Belarusian government agencies online (a survey of web sites)

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I. INTRODUCTION

This is the second survey of Belarusian government on-line presence, conducted by e-belarus.org. The review of 2004 was based on standard ideal e-government criteria and showed that the majority of governmental agencies websites gave thematically organized content that duplicated offline information. Only 6 percent of websites presented some specific information accessible only online. 56 percent gave only minimal information making it possible to contact government officials via telephone or ordinary mail. Only 3 percent of websites made governmental bodies more accessible and 4 percent provide some online services.

The purposes of this study are

- to consider the type and quality of government –to- citizen online communications within the national context (rather than to compare it with ideal standards) including 3 major areas: access to information, engaging or representing citizens, e-services functions;

–to compare national, regional and district government agencies web-sites

II. GENERAL CONTEXT

Governance. Belarusian state governance system consists of three branches (legislative, executive, and judiciary) and is arranged in four tiers: national, regional, district and local. Legislative power is executed by the National Congress which consists of two houses: the House of Representatives and the Council of the Republic. At the regional, district and local levels councils of deputies are to be elected by the citizens of their jurisdictions for four-year terms and formally have exclusive jurisdiction over economic and social development programs, local budgets and taxes, management and disposal of local government property, and etc. President of the Republic of Belarus is the head of executive bodies. The executive branch also includes the Cabinet of Ministers, 25 ministries, 14 committees and 8 sate trusts agencies. Judicial power is vested in a court system headed by the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, the Supreme Economic Court, and the Procurator General. The mid-level courts are regional and low –level courts are district.

For research purposes legislative, executive and judiciary bodies on three levels of Belarusian governance system (national, regional and district) were surveyed as no one local governing body (small towns and villages) is represented online. The number of governmental institutions reviewed totalled 903[1].

Internet. In Belarus, according to statistics compiled by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU),[2] there are 1,409,780 Internet users.[3] Around 14 percent of Belarusians are now online, with a bias towards younger and urban users. A recent survey, conducted by the Belarusian Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research, indicates that people aged 20 to 24 (one third of the respondents) are the most active Internet users, and 50 percent of all respondents are university graduates. Remarkably, 40 percent of the Internet users are

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[1] Sources: <http://pravo.by/regions/ region.htm>; <http://pravo.by/StateLaw/statelaw.htm>

[2] ITU communications data come from annual questionnaires sent out to telecommunications authorities and operating companies. These data are supplemented by annual reports and statistical yearbooks of telecommunications ministries, regulators, operators and industry associations. In some cases, estimates are derived from ITU background documents or other references.

[3] See: <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/>; also : <http://www.e-belarus.org/news/200409281.html>.

government officials. The majority of users (45.6 percent) live in regional centres, and 22.9 percent are inhabitants of the capital of the country.[4] So, the "average" Internet user in Belarus is a young governmental employee in his or her early twenties, with a university degree, and living in a regional centre. While awareness of these dynamics is growing, Belarusian government is already pursuing an array of ICT-related laws and regulations.

Policies. The basis for the present government policy in the ICT sphere was laid by the *Law on Informatization* adopted in *1995*. According to the *Law* the basic principles of the informatization in the Republic of Belarus are: wide public online access to information; government participation in the development of the national informational resources; data security and protection[5]. In 1999 *A Concept of Governmental Policy in the Sphere of Informatization* was developed. The *Concept* states that transition to the information society is the major objective of the Belarusian government strategy in the sphere of informatization. Development of infrastructure and security of information are pointed out as the basis for the transition, while no e-government related initiatives were mentioned in the *Concept*[6]. In 2003 the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus published its programme for the widespread introduction of information technology to government from 2003 to 2010 "Electronic Belarus". "E-Belarus" is aimed at developing governmental ICT infrastructure and the co-ordination of the introduction of ICT into administrative practice at all levels - from local authorities to ministries. The programme also provides measures for the promotion of e-commerce and e-learning in the country. Some e-government initiatives are mentioned as possible next steps after a successful implementation of the programme[7]. Other documents within the framework: State research programs "Theoretical Basis of New Information Technologies" (Infotech) for 2001-2005; "Advanced Information and Telecommunication Technologies" ("Information Technologies") for 2001-2005; "Developing methods and tools for building a comprehensive information security system (Information Security) for 2001-2005; "Comprehensive informatization of the healthcare system in the Republic of Belarus for 2001-2005; "Computer Technologies for Designing and Manufacturing New Products' for 2001-2005, Programme for Communications Development in 2001-2005.

