet see this as a tool to form public opinion. However, these teams of bots already exist. And if you have a resonance topic, like, for example ,this topic of hazing and deaths... If it is a 'painful' topic, this group of bots appear immediately. They do not use their real names as well and they start to understand that these are people for whom it's their job, they get their salary. In Russia it is already a factory of trolls. It is a separate topic. All people understand the power of internet and social media.

Y.I.: Now we were talking mostly about successful cases of using social media in politics. But if we think about it, it is a very limited part of population, if we take in percents, it is not that big...

A.L.: It is not limited, but we need to understand. First, the army of internet users in Belarus is huge. I think we are not very far away from European countries. But we need to understand that I can use internet to buy female leather boots with a good price and that's it. Therefore, when we are talking about this segment that is the civic society that is interested in, I don't mean here purely political part, but also about interest in public life – what I can do in my yard, to stand against building process or something. This, unfortunately, is not as big as we would like it to be. If it coincided, then it would be super. But even in this situation, what we do in the party and I am a big supporter of, we go to people. And no one will ever reassure me
that it is wrong or unnecessary. We give away the 'Narodnaya Volya', some print press. And I see, and I know that a lot of people, who are not represented on social media and you need to go to them and bring them a different product. If there is such an opportunity, to make them join the internet. I think these projects will grow.

Y.I.: Why I started this topic is because there are a lot of researchers, so called digital pessimists, among them a belarusian, Evgeny Morozov, maybe you know him. And they, in particular, he argues that in the society where there is no tradition of civic participation the appearance of the internet is not going to bring changes. Because people get the internet, but they use it for different purposes, they use it for entertainment, for image building, for something else.

A.L.: For household, yes. Yes, he... I can agree. A very good example is Ukraine where the civic society has recently made a huge step forward. With a big number of problems, in their society it becomes an important factor of influencing, and this starts from the television, from social networks, from a big number of registered and active organizations with a rights field and their possibilities. Certainly, there are a log of other problems appearing that accompany this process, but in Belarus the internet is indeed not... When very acute problems appear or situations such as the Decree No. 3. This is also a peculiar feature of the Belarusian mindset. Many people want some changes, but most of them want these changes to take place without their personal participation. So if it happened, he would say 'okay'. He would shake your hand and say 'thank you'. Therefore, when we have discussions on the internet, when we touch upon opposition, political parties, lots of people appear who take on the prosecutor's image and they demand something. Though when one joins a political party, the only thing they do is they legalize their status as a person who is in opposition, de jure. But de facto, the attitude of Belarusians to politics, they all have different motivation for being dissatisfied. One doesn't like that there is no reduced fare on public transport, another doesn't like that there is no European perspective in the country, and so on. But all of them doesn't accept this politics, which basically means they are in opposition. But people do not think that they must do something for it. They think that someone else in the opposition party should do it for them. But in the authoritarian country it is impossible to create a successful civic society. It is not the aim of the power, of the system to create, cultivate, help... And the government understands, or some individual representatives understand that... In our lexicon we have 'motivation', 'competition', this is what the engine of progress is. People in power today
almost don't use such words, they don't stake on motivation. Obedience – yes. Quick implementation of orders no matter which – rational, ineffective – yes. What the demand is, yes? Such politics takes place. If the government needs obedient, fast-acting, but they don't need competition, don't need motivation. But there is no civic society without these things.

Y.I.: Do such platforms as Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki to increase the civic society, its volume and participation?

A.L.: This is what is happening. Another question: there is a difference in the understanding of the pace. It would be better if it was much faster. What is obvious about Odnoklassniki is that there is a huge mistrust in the government, critical attitude to what happens, therefore, posts related to the topic of justice, let's call them like this, they spread very quickly. Questions related to democracy – no. People's reaction to this is rather weak. But if you write the fate of some person who faced injustice – he was bitten by the police or something – this is what people react to and become involved in the discussion. There are sometimes two, three thousands of posts of pure discussion. And, of course, it is very important, and there moderators appear – people say persistently about self-respect, self-responsibility – not in these words, maybe, with different terms – but about this. Therefore, I think is is slightly expanding. But when, on the other side, from the side of the state power institutions it is not encouraged or limited, the pace is different that we would prefer.

Y.I.: You have slightly mentioned the topic of bots, we have touched upon this topic, I am just curious... In my opinion, as I see it, the key tool of control of the information space by the government is censorship. This is how I see it. I think that some complex and more advanced tools are not yet used by the government, but you are talking about bots, could you please tell about it in more detail? How well is it developed?

A.L.: It would be more precise to say here about self-censorship. We are living in the country of self-censorship, everyone has it, we can only talk about its volume. Starting from websites and editorial offices, for some it is 100%, for some – 50%. Therefore, there are sites such as Charter’97, Belpartisan, and there are some 'herbivores', and there is a self censorship in every person. If they express their opinions under their names, they must understand where this limit is. This has a right to be, indeed. What concerns the trend among the government that they try to manage this process and there are structures that are involved in this. There are analytical services that analyze. For example, the center under administration is now
becoming a very important brain center. They don't have problems with financial support for analytics, for hiring people who monitor this. However, the question is how widely applied it is – this is another question. But I am convinced that all more or less relevant Belarusian public or political personalities are under such control. For example, if Alexievich published some critical article about, then, of course, there would be so called bots, for whom this is their job. To either create the conflict in the heads of people who read this or to move the discussion in another direction. As a rule, when they come, they don't write something related to the topic, they start: 'Oh, you remember, she supported the Ukraine, she is for blood' and so on and so forth. At the moment it is a small, but a conveyer in Belarus.

