

Stand and Applaud: The Courage of Belarus's Revolution via Social Networks

In Belarus, it started with a clap. One person, unable to use his voice to shout out in protest, stood in the center of Minsk and reminded those in power of his capacity for self-expression. Immediately, others came and brought their hands together in unison with his and the sound grew louder. Clap, clap. Then feet began to stomp and the sound grew louder. Stomp stomp, clap clap. Soon the square was filled with the sound of thousands of people -- people who an authoritarian regime has been trying to silence and control for decades -- and the entire world heard.

“About 1,000 people tried to gather in the Belarusian capital to take part in a flashmob called for via various social networks to show their desire for economic and political changes in the country,” a Belarusian photographer posted on the citizen journalism website Demotix June 15.

The report accompanied a series of photographs showing people gathering peacefully without signs or banners, clapping together in unison. There were also photos of police moving in and protestors being carried away. But the images of unity managed to inspire more than those of violence. A week later another protest began the same way as the first. It was even larger.

From the capital Minsk to smaller cities and towns across Belarus, people have started defying a ban on unauthorized public meetings and coming together to protest the 17-year totalitarian rule of President Alexander Lukashenko, often described as “Europe’s last dictator.” There have been protests in the past over fraudulent elections, repressive policies, and the illegal jailing of those who speak out against the government. But after these were split up by the police, the issues were left unresolved, except perhaps in the minds of the populace.

Now a series of economic missteps by the government has incensed public anger yet again.

After a presidential victory in December 2010 which was widely seen as illegitimate and isolated the country further from its democratic neighbors, Lukashenko has been enacting policies with disastrous effects for average Belarusians. In an effort to solve the country’s enormous budget

shortfall, the Belarusian ruble was purposely devalued by 36 percent in May and is now falling out of control. Paired with soaring inflation, the result has been panic buying, product shortages, and increasing unemployment.

Rather than address these problems and the protests they inspire, Lukashenko's response has been to blame the press for using "trash called the internet" to disseminate misinformation and foment unrest.

While his analysis may not be subtle, Lukashenko is partly correct. Like many of the anti-government protests that have spread across the Arab world, those occurring in Belarus have been organized through social media outlets. Facebook, Twitter, Russia's social networking site Vkontakte, as well as a growing number of blogs and citizen reporting sites like Demotix have publicized information and helped energize a normally reticent Belarusian public. While they are not sufficient for creating revolution, these outlets have been able to highlight a collective discontent for a government many believe shows a complete disregard for human rights.

The combination of social unrest and online social media outlets produced a catalyst for change and a re-emergence of democracy in countries like Tunisia and Egypt. But can the same happen in Belarus?

Much has been made of social media's role in the Arab Spring with many journalists calling the events "Twitter Revolutions." The term, which was actually coined during Moldova's 2009 protest by the well-known Belarusian academic Evgeny Morozov, author of "The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom," is meant to define events where social media outlets bring people together from disparate communities, classes, and circumstances to enact change. As Morozov puts it, social media plays a crucial role in "mobilizing the masses outside of and far away from the square (and, in part, getting some of them TO the square in the first place)."

Despite the popularity of recent protests, however, online social networks in Belarus remain some of the weakest in the world. Belarus Digest, a website dedicated to analysis of the country, recently published a story saying that of the 10 million people in Belarus, about 33% of adults

receives information from the internet. Only 2.2% use social networking sites, usually Facebook or Russia's Vkontakte, and Twitter users number under 50,000.

These numbers may be low but the percentage of Belarusians on social networks is present and growing especially among young people, according to Volha Charnysh, the managing editor of Belarus Digest and an Associate of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University.

“Basically, the internet is yet to become the main source of news,” said Charnysh in an email interview. “It is used primarily by young people and often for nothing but entertainment, but more and more people have the capacity to go online from home.”

Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian-American journalist on human rights and reform in the Muslim world, believes these young people are a key element. One of social media's greatest contributions to the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, she has argued, was that it strengthened an understanding among people, especially young people, of individual empowerment.

“Social media changed the consciousness of the young people using them,” Eltahawy said at a recent panel discussion held by the International Center for Journalists in Washington, D.C. “It basically allowed them to say, ‘I count.’”

But as more people in Belarus have turned to the internet as a place to speak out, the government has been working to eliminate this emerging outlet of free expression.

According to a 2011 report by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Belarus is one of the worst countries in the world for internet freedom. Since 2005, the Lukashenko regime has administered crackdowns against civil society online via blockings, cyberattacks, and tampering. This strict internet repression increased in 2010 with the passage of Decree No. 60, which requires each Internet Service Provider to register with the government and identify all users. In addition, a special censorship center was tasked with monitoring all online content.

The immediate effects of the decree have been striking. Several prominent websites, including the popular opposition site charter97.org, have been regularly blocked. Influential bloggers have been interrogated or jailed as well as having their equipment stolen and personal information hacked. In the lead up to the December 2010 elections, these actions became more severe with hundreds of Belarusians arrested for posting criticisms of the government. In response, many began self-censoring online fearing jail or worse.

“Belarus is in some ways a model of how social and other new media can be used against democracy activists,” Jay Tolson, Director of the Radio Free Europe Newsroom, said in an email interview. “The KGB is very active on social media sites to identify activists and monitor their activities, to disinform people, to organize pro-regime events, and to vilify activists.”

Morozov, in a private interview, agreed that the Lukashenko government makes it very difficult for those trying to organize online.

“The regular narrative is that the costs for authoritative governments to monitor the internet outweigh the benefits,” he said. “However, sometimes the benefits outweigh the costs when they can get information, spread propaganda, and censor the public.”

Nevertheless, hope remains both inside and outside the country that these new social media networks will prove stronger than the government opposing them.

Belarus’s neighbors in the European Union (EU) are some of the strongest supporters of democratic change in the country. In an effort to promote democracy in 2010, they had promised the Belarusian government billions in much needed economic aid if the presidential race was clean. The offer was revoked, however, after Lukashenko proved he had no interest in fair elections by putting many of his opponents and hundreds of protestors in jail.

Now, the EU is looking for ways to help the opposition. One method has been to impose strict sanctions on Lukashenko and others in his administration by freezing assets, refusing travel visas, and restricting the work of government-owned businesses. But another has been building

support for Belarus's burgeoning social media outlets. Estonia, an ex-Soviet state like Belarus well known for its technology sector, says it will put its cyber-expertise to work on behalf of the Belarusian opposition to teach them "how to manage their internet websites and protect them against cyberattacks," according to RSF.

Poland also strongly supports democracy in Belarus and has been actively working to bring more information to the country. To do this, Poland has helped finance the satellite TV channel Belsat as well as two radio stations broadcast conventionally as well as online.

Tolson agrees this may be the best way to help bring about democratic change.

"Social media has the power to spur revolution," said Tolson. "But social media alone is much weaker than social media that works hand-in-hand with access to traditional media, including radio, TV, and print -- and to real, on-the-ground organizations that support democracy."

In the end, however, international support, tech-savvy youth, and social media tools only provide the background for Belarus's embattled populace. As Eltahawy has said, while social media may awaken citizens to an opportunity, it "did not invent courage."

Now more people in Belarus are demonstrating that courage by gathering to clap again and again. On the outside, we watch, wait and applaud their efforts.