Experts participated in the poll conducted by Institute of the Information Society that these programmes stimulate interest to developing information society policy, legal and regulatory environment, awareness of ICT potential for resolving socio-economic problems and full-fledged development.[8]. Bureaucratic structures become more and more aware of the role of information, information systems and information technologies in administrative processes, but there is still the lack of understanding that focusing only on computers will not make officials more productive and that e-government is a reform process and not merely the computerization of government operations. As the result no comprehensive e-government strategy has been worked out in Belarus.

III. METHODOLOGY AND CODING SCHEME

To address objectives outlined in the introduction national, regional and district governmental institutions web-sites were surveyed. Methodology was developed on the basis of the studies that

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[4] See: <http//iiseps.by/>.
[5] See Russian version at: <http://www.mpt.gov.by/baza/informatiz.htm>
[6] Russsian version at : <http://pravo.by/webnpa/text.asp?RN=P39900195>
[7] Russian version at:< http://www.mpt.gov.by/baza/ebelarus_prog.htm>
[8] Promoting Enabling Environment for Information Society Development in CIS Countries:Proceedings of the UN ICT Task Force Europe and Central Asia Regional Network Meeting, Moscow, October 13, 2004/Ed. By Tatyana Ershova and Yuri Hohlov. – Moscow, 2004. P.20

examined e-government sites in other countries[9]. After a pretest of 125 governmental institutions websites (including libraries, schools, government agencies departments and etc.), the final version of coding scheme was prepared. During the pretest, the governmental agencies web-sites were observed on a weekly basis for a period of six months (October 2004- February 2005). In the final analysis 74 web-sites of governmental agencies were checked only once. The primary unit of analysis for this study was the "home page" or opening screen of the Web site. As "the home page is central to Web-based communication because it provides a kind of "front door" to all the messages contained in the site"[10]. The study focused on three criteria groups: e-informing, e-engaging, e-services. For the purposes of the study stated above the criteria were formulated to meet two major requirements, i.e to reflect current national context and to leave space for improvements achievable in this context.

1.*E-informing* criteria indicate the degree of information about governing bodies and environment providing by governmental web-sites. This includes 3 subcategories: (1) Direct links to peers, higher and subordinate bodies, to subdivisions, to private sector and to NGOs and to political community; (2) Information about government bodies (about subordinate agencies, routine procedures, rules and regulations, information about names of officials and their responsibilities); (3)Updating frequency.

2. E-engaging criteria indicate the degree of citizens- to - government "connection" through 1) Online discussion forums, (2) Online surveys or polls, (3) Chat rooms, (4) Possibility to apply online, (5) Rules for applications and answers, (6) Online forms for public concerns or complaints. Additionally, (7) Names of contact persons as well as (8) Telephone numbers and addresses, (9) E-mail or online mailbox to officials or policymaking bodies were identified as they can help tighten the connections between government and citizens

3.E-services functions. Analyzing situation with e-services functions, we followed Xiang Zhou suggestion to distinguish non-interactive and interactive services. Non - interactive services refer to information or advice that is published online and that is designed to help citizens or businesses efficiently carry out their daily activities. These e-service hyperlinks allow only a passive relationship between the Web site and the user. The user only has to click on a link to receive the information or advice: (1) FAQ, (2) Administrative publications, (3) News concerning field under administrative domain, (4) Consultative information. Interactive services were defined by Xiang Zhou as "content that facilitates interaction between the Web site and the user. These services require more than a simple "click" to obtain information. Typically, the user has more control over content and the Web site is more responsive to user input". In our study, we used six major interactive functions: (1) e-filing(online release of information about commodities, civil service status tracking and so on); (2) searchable data bases for consultative information, for instance, users can search information or documents by common subjects; (3) possibility to apply by e-mail in order to place information at governmental institution website; (4) submitting documents online.