Y.I.: So, there are hired people, who sit and write this.

A.L.: No question, no question. This is not widely applied to all active people, but it exists in relation to several hundred of people who are relevant. People with a clear oppositional position, there was a situation when criminal cases were instituted in relation to people who wrote some post. Insulting the honor and dignity of the President. They haven't reached the court, but it creates a precedent. Why? Because a lot of critical posts, and, in my opinion, even insulting posts, when people are not shy in expressions in relation to Lukashenko. And they understand that this space is growing, increasing, they need to stop it. By what means? They need to create some demonstrative process: there is a person caught on social media, there is his post, and there is the trial and punishment – so that other people increase their self-censorship, which everyone already has.

Y.I.: In your opinion, does the government use ads? There are bots...

A.L.: If you mean paid ads – yes. I have the most recent example. In the beginning of this year, there was an operation aimed at my personal discrediting, and when we analyzed – I mean people who are involved in this – videos and information was put on social media and paid for. This is for sure. If there is a certain aim and task, to discredit the structure, the person, this is all involved. They have already learnt, there is a financial support, and all these things that have a negative connotation, to discredit, is paid for. It's like an ad, it pops up on the top so that more people could see it. This is a very new example from this year.

Y.I.: I see. Do you use ads on social media?

A.L.: I haven't yet used it, however, there were thoughts not as much for myself as for some important topics, which I would like, actually... During the election campaign we used a bit of
ads for our candidates, we tried to do it. Of course, the most important thing is to have resources.

Y.I.: So, this is the question of finances.

A.L.: The question of finances, because there is a misunderstanding that... Of course, it is great when there are more people and you grow, because... What is Facebook? You make a post on Facebook and only 150 people of your friends see it, not all 4000. This is what is different about Odnoklassniki, it has a different approach. I have less friends there, around only 2000. But if there is a repost, the more... Let's say I have 500 reposts, 1000 reposts – this means that you cover the space. You threw a stone, and waves appeared. This is why it is so important to be present there. You don't pay there, but you get access to consumers of your post, of your information, only because a lot of people were interested in this. Different strategies of social networks.

Y.I.: Also, I would like to draw attention to the fact that you are one of a few politicians who use videos for promotion. And you do it not as simply blogging, there is also blogging, where you tell what happens from the first person, and there are also analytical programs, you have already mentioned 'Burbalki'. How time-consuming and effective is it to create video content?

A.L.: I haven't conducted a substantial analysis, in terms of effort... No, I think what is important is to be interested in it. For example, I often ride a bicycle. And last year, I launched, I had somewhat 5 videos. I just approach the point that I am interested in. The building of the Supreme Court is being built, I think that these are irrational spendings. Or, say, a special clinic in Zhdanovichi. I came there. This doesn't require any spendings from my side. I have a smartphone, I have access to social networks. I press the button. I have thoughts, I express them and go further. No, for this you just need not to be lazy and... I see that in terms of views, they have more views than static videos For example, if we show 'Burbalki', this is a formed cluster of loyal viewers. They switch it on, and they watch only 30 minutes, and so on. In general, people like something short and active. One of our biggest videos was when we were caught after the 'non-parasites march' in Molodechno. This was in real time and people were watching this. Tens of thousands, a lot of views in real time. Therefore, there is an understanding that sometimes you should make videos in real time. Regarding static videos, we have refused from this, we also tried making it in real time, with questions, but the dynamics wasn't big. Therefore, we decided to put a focus on quality, to
record it well and publish. And we still reach the same number of views. What is very important is that you should be present on several social networks. Their audiences do not intersect, and, for example, 'Burbalki' may have from 20 to 30 thousand of views. This is good. These are Odnoklassniki, YouTube, Facebook.

Y.I.: Where do you have more views?

A.L.: Odnoklassniki. They give us the most views. And some well-promoted platforms, such as ePramova. They have lots of subscribers. Many political structures tried to create their own television, we were among the first, but we are the only left. All others make their personal videos or something like this, but they don't have some thematic programs like we have on UCP-TV. We are the only left. Another thing is that we have enthusiasm and volunteers for this.

Y.I.: If you say that personalized politics is more effective in Belarus, maybe, you need to create Lebedko-TV instead of UCP-TV?

A.L.: Well, from the point of view of views, maybe, yes. Because I have some closed recognition. From the point of view of perspective – this is good and bad. The worst option is when everyone knows you but no one watches and is not interested. But if you have low recognition, this is also the question of recognition. If there is a normal political situation when you will be able to win election campaigns - because people vote for you, not because you are assigned to a position – then everything will change. But at the moment, we are a liberal-conservative structure, therefore, on the one hand, it means the desire for something new, to try to do something, and, on the other hand, we do not want to refuse from some other conservative things, maybe, there is no fast and obvious result.

Y.I.: How many people do work on 'Burbalki'?

A.L.: 'Burbalki' is a crazy thing. We get together, and the only thing that we have time to send each other are names of the topics – that's it.

Y.I.: So, it is very spontaneous.

A.L.: Yes. For example, we are making a video on Tuesday, which means that on Sunday we send each other topics. Yaroslav and me take two topics each. That's it.

Y.I.: It this the whole team? Who is a cameraman?

A.L.: We have one guy who is a cameraman. He shoots and edits so that it is in a good
quality. That's it.

