Online Campaigning in 2006 Presidential Election in Belarus

Many writers emphasize the important role Internet has played in recent presidential elections in Belarus. "With newspapers, radio, and television under state control, the Belarusian opposition is using new technologies to get their message out -- in particular the Internet", wrote Valentinas Mite on February 7, 2006 (Belarus: Opposition Politicians Embrace Internet, Despite Digital Divide http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/02/94d60147-0a69-4f28-86c3-728a651fb0d0.html).

Blogs, forums, livejournal online communities, flashmobs have become very new and prominent features of 2006 presidential election campaign in Belarus. Independent online sources managed to compete with "newspapers, radio, and television under state control", at least for those who had occasional access to Internet, and for their friends and relatives.

The four presidential candidates – A. Milinkevich, A. Kozylin, A. Lukashenko and S. Gaidukevich –had their online venues. However, only opposition candidates A. Milinkevich (http://by.milinkevich.org/) and A. Kozylin (http://www.kozylin.com/) launched single-purpose campaigning sites. A. Lukashenko, being acting President, occasionally used official presidential web-site (http://president.gov.by/) to cover some election events. S. Gaidukevich didn't use even his party's web-site for online campaigning http://www.ldpb.net/index1.htm.

The dynamics of the number o fhttp://by.milinkevich.org and http://www.kozylin.com/ websites' visitors is presented in the diagram below.

Diagram 1.
Dynamics of milinkevich.org and kozylin.com websites' visitors (20.02-09.04, 2006)
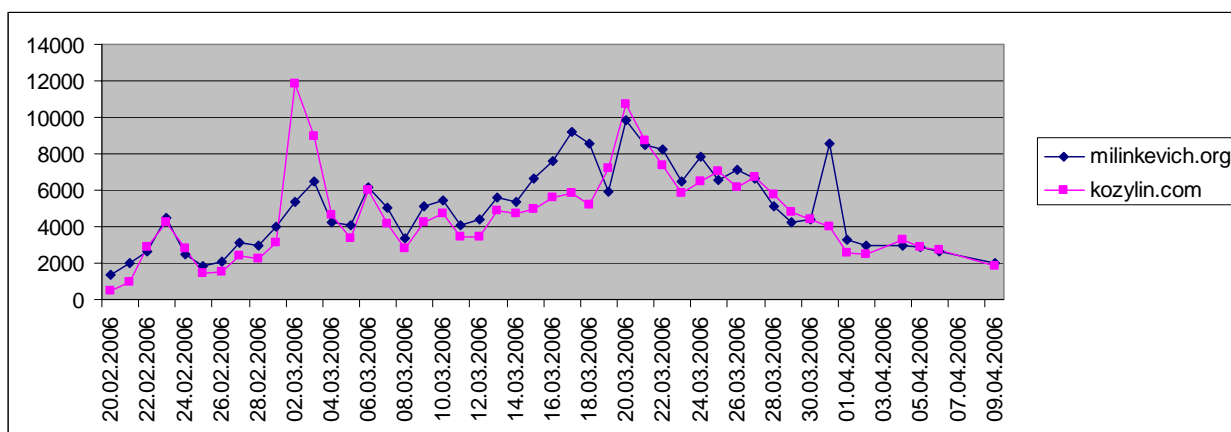
The peaks in the diagram refer to the following events:
23.02.2006. Thursday. The first A. Kozylin's speech TV broadcasted (recorded);
02.03.2006. Thursday. The authorities detained A. Kozylin, and his second speech (recorded) is broadcasted by the national TV channel. This day Kozylin's web site became one of the 5 most visited Belarusian web sites according to Akavita rating system;
17.03.2006. Friday. The last working day before the day of elections May 19, 2006;
19.03.2006. Sunday. Both web sites were blocked or filtered. Milinkevich's website was inaccessible. Kozylin's web site was functioning with occasional breaks;
20.03.2006. Monday. Milinkevich's website site was re-launched;
24.03.2006. Friday. The day before March 25 meeting (Chernobyl way);

31.03.2006 Friday. A. Milinkevich team announced an online campaign on gathering information about human rights violations and arrests during the election campaign, as well as compiling audio, video and photo evidences of the events of election campaign.