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[9] Monitoring System for E-Government (Russia) <www.processconsulting.ru/; Statistical Indicators Benchmarking the Information Society (EU Information Society Technology Programme (1998 – 2002) www.fhso.ch/pdf/unternehmer/sibis_e.pdf; 3) Realizing the Vision (Accenture e-gov report, 2002)www.accenture.com/xd/xd.asp?it=enWeb& xd=industries%5Cgovernment%5Cgove_welcome.xml; 4)Benchmarking E-government: A Global Perspective. Assessing the progress of the UN member states, ??????????????? UNDPEPA (United Nations Division for Public Economics and Public Administration) ? ASPA (American Society for Public Administration www.unpan.org/e-government/ Benchmarking%20E-gov%202001.pdf; 5)The Guide to Minimum Website Standards (Australian Government Information Management Office) www.agimo.gov.au/publications/ 2003/03/e-govt_benefits_study/references; 6) Xiang Zhou -Government in China: A Content Analysis of National and Provincial Web Sites JCMC 9 (4) July 2004

[10] Xiang Zhou Government in China: A Content Analysis of National and Provincial Web Sites JCMC 9 (4) July 2004

Indexes for major criteria were calculated as a factual criteria score and total possible score ratio. Eg. Index for e-informing: 578 (factual score) / 1110 (74websites*15 criteria subcategories -total possible score) = 0,5

IV. FINDINGS

Only 74 (8,2 percent) of 903 analyzed national, regional and district government bodies are represented online. At the same time 73,2 percent of national government institutions (41 from 56), 11percent of regional (8 from 72) and 3percent of district (25 from 775) government bodies have their websites. Among the 74 reviewed web-sites 41 (55,4percent) represent national, 8 (10 percent) – regional and 25 (33,8 percent) –district governing bodies. District and regional councils and judicial bodies do not have their internet sites, the only exception here is Gomel district military prosecutor's office (http://www.mvp.gomel.by/). As for Belarusian higher judicial bodies, only 2 of them (Constitutional Court <http://ncpi.gov.by/constsud/rus/> and Supreme Economic Court <http://www.court.by>) are represented online.

As it was suggested above e-*informing* criteria is based on three subcategories –direct links, information on government agency and updating. The research shows that regional administrations websites provide more information on NGO, private companies and vertical governments structures, which is respectively 39, 62 and 14,5 per cent more than average. District agencies provide more information on businesses, NGO, horizontal links (32, 5, 17 per cent more than average respectively). National bodies give more links to their subdivisions and to private sector (4 and 34 percent more than average). Political community is represented at e-government sites only on national and district levels (see Diagram 1. Direct links)

Diagram 1. Direct links
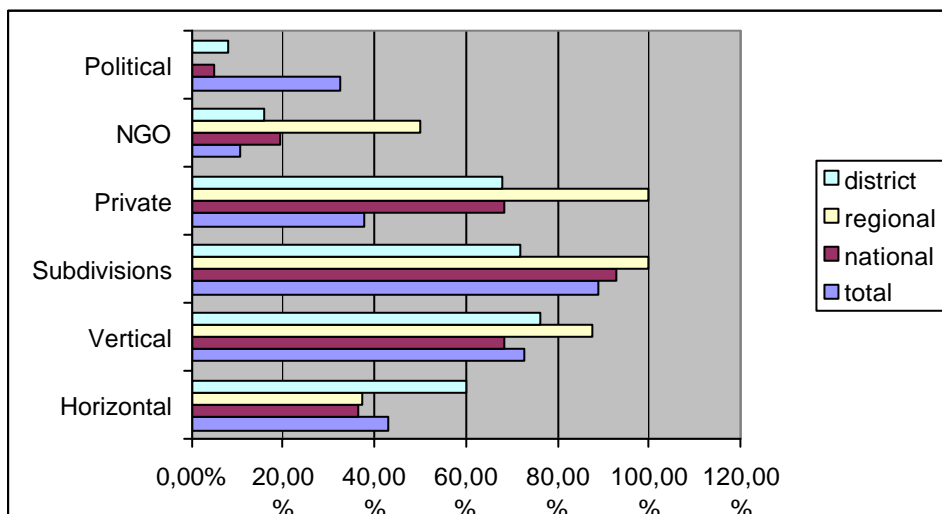
The structure of "information on governing agencies" criteria is presented in Diagram2. The diagram shows that majority of governmental web-sites of all three levels provides names of officials, and information on subordinate agencies. More regional agencies give government body schedule information (11 percent more than average), while national government institutions are more occupied with subordinate agencies (5 percent more than average).