Y.I.: So, three people.

A.L.: Yes. Well, we have 1.5 people more so to say. One young person, we use him sometimes. This all happens without budget, without anything. So to say, a voluntary project.

Y.I.: I will move on to my final question. What are the plans for the future regarding your strategy on social media? Maybe, you would like to change something, to improve something, or just some plans for the future.

A.L.: In this respect, I rely more on people for whom it is their profession. Of course, some things will be changing along with technical advances: some new apps and so on. We just need to track it on time and enter it on time. Because these are not just opportunities, this is also business, therefore, I think those who are involved in it, they do it very professionally, and our task is only to be on time to enter it. What concerns closest tasks, we need to preserve these platforms, for example, if we have video... But I see that it grows every day, every day new people and subscribers appear. Therefore, we need to preserve what we have. By the way, our slogan is 'Build the new, preserve the best'. We will preserve the best of what we have and try to keep up with new opportunities that internet and social media give us.

Y.I.: Do I understand correctly that you have some consultants, do you hire some people? You were talking about people, who are well at it.

A.L.: Yes, look, when there was a local elections campaign, Chernov's school, all our candidates go to this school. And one part of our educational program... A – we teach people to speak in front of a camera, to record, to participate in debates, make streams. We teach them to do it. And not only our Chernov's school... Of course, we attract, we have those who can be called experts unlike us, amateurs. There is Zinaida Alexandrovna Bondarenko, who... Half of Belsat has gone through her education – TV hosts and so on. We involve her. Haschevadskiy, our famous director. Of course, he consults us, helps us, we involve him in our schools. There are content consultants, say, Alexandr Dobrovolskiy who has a considerable experience. So, yes, there are people we cooperate with. In addition, our international partners. We are the part of the European People's Party, we cooperate with, we make trainings. In April we make two trainings: one devoted to work on social media and the second about public speeches. So, eight people are sent there. These are people who we think are interested in politics, who are going to be candidates for deputies. At the moment we fight
– at least we try – to fight computer illiteracy, because there are very good people who have lots of knowledge and huge experience, but they don't have the opportunity to share this. If they were present on social media... Say, there is an issue: the atomic station - do we need it? If a person has knowledge, they can sit in their kitchen and discuss it with their neighbor. But if they go into computer, into social media, the retransmission of ideas, the function of multiplication is very important. There is an understanding of how important it is among people who have went through the local campaign, who were successful on social media. There are good examples. The main thing is to make them self-confident. And people open it for themselves this new world. I don't know a person who entered social media and was disappointed. On the contrary, he sees that new people join him. We, through the internet... We have a big database... Now what is important for working with people is the database of their emails. When you have their emails, you can send it for free. Because the usual post is rather expensive nowadays. Phone calls also require some resources. There are whole programs on how to work with electorate via computers. You can create your... You can create, now there are programs that you can create your own network. Say, USP – and it will be only our network. At the moment we discuss with our partner that we can create it. Therefore, this is the future.

Y.I.: I see. Good luck.


Y.I.: Thank you very much. Actually, this is very helpful for me.
7.4.2. Denis Tikhonenko

Name: Denis Tikhonenko
Nationality: Belarusian
Place of residence: Belarus
Political movement: “Forward, Belarus!”
Position: Assistant of the leader (Anna Kanopatskaya)
Date of the interview: 11/04/18
Place of the interview: Skype call
Language of the interview: Russian
Name of the interviewee: Yuliya Ilyuk
Transcript made by: Yuliya Ilyuk

Transcript:

Yuliya Ilyuk: Hello, good afternoon.

Denis Tikhonenko: Yes, good afternoon, Yuliya.

Y.I.: Do you hear me well?
D.T.: Sure, everything is alright.

Y.I.: That's great. First of all, thank you for accepting my invitation for an interview. I will try to keep it short and up to the point. Right from the start, I would like to clarify one small technical point: can I record our conversation on a dictaphone?
D.T.: Yes, sure.

Y.I.: Super, great. Our today's conversation will be developing within the frames of such concepts as social media and politics. In particular, I am interested in how you and Anna Anatolyevna use social media. Because I know you are very active on social media: you have pages on Twitter, Facebook, Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki. Can we say that Facebook is your key platform?
D.T.: Yes.

Y.I.: So...
D.T.: Yes, we have chosen Facebook as a basis of our communication. New information appears there earlier than on other social media. Except for, maybe, Twitter. There one can find more full information, because not everything is duplicated on other social media. Some things can be only on Facebook.

Y.I.: On Facebook, there are profiles as ordinary users with friends and so on, and there are pages as politicians. So, I know you use both – a profile and a page. Anna uses only her page. Why is it so? And what are the differences in purposes?

D.T.: What concerns Anna, we have made a decision that she will not have a public profile - not a page, but profile, you get the difference.

Y.I.: Yes, yes.

D.T.: All materials that she had in her profile were hidden, the only thing that was left is the message that all information about her activity will be on the page. This was made, first of all, because she has become a very public person that draws a lot of attention and this attention is only growing during the years. Therefore, we decided that some personal information that concerns... Which she or me don't want to make public – this information will be hidden. Thus we focused on her having only the page. There are, of course, some personal moments, but they appear in a certain amount. What concerns my profile, I am not shy about it, I have there both – personal information. I decided to save this page, because, if you know, there is an option to convert a profile into a page with automatic transfer of all friends to the page. This way is used by many Belarusian politicians. We decided to exclude this way to avoid artificial followers of the page. So we decided that in order to understand the real rating, what is the real attention of the audience to her, to me there is in the society we decided that people should be added there by themselves. If all friends that we had in our profiles – five thousand – this is the maximum amount. We didn't transfer our friends to the page automatically.