On 23.02, 02.03, and on 20.03 milinkevich.org and kozylin.com websites' visitors searched for additional information and for full versions of A. Kozylin's speeches. On 17.03 and on 24.03 visitors looked for the information about authorities and opposition plans for election day and for 25th of March meeting. Only on 31.03 (in one case of seven reported above), the peak was originated by an online campaign call. All the other peaks registered were a kind of online echo of offline events.

None of the opposition candidates developed a defined online strategy, none of them managed to use Internet potential of spontaneous online activism. In most cases, they used their websites in an old-fashioned news provision way.

The same conclusions may be drawn from the survey of presidential elections candidates web sites conducted by e-belarus.org during an election campaign period, and up to presidential inauguration (February 20, 2006 – April 9, 2006).

The major indicators for the survey were derived from M. Foot, K. Schneider and M. Xenos's research on online campaigning in 2002 US elctions [M Foot, K. A., Schneider, S. M., Xenos, M. 2002. Online Campaigning in the 2002 U.S. Elections. Working Paper v. 2. (An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Internet Research 3.0 conference, Maastricht, the Netherlands, October, 2002]. These authors, conceptualizing Internet as a structure that facilitates political action, have developed 5 sets of indicators for online campaigning evaluation:
1) 10 basic features on candidate sites (biography, issues, party affiliation, information about making donations volunteer sign-up and etc.);
2) 11 indicators describing adapting traditional practices for online campaigning (campaign news, campaign adds, speech texts, endorsements and etc);
3) 14 indicators for adopting web-exclusive campaign practices (like pop-up windows, send links, site –specific search engine and etc):
4) 9 indicators for evaluation of candidates' linking strategies;
5) 10 indicators for comparison and documentation on candidate web-sites. (For details, see Table 1 below).

The results of candidates' web sites survey (catalogued in Appendix 1.) provide arguments for the following preliminary conclusions.
1. Oppositional candidates used their online venues more actively (21 and 16 points for Milinkevich and Kozylin respectively) than the acting President and his "pocket candidate" S. Gaidukevich (10 and 3 points) in order to make up disadvantages entailed by their restricted access to traditional mass media.
2. At the same time, they adapted traditional practices to online structures rather than adopted new web-based practices and structures in order to promote the effectiveness of their online and offline campaigns. The most striking thing was that both oppositional candidates didn't use interactive polls to study opinions of the audience.
3. A. Lukashenko and S. Gaidukevich did not use their online potential: the first one, perhaps, because of the fact that he did not regard Internet users as his electorate, and the other one because of his predetermined role in the election campaign.
4. All the web sites are characterized by extremely poor linking strategies (4 points of maximum 36 for all candidates). This indicates low awareness of "interactive" and "interaction" concepts, characteristic of Belarusian political community. It applies not only to online interactive tools, but also to the general political practices. There were no

permanent links to other political parties, advocacy groups and etc. Only official website of the acting President (http://president.gov.by/) has permanent links to press-organizations, such as http://www.belta.by/. Oppositional candidates failed to establish an online dialogue with different fractions of the society (see, for instance, section 5. Comparison and documentation on candidates web-sites, positions 2-7).

5. None of the candidates managed to conduct transparent campaign as regards financial issues (see section 5, positions 8-10). Even in case of possible governmental charges on violations of legislation, oppositional candidates could have provide some financial information on campaigning in order not only to make their campaign more transparent, but to present counter-arguments before state propaganda about "opposition paid by the West".