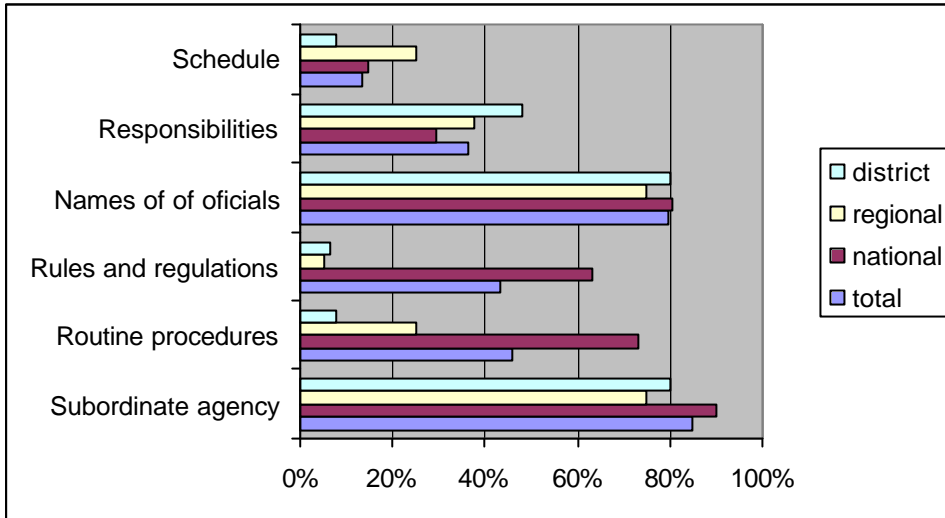**Diagram 2. Information on government bodies**

Diagram 3 shows that the majority of the websites under review are updated weekly, with the largest portion of weekly updated sites among national agencies (68,3%) and the smallest portion (50%) - among regional agencies.
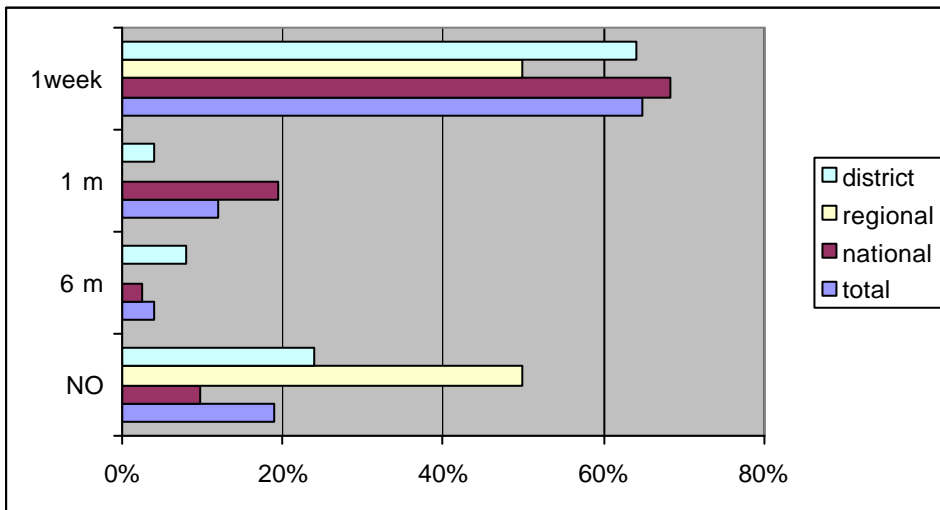
Diagram3. Updating