Y.I.: So the audience is different? On the page and in the profile.

D.T.: We haven't conducted such an analysis, because actually many of my and Anna's friends subscribed to the page as well. But, of course, there are a lot of people that we don't know. Why else have pages been created? Because she and me have both reached the limit of followers. Not followers, but friends in profiles. So there you can only become a follower of the page, but from my experience people are reluctant to be only followers, they feel themselves as the second-sort person, they would like to be either friend or none. Therefore...
There is no such thing on the page. On the page there is no division by friends, not friends, or other categories. There you can subscribe or not subscribe. Therefore... How much of the audiences intersect is hard to say, because we have never had such a question to conduct such analysis. And how many Anna has – five thousand friends, now around four thousand followers of the page – I don't know how many of them intersect in percent. We have never had such a task.

Y.I.: Ok, I see. Besides your personal pages on social media, you also have a general page of the movement “Forward, Belarus!”. From your experience, can we say that in Belarus, personalized politics with the focus on a politician is more effective than promoting the whole organization or some structure.

D.T.: Well... From the analysis of the number of followers of organizations and their leaders or some well-know people, we can make a conclusion that people are more inclined to trust people. The number of people that persons have, for example, the leader of the UCP Lebedko has more followers than the page of the United Civic Party. And this analogy is the same among all structures. People trust more... People on social networks, these are social networks after all, they look for some interpersonal contacts. It's more pleasant for them to be subscribers of people, to communicate with them than with some impersonal page of some organization, which is led by some unknown person, it's not known who the moderator of these messages is, who writes all of this. This scares people off. Pages of organizations, as a rule, have less followers than personal pages. Besides, the paternalistic structure of Belarusian society should be taken into account. We, most of Belarusians, they are looking for some leader, the organization should go somewhere behind, in the background. They need some person, some guide, who will generate ideas, push to some actions. If this is made from the name of organization, it is several times less effective.

Y.I.: I was also thinking about this and asked this question, because, say, in Scandinavian countries parties play more important role than individual politicians. They have a very well developed party system, and, therefore, organizations play more important role there than individuals. I feel that in Belarus, the society requires individuals, indeed, and some interpersonal communication.

D.T.: Yes, this is not only in Sweden, I see it in many countries that party pages, say, in Lithuania there are fake political movements that don't exist in the real life but have more
followers that monitor their news... This is the level of the development of the political culture, our party system is completely destroyed, it is in germ. No one understands the meaning of organizations, it's difficult for them to try and understand this, it's easier to choose the person who will say 'we will do this, this and this'.

Y.I.: In your opinion, what role do social media play in the political life of Belarus? Can they activate political participation?

D.T.: In general, of course, social media play a great role in the whole world. One contemporary example that I always tell people is from Italy. There is a political party, movement Five Star, which has won their election campaign only on social media. They haven't made anything offline and won only with the help of social media. There, of course, more people are on social media, but still this fact is very indicative. Therefore, of course, in Belarusian circumstances, it is important that we have no freedom of expression and mass media, opposition structures, opposition, alternative leaders can't be present on state media, which dominate on the scene. Therefore, there is no other choice than to use social media to inform about their activity and upcoming events, personal life. This source is the only one, it's also the fastest one and reaches wide audience. In addition, traditional media start to use social media pages of politicians as information sources. They don't call them and simply take the information from social networks. This is a great catalyst that allows to spread some important information. When this concerns some public figures that have many followers, this is important. Of course, if this is just a person writing something, it is not that important whether people will find out it quickly or not. But in case of politicians it plays a great role. These facts, these three key facts, are or must be motivating for any Belarusian politician that wants to have some real influence or rating.

Y.I.: Do you notice such a tendency that with the appearance of social media more people are involved in political process, but there are less real actions or they remain on the same level? In other words, social media become the place to 'let of steam', to like something, to write, this is done easily, but eventually likes do not convert into real actions or beliefs.

D.T.: This has always been so, this had been so even before social media, when there were traditional media, when opposition was distributing information with the help of some leaflets, this was in the late 80s – the beginning of 90s. This has always been so. I remember my youth. In 1990 I was 16 years old, when I only started to be involved in this, this has
always been so, when you distribute, say, 1000 leaflets, you have 10 people in the end that will do something. This proportion has remained I think. Well, we haven't conducted a research back then, but today this proportion looks like this – 1% as far as I remember. From one hundred of people who like or write something, in the reality only one person will do some real actions. We see this on the example of some mass events, even those that are allowed by the government. There are far more people that show their interest in the event on the internet than those who actually come. As a place to 'let off steam' – yes, there is such a thing, this especially concerns petitions, when people feel participation in some process, they leave their vote for or against something – some phenomenon or government actions. They feel that they have already completed their mission and they won't go for some further actions. However, this all depends on the organizers of the process. Of course, this thing will always be present. And it is important to convey the message to people that it is important not only to like, but also to do something. If you motivate people in the right way... These are elements of manipulation in some way. If you explain people that you need their signature and active support correctly, of our decision, our proposition is not accepted, then more people will go out. Here we have the fact that many Belarusian politicians are not working properly on this when they collect signatures. I think that there was no processes that has been properly finished, besides mass protests that took place on autumn 2017, where there were collected – I will not remember the exact number now – something around... Kanopatskaya announced the call for signatures, we've collected around 100,000 signatures I think. Other organizations were also collecting signatures. And on the streets there was something around 20,000-25,000 people all around the country. At that moment it was not enough to have only signatures, and we motivated, political organizations motivated the obligation, not obligation, but the necessity to go to the streets to show that we exist, because the government doesn't believe the signatures that we've collected. And people went to the streets. There we need to take into account such thing as self-organization, of course, but we can talk about self-organization in Minsk, in a big city. When these actions took place in Molodechno, Baranovichi, Bobruysk – these are not regional cities – this was the work of political organizations, they distributed this information about a peaceful campaign with the help of leaflets, stickers, and people went to the streets. When people understood the connection, they went out. When this was just a petition, or collective appeal to Mingorispolcom and the work was finished at this stage, then it was obvious that people would do nothing offline. They
simply didn't know what they should do next.