Appemdix 1
Online Campaigning in 2006 presidential elections

1. Basic Features

Indicators		Milinkevich	Kozylin	Lukashenko	Gaidikevich	All
1 Basic features	1.Biography	+	+	+	+	4
	2. Issues section	-	-	+	-	1
	3. Party affiliation mentioned	+	+	-	+	3
	4.Volunteer sign-up	+	-	-	-	1
	5. e-mail sign-up	+	-	-	_	1
	6. Campaign calendar	+	+			2
	7. Voter registration information	-	-	+	-	1
	8. Privacy policy	-	-	-	-	0
	9.Information about making donations	-	-	-	-	0
	10.e-mail address for campaign	+	+	-	-	2
Total	Maximum 10 for one candidate 40 for 4 candidates	6	4	3	2	15

2. Online campaigning: adapting traditional practices

Indicators		Milinkevich	Kozylin	Lukashenko	Gaidikevich	All
2.Online campaigning: adapting traditional practices	1.Campaign news	+	+	+	-	3
	2.Campaign adds	+	+	-	-	2
	3. Photographs of campaign events	+	+	-	-	2
	4. Information for offline distribution of campaign materials	-	-	-	-	0
	5. Speech texts	-	+	+	-	2
	6. endorsements	-	+	+	-	2
	7. Encourage letters to the editor	+	+	-	-	2
	8.Invitation to e-mail the campaign	+	+	-	-	2
	9. Telephone address or address for campaign	+	+	-	-	2
	10. System to make online contributions	-	-	-	-	0
	11. Information about contributors	+	-	-	-	1
Total	Maximum 11 for one candidate 44 for 4 candidates	7	8	3	0	18

3. Adopting web-exclusive campaign practices

	Indicators	Milinkevich	Kozylin	Lukashenko	Gaidikevich	All
3. Adopting web-exclusive campaign practices	1.Send links	+	+	-	-	2
	2.Web toolkits	-	-	-	-	
	3.Electronic paraphernalia	+	-	-	-	1
	4.Site-specific search engine	-	-	+	-	1
	5.Other languages	+	-	+	+	3
	6.Pop-up windows	-	-	-	-	0
	7.Multimedia content	+	+	-	-	2
	8. Interactive polls	-	-	+	-	
	9. Visitors comments	-	+	-	-	1
	10. Ability to individualize content	-	-	-	-	0
	11.Online events	-	-	-	-	0
	12.Accessible to person with disabilities	-	-	-	-	0
	13.Interactive campaign calendar	-	-	-	-	0
	14.Solicit user's web messaging handle	+	+	-	-	2
Total	Maximum 14 for one candidate 56 for 4 candidates	5	4	3	0	12

4. Linking strategies of candidates

	Indicators	Milinkevich	Kozylin	Lukashenko	Gaidikevich	All
4. Linking strategies of candidates	1.Government sites	-	-	+	-	1
	2. Political parties	-	+	-	+	2
	3.Civic or advocacy groups	-	-	-	-	0
	4.Press organizations	-	-	+	-	1
	5.Local or community sites	-	-	-	-	0
	6.Portals	-	-	-	-	0
	7.Other candidates sites	-	-	-	-	0
	8. Individual citizen sites	-	-	-	-	0
	9.Opponent sites	-	-	-	-	0
Total	Maximum 9 for one candidate 36 for 4 candidates	0	1	2	1	4

5. Comparison and documentation on candidate web-sites

Indicators		Milinkevich	Kozylin	Lukashenko	Gaidikevich	All
Total	Maximum 9 for one candidate 36 for 4 candidates	0	1	2	1	4
5. Comparison and documentation on candidate web-sites	1.Site sponsorship identifier	-	-	-	-	0
	2. Present issue statements	+	+	+	-	3
	3. Provide rationale for positions	+	+	+	-	3
	4. Cite references in issue statements	+	+	-	-	2
	5.Compare positions to opponent[1]	-	-	-	-	0
	6. Compare positions to other groups	-	-	-	-	0
	7. Identify shared values with others	-	-	-	-	0
	8.Discuss campaign finance issue	-	-	-	-	0
	9.Report campaign expenditures	-	-	-	-	0
	10. Report personal financial statement	-	-	-	-	0
Total	Maximum 10 for one candidate 40 for 4 candidates	3	3	2	0	7

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[1] Positions were compared only with a A. Lukashenko's one