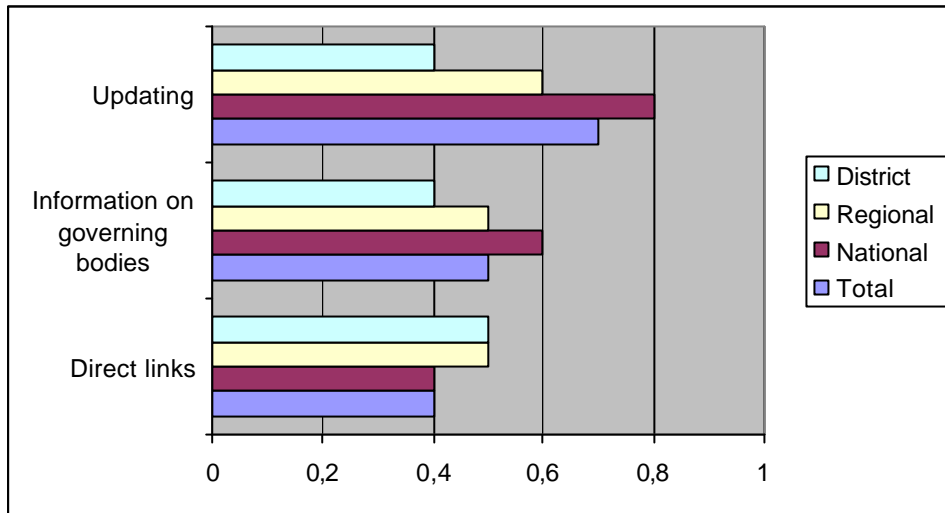Diagram 4 presents aggregated data on e-informing criteria.

e-belarus.ORG

Diagram 4 E-informing

Diagram 5 examines differences in *e-engaging* at three government levels and shows that the most common way of citizen-government contacts suggested by web sites are e-mail, telephone number and postal address. The former is preferred by district agencies (7percent more than average) and the latter – by national (21percent more than average). It is interesting to note that regional agencies do not provide names of contact persons, while district institutions have the highest score in this respect (4percent more than average).

Diagram 5 E-engaging
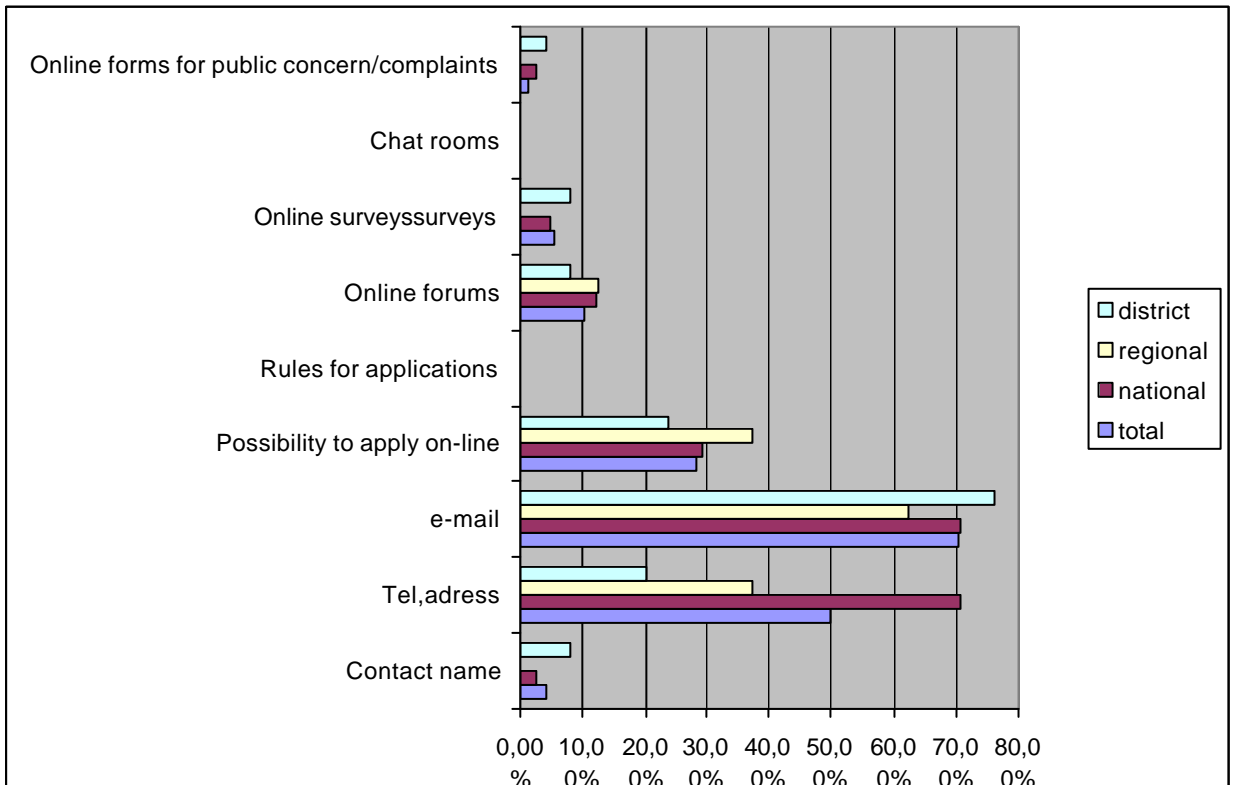
E-services. As illustrated in Diagram 6 significant differences were found in the overall implementation of non-interactive e-service among the governmental levels. The national sites were significantly more likely than regional and district to provide administrative publications (25percent more than average), while regional and district agencies provide news concerning field under administrative domain. Consultative information is provided only by one district agency web-site.