Y.I.: I see. Is there any sort of fear among people, maybe you feel something like this, that there is a fear to be noticed in the field of opposition even online, to say nothing about offline? I mean online, maybe, there is some fear to like something, write comments, make reposts.

D.T.: It's difficult to say, if there is such a fear, because even if these people exist, we don't see them, we don't know. No one will tell in a personal message or email that they are afraid to like something. Therefore, it's rather difficult to say definitely. I think that there is probably some fear, because there are cases in Russia, I don't remember if there were some in Belarus, but in Russia there were, when people were prosecuted, received some fines. There were even administrative arrests. Yes, maybe, the government does this to stop this process, therefore, maybe the fear exists among some people to do something or even write something. I can only say that after I write some posts my friends sometimes write me: 'Aren't you afraid to come home today?'. So I suspect... Well, maybe, not likes but when a person writes something brave in their profile, not necessarily... Well, within the law, but something that doesn't fit the party line so to say. Then maybe there is a fear indeed to write something, disagreement with some decision.

Y.I.: By the way, a very interesting question: do government and government structures influence in some way your activity on social media?

D.T.: Well, they can't have any direct influence. There are some interesting examples from our work when some of pro-government deputies can approach us, and it can be noticed that he speaks not his own language. In other words, someone says him to convey the message to Anna or me that we are too sharp in what we say or write. But this happens in a half-joking manner, and usually it leads to nothing, but sometimes they send us these half-signals that 'maybe, you shouldn't be so direct in scolding and criticizing us'. Such situations exist. As for ordinary people, there is no way the government can forbid people to write something. I think that if such things happen, the person won't be silent. First of all, they don't break any laws unless they abuse someone or kindle some ethnic issues, if they write something within the law, they have a right for this, it is a freedom of expression, therefore... I can't imagine a situation when some state agency can say people that they shouldn't write something or do something else.
Y.I.: If we look at...

D.T.: It's the same as forbid a person to... Yes.

Y.I.: No, I am sorry, you continue, continue.

D.T.: It's the same as forbid a person to express their thoughts in the kitchen roughly speaking. To come at his house or to the smoking room at the factory and say: 'What are you saying here? We will fire you for this'. It never comes that far. It used to be like that in our history, but this time hopefully won't come back.

Y.I.: This is interesting, because I hear a lot that there is a fear even to write on social media and so on. But let's look at the official government politics. This is how I see the situation at the moment. The key tool to control information space, I mean online space, is censorship. When this moment will come, will it come or maybe it has already partially come when the government will use more in some way progressive methods of control of online space, for example, ads on social networks, hired bloggers, and so on?

D.T.: I think that control already exists. The Information and Analytical Center has been created for this purpose. We notice that are profiles are tracked, when there is a reaction to something, it becomes obvious that someone reads it and tells someone about it. So this thing already exists. If there is, as you say, contractions, I think – yes. The classical example is the influence of Russian army of bloggers on the US elections and vice versa. This is real, this can be done. The last thing we know is that Facebook has deleted tens of thousands of Russian profiles. Of course, yes, this is like an element of anti-propaganda. Say, opposition makes propaganda, the government makes anti-propaganda, it creates some profiles that do and write something – so called troll factories that will actively promote some point of view to influence public opinion on social media. Or this can be the creation of some ad materials that will also influence the behavior. At the moment there are no such tactics – on the contrary, government accounts, there are no public figures at all, but some organizations are present. They reach considerably less public, no one reads them, no one does anything with them. But I think that the government understands, if we are talking about the Belarusian government, they understand that it is very important, and yesterday Lukashenko mentioned this that contemporary mass media can't be fully considered mass media, they can blow up everything at any moment, this was addressed to internet in the first place. There are amendments to the law on social media, and most of them have a prohibitive-controlling
character in relation to social networks: elimination of anonymity of users who comment on something. The government wants to take control over people who write or do something on social networks. To make bloggers equal to independent mass media, allowed to extra-juridical blocking – all of these indicates that yes, this world, virtual world, not simply internet, but the world of social networks is very important, because there are many people even for the standards of Belarus and receive some information from there. Therefore, government should react and I think they will react.

Y.I.: I see. Do you use ads on social networks?
D.T.: Ads?
Y.I.: Yes, yes. The promotion of posts or a page, for example.
D.T.: Yes, yes, of course. This is a must-have, I think you can't be without it. Organic reach is organic reach, but the audience is rather narrow at the moment. The segment of Facebook users in Belarus is around 900,000 active people, and when we are saying that Belarusian politicians have 4000-5000 followers – how much is it? It's less than 1%. There is space to grow. Ads allow to do this, and you need to use it anyways.

