



Beyond the ‘Telegram Revolution’: Understanding the Role of Social Media in Belarus Protests

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Abstract: When anti-government protests erupted in Belarus in 2020, journalists and commentators were quick to dub them a ‘Telegram revolution’, by referencing the messenger app that was instrumental in coordinating the protests. The label seemed to be a natural choice, following the logic of phrases that were used to refer to anti-government protests in the late 2000s–2010s, from ‘Twitter revolution’ to ‘YouTube uprising’. Despite its appeal as a rhetorical device, this framing is problematic because it runs the risk of overlooking the political and social context that brought about the grievances behind the movement. The present essay offers a look that goes beyond this technologically deterministic approach to show the role of Telegram and other digital spaces in reshaping the social contract in Belarus and reinforcing emerging changes in the nation’s socio-political fabric that have been found by previous scholarship to be of central importance to democratising change.

Keywords: social contract, authoritarian bargain, social media, Telegram, affordances, Belarus, protests

When in 2020 anti-government protests erupted in Belarus and made international headlines, journalists and commentators were quick to dub them a ‘Telegram revolution’ (e.g., Litvinova 2020, ‘The Telegram Revolution...’, 2020), by referencing the messenger app that appeared to be instrumental in coordinating the protests. The label seemed to be a logical choice. After all, it followed the lead of similar phrases that were routinely used to refer to anti-government protests in the late 2000s–2010s, from ‘Twitter revolution’ (‘Iran and...’, 2009; Christensen 2011; Morozov 2009) to ‘Facebook revolution’ (El Hamamsy 2011; Harlow 2013) to ‘YouTube uprising’ (Khamis 2012). With this familiarity, it projected a comforting sense of knowability by placing Belarusian events among other, presumably explained and understood democratising movements.

Despite its appeal as a rhetorical device, this framing is problematic because it runs the risk of oversimplifying the protests by overlooking the political and social context that brought about the grievances behind the movement. In what follows below, I offer a look that goes beyond this technologically deterministic approach to show the role of Telegram and other digital spaces in reshaping the socio-political dynamic that is both reflective of the specifics of the Belarusian context and echoes some common themes that arise from research on the role of social media in facilitating political