Diagram 6. Non-interactive services
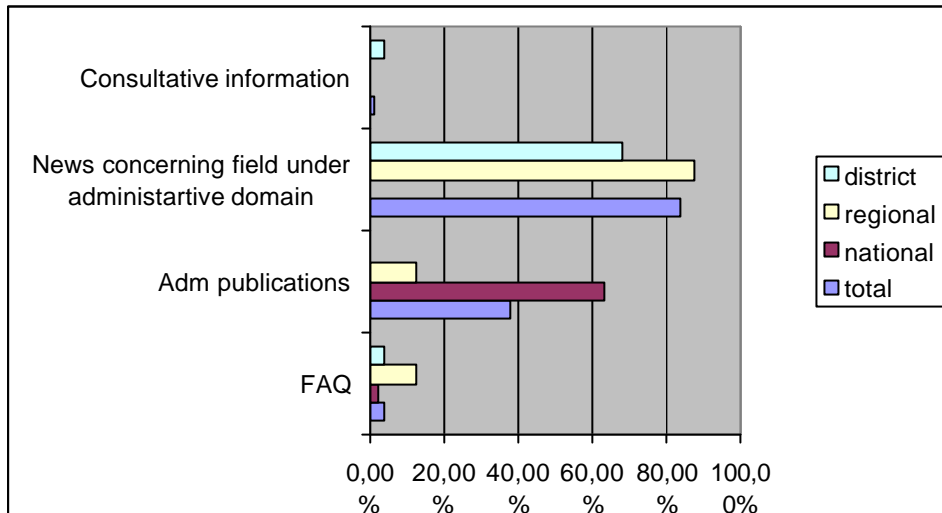
As Diagram 7 shows no interactive services are provided by national government agencies, 4percent of district and 25 percent of regional administrations provide such a service as "searchable databases". "Downloading files" and "e-mail publications" are provided by 13 per cent of regional agencies web-sites**.**