Y.I.: That's great. To be honest, I didn't expect, I thought that we don't use ads very much. Ok, I have one more question...
D.T.: That they don't use...
Y.I.: The connection delays, and you hear me later...
D.T.: What's wrong with the internet?
Y.I.: ... hear me. Hello?
D.T.: No worries. Yes, yes, I hear, one second please.
Y.I.: Hello, I hear you now.
D.T.: Some don't use it, but we use it from the first day, maybe. From the autumn 2016.
Y.I.: Okay.
D.T.: These are posts and a profile. Different options exist.
Y.I.: Well, I have one more question. You say that Facebook is your key platform, in your opinion, do such platforms as Odnoklassniki and VKontakte have weight, and are you planning to increase your presence on these platforms?
D.T.: Of course, they have weight, this conclusion we can make from different researches of audience. Odnoklassniki is probably even the most popular social network at the moment. Why we have chosen Facebook as our key platform is, first of all, from the point of security. This is the 'com' zone, they are Americans. It's very unlikely that it can be blocked or limited and so on and so forth. What concerns VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, they are located on the territory of Russia. We don't have any secret information there, but still I think there is a possibility that they can block or limit something unlike in Facebook. Regarding the audience, we also need to understand who our target audience is. For example, if we are talking about VKontakte, it is mostly used by young people at the moment, and from the statistics we see that this is not our group, they are not interested in politics, and there is no point in spending our resources on this group, only if these are some questions or projects that are related to young people. We are present on Odnoklassniki, but I see that we reach less audience. It's quite difficult to answer why it is like this. For example, Lebedko has many views on Odnoklassniki, and there is strong reaction to his messages. But he has a different style, he is a brawler-politician, and this catches attention of this audience. We have slightly different audience, different format, we don't like some scandals, empty PR activities, we focus more on very clear and unambiguous actions, therefore, we don't see our audience there as big and important as on Facebook. From the point of informing people, we have there pages where we duplicate the same information, and people also react here and answer something. Let's say, say, if we are talking about presidential elections, then you need to get the full advantage of all these three networks. Twitter is the least popular in Belarus. It's only for purposes of image building – that you have it. And we haven't yet decided on what format of tweets to choose – to act as Western politicians or consider Belarusian context, because there is a difference in how well Twitter is developed and how people treat it in Europe, the US and Belarus. That's it.

Y.I.: I remember last year Anna with your help opened a project on YouTube. Every week you were talking about conclusions for the week. And it was a great project, why haven't you continued it?

D.T.: We decided... We decided to make it more professional. Therefore, at the moment we are looking for resources: people, equipment to make it not in this amateur style. This was great, we tried, but, firstly, we saw that YouTube is some sort of Twitter without video. We don't have as many views there as on social networks. Any video on social network will get
much more views than on YouTube. It hasn't caught on in Belarus. However, we have some
bloggers, video bloggers with huge amount of subscribers. Here we have a lot to work on and
think about. The most important thing here is that all our profiles are political profiles. People
go on YouTube for different things – for music, entertainment, hype or something else. They
are not interested in politics. A very narrow segment of people is interested in what Anna tells
about her professional activity. At the moment we would like to change the format. Before
the New Year we tried this and saw what we had, but we would like to make it more
professional. There are video bloggers who make montage, we need a team, I don't know how
to call them, people who will write scripts, shoot and edit videos. Because what we did before
the New Year, there were only two of us and we tried to see whether it worth doing this. At
the moment we are thinking about how to make this format more professional.

Y.I.: Well, I think that our neighbor Navalny proves that politics can exist on YouTube, but it
must be in a semi-entertainment format.

D.T.: Yes, maybe. But here is also a question about female and male politicians. There are a
lot of things that are used by male politicians that we can't apply to female politicians. I can't
imagine Anna who will dance and tell with sarcasm... I think we need to consider here some
personal features. To be honest, I don't know how it is possible to present Belarusian politics
cheerfully, because everything is very sad here. This is not in the foreground at the moment,
because it is a very big pease of work, which requires time and people who can do it. We
understand that we can't afford to do this on a high level at the moment, therefore, we stopped
this process, because if we do something, we want to do it well. It's better to do nothing than
to do it somehow.

Y.I.: I understand your position. Probably, the final question: what are your plans for the
future regarding the communication on social media? Is there anything that you would like to
correct or launch something new?

D.T.: Well, we try... Taking into account our resources, if you have noticed, we are now
trying to attract people to collaborative work on Google Docs documents on social media.
When different people from different places edit documents together, thus doing important
work. They don't do something that is dangerous, but they do important things. We try this...

Y.I.: Does it work?

D.T.: ... this format. Yes, the most simple thing: at the moment we are collecting questions to
the president, and we have around 1000 clicks on the document, people write something there, there are already something around 60 questions. All of this is happening during this week. We will see. Everything depends a lot on opportunities that social networks give us. New features are constantly appearing. You can write or present something differently. Some technical nuances on what can be done. We will use it anyways, because if you only write text, it is no interesting for anyone anymore. We see by the characteristics and by the mechanisms of how social networks work that, for example, live streams are in priority. Then videos, then photos, then pure texts. All these functionality of social networks should be taken into account. I thing that we have used everything that is possible. We've had live streams, and we've tried videos, we do something with photos and pictures. Yes, we try. It's not that difficult if you have a smartphone at hand. Any modern phone allows to do something. It's quite simple and easy. At the moment I can't say what. Maybe, something we haven't tried doesn't exist yet. If something new appears, we will use it.

Y.I.: Okay, thank you Denis for your opinion and your time.
D.T.: You are welcome.
Y.I.: I think we can finish. This is very useful for me.
D.T.: Good.
Y.I.: Good luck.
Y.I.: Thank you, bye.
D.T.: Bye.
7.4.3. Alena Lutskovich

Name: Alena Lutskovich
Nationality: Belarusian
Place of residence: Belarus
Political movement: “Young Democrats”
Position: the leader
Date of the interview: 01/05/18
Place of the interview: Skype call
Language of the interview: Russian
Name of the interviewee: Yuliya Ilyuk
Transcript made by: Yuliya Ilyuk

Transcript:

Yuliya Ilyuk: Hello!
Alena Lutskovich: Yes, Yuliya, good afternoon!
Y.I.: I can hear you well, do you hear me well?
A.L.: Yes, everything is alright at the moment.
Y.I.: Alright. I hope everything will be ok, because Skype sometimes doesn't work properly. First of all, I would like to thank you for agreeing to have a conversation with me. After long negotiations we are finally having this interview.
A.L.: Yes.
Y.I.: I would like to clarify a couple of technical moments. Can I record our conversation?
Y.I.: Can I use your name in my work? Or do I need...
A.L.: Sure, you can use my name.
Y.I.: Alright, thanks. I think I have already told you a bit about my work and what research I do. Therefore, our today's conversation will be going within the frames of such terms as
social media and democracy. And politics, yes. I wanted to ask you about your experience of using social media. As far as I understand, your key platform for communication is Facebook. Or do you use other platforms as well?

A.L.: No, Facebook is the main platform.

Y.I.: You don't have presence on other platforms at all, don't you? Or do you use them for different purposes?

A.L.: Do you mean me or 'Young Democrats'?

Y.I.: No, I mean you, you, your personal profile.

A.L.: Ah, alright. Then everything is slightly different. I am using Facebook, Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki. Facebook is our community, if we can say so. We all know each other there. When I need to state or draw attention to something, I use Odnoklassniki more often, because as a politician who needs to communicate with their target audience, on Odnoklassniki there are more representatives of my target audience. So there is more sense in being active there rather than on Facebook.

Y.I.: As far as I understand, Odnoklassniki is a different target audience. An average Belarusian person, right?

A.L.: Yes, an average voter.

Y.I.: So is Odnoklassniki more effective when addressing this audience?

A.L.: For me yes, because if we – me and several of my adherents – so we have a group where most participants are residents of Oktyabrsky area. If you are active there and place your program there, you can be sure that it is seen by your voters. Not everyone, of course, but those who are active users, who is present on social media, they will see it. To compare, on Facebook there are around 10 people from Oktyabrsky, who are registered. And even if they are registered, many of them are not active. On Odnoklassniki, those who use internet, most of them are on Odnoklassniki.

Y.I.: Okay.

A.L.: Regarding the efficiency, if you need to convey some information to the audience... Well, the most effective method is when you come to a person's home and talk to them in person. But still there is efficiency. Sometimes when information that is relevant for this area, of a local scale I mean, is published in the group, active discussion is happening. People
discuss it, and if something can be done to solve the problem, they solve it very quickly. If this provokes people's interest and active discussion.

Y.I.: In your opinion, do social media play an important role in Belarusian politics, or there is still a room for improvement?

A.L.: In my opinion... You mean social media only.

Y.I.: Yes, social media. Odnoklassniki, Facebook.

A.L.: I think that they play a role, but not the most important.

Y.I.: So, it's not sufficient... What can be the reason of this, in your opinion? Is it because not many people are present on social media or because not many of them are interested in politics on social media and use social media for other purposes?

A.L.: As I see it, many people use social media for other purposes. In cities, where people are more educated and where their professional activities require being active on social media to find the necessary information. In villages, in small towns, people are more likely to use social media for entertainment rather than for searching for some information, especially political information. They can read TUT.BY but nothing more than that. They never think that they can go on social media and find their candidate in deputies. One more important factor that can play a role here is that the government is not represented on social media. What we see in the Western politics is that officials usually use Twitter and try to involve people in political activity. In our case it's vice versa. A complete information silence from the side of the government and officials. Not long ago I went to our council of deputies and offered them to provide at least their email, so that voters could contact them. This caused strong resistance from their side. There is no culture of participation, and the government consciously encourages to leave everything as it is. The government is closed and inaccessible for people.

Y.I.: So, it comes from the side of the government. Maybe, education plays its role.

A.L.: Yes.

Y.I.: Young people are not brought up as active participants of the political process. Can you hear me?

A.L.: Yes, yes.

Y.I.: There is a theory, many researchers write that with the appearance of social media more
people come there but see it rather than the place to express their negative emotions, they easily become involved in interactivity, they like posts, but in the end it rarely comes to some real actions. Do you notice this tendency, and, maybe, you know some successful examples of using social media for political purposes?

A.L.: This is especially relevant for Facebook, when there is a huge number of commenters, the comment, criticize, and at the same time they are never noticed in any political processes. Indeed, many people use it as emotional relaxation. They gather there, criticize and feel better in some way.