Diagram 7. Interactive services
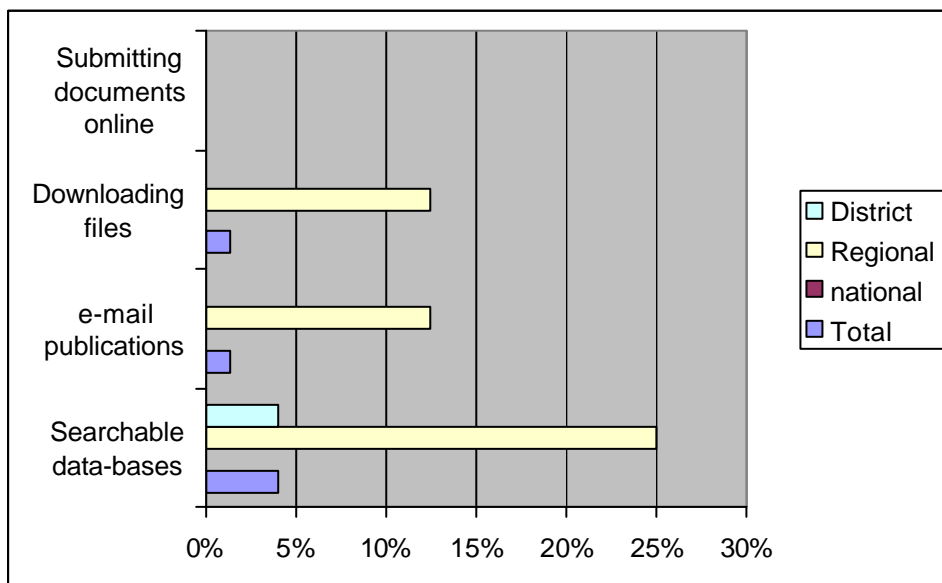
V. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings stated above, a general profile of Belarusian e-government may be presented in the following way: national executive government body providing static (informing) and dynamic (non-interactive e-service) information about governmental structure. Regional and district institutions web-sites are very few in number though in many cases provide almost the same level of e- informing and e-participation (see Diagram 8)

Diagram 8
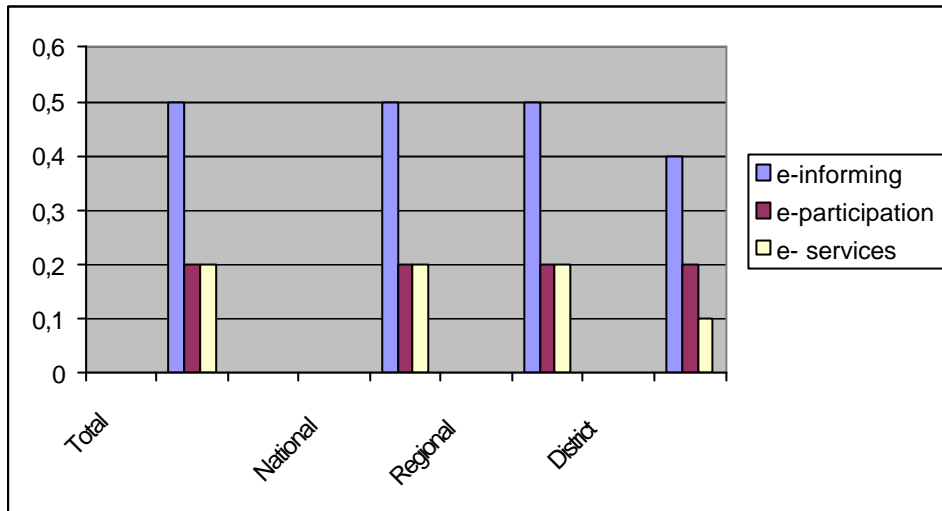
55 percent of governmental websites represent national bodies , 11 percent represent regional and 34 - district administrations. 22 percent of all websites are not updated. The majority of governmental agencies websites give thematically organized content that duplicates offline information. 45 percent give only minimal information making it possible to contact government officials via telephone or ordinary mail. 34 percent of websites make governmental bodies more accessible (possibility to apply online, and/or forums, discussions or forms for complaints) and 4 percent provide some interactive online services.

Significant improvement of government agencies accessibility as compared to the 2004 survey data (3 and 34 percent respectively) is explained by two major reasons: 1) "softer criteria"; 2) growing portion of district websites. Thus it may be stated that the general situation with the accessibility has not changed significantly. On the other hand a smaller portion of webites providing only minimal information (45 percent in 2005 and 56 percent in 2004) indicates that more websites give specific information accessible only online. And the level of interactive e – services remains the same (4 percent).

The analysis shows that Internet potential is not yet used fully to bridge the gap between citizens and governmental institutions. The general trend of e-government official initiatives indicated by the study may be defined as "one way communication with some possibilities of feedback". There are no plans to develop and support financially a large-scale modernization strategy and action plan to re-engineering back-office in the interest of front-office in view of the latest technologies and greater openness and a need for new services. Meanwhile interactivity as a major characteristic of e-government can be accomplished if only the back-office of the government truly reformed and the government wants more transparency and better services for people and businesses.