Y.I.: Do you have any examples in mind when discussions on social media went beyond the internet space and changed something in real life?

A.L.: Let's remember the protests against the Decree No. 3. It's number 3, isn't it? About 'social parasites'.

Y.I.: Yes, yes, about 'social parasites'.

A.L.: People, when the problem is related directly to them. Even if not them directly, but their relatives, people felt very strongly that this was a big injustice. The date, time and place of protests was discussed on social media. This wasn't made through ads on bus stops, right? No one would allow to do it. People expressed their opinions on social media, people found the information about protest on social media, they gathered together and took part in protests. I think this is a good example when street movement appeared from social media. Another question is that it could be better organized and take bigger scale.

Y.I.: Yes, I agree with you on this. Can the government or official structures influence the activity of politicians on social media in some way – directly or indirectly?

A.L.: I think that no. The activity of politicians, you mean opposition politicians?

Y.I.: Yes.

A.L.: No, they can't. They don't control this space. I have an experience, when there are parliament or local elections. I am not very active on social media, I am more active when there is an election campaign going on, when you need to show yourselves somehow. The workers of an 'invisible front', I don't know who exactly they are, but they start to leave negative comments under posts. What the government can is to create these negative comments. There are trolls, they create fakes. They can also use print materials, but this is not
about social media then. On social media they try to create a negative image of opposition politicians. They can leave comments under posts saying that the problem discussed is not a problem at all. But they can't influence what you write in your posts. Of course, there were examples when people received administrative fines for criticizing the regime. Also, they used to highjack accounts of politicians on social media, but now it's not that common.

Y.I.: Okay.

A.L.: But I think these are actions that can't considerably influence politicians' activity on social media.

Y.I.: How much does the internet space – I don't know how to formulate it more properly – is used by the government? To what extent these bots that write comments as you say, these processes are put on a conveyor? What is the scale of this in Belarus?

A.L.: If we look at Russia, we see that these processes are very systematic and professionally implemented there. In Belarus they have a more chaotic character. If someone gives an order, the activity appears, then it decreases and there is a complete silence. It all appears again when a new order is given. This may be not even connected to orders, this happens very chaotically and periodically, maybe it is connected to financial support. They try to make a conveyor like in Russia, but at the moment they don't succeed, luckily.

Y.I.: Is it somehow connected to the activity of the Information and Analytical Center? Do you know something about it?

A.L.: We can suppose that this all happens with the help of the Information and Analytical Center, otherwise, why has it been created? But I don't have a reliable data about it.

Y.I.: Have you ever used ads on social media? To promote yourself as a politician or to promote the organization 'Young Democrats'.

A.L.: Unfortunately, no, we haven't used it due to the financial situation.

Y.I.: Maybe, you plan it, or haven't you considered such an opportunity?

A.L.: How to say, I haven't considered it, but if there were financial opportunities, this would be the first thing that I would use. Maybe, this will happen sometime in the future. Also, I wanted to add that I had... Social media and politicians or other people. Their pages are used actively by KGB to collect data.

Y.I.: In what way? You mean, they collect information that is provided in their profiles?
A.L.: All of this is analyzed. I also had experience when a young, maybe trainee, was collecting data about me. They come to your page, check your friends, write some of them and ask unobtrusively questions about you. Not just analyze...

Y.I.: Are you serious? This is quite surprising.

A.L.: Yes, this was also a surprise for me. But in my case they have chosen a wrong friend: he told me everything and showed the page of this young man. He confessed that we were right and that he was given such a task. But this is just one-time example, when a person was revealed. We don't know how many of them haven't been revealed.

Y.I.: I also have a question, have you thought about creating a page as a politician on Facebook? At the moment you have a profile, where you have friends and post your information, but have you thought about creating a separate page as a politician?

A.L.: I know that many of our politicians have such pages. I haven't thought about it yet, because, say, if I were a politician of a republican scale and I had a person to manage this page, so that it was not just created, but active, then yes.

Y.I.: Okay. Maybe, the final question: what are your plans regarding the communication on social media? Is there anything you would like to make or change? Maybe, you plan to more actively promote yourself on some platform?

A.L.: Well... I try to make more posts and express my opinion on Odnoklassniki. I think it is necessary to do it on Odnoklassniki and Facebook, but for me... Now I will try to formulate it. Facebook is used more so that people from our community know better who you are and what you think. On Odnoklassniki I want to touch upon some local problems, questions about activity of our local council of deputies. I don't have plans to do something, to create something. Say, on VKontakte I am not active, because there are less people from my target audience.

Y.I.: There is a different audience, indeed. There are more young people, who probably can't vote, they are under 18.

A.L.: Yes, that is why I am not very active there. If I need to choose topics for posts, on VKontakte this would be a topic aimed at young people, on Odnoklassniki this would be another topic - our local problems, on Facebook there is a world community who like to discuss geopolitics.
Y.I.: Yes.

A.L.: So we can make a conclusion that I am not planning to use actively social media, and not that I am not going to, but I have not enough knowledge and experience on how to do it effectively.

Y.I.: Yes, I see. Thank you very much that you agreed and spent your time on a weekend.

A.L.: You are welcome.

Y.I.: I hope I haven't taken much of your time. I think we can finish this call.

A.L.: Okay, if there are any questions, you can write me.

Y.I.: Yes, maybe there will be some additional question, the work is in process, so something can appear, I will contact you then.

A.L.: Okay.

Y.I.: Bye, have a nice day.

A.L.: Thank you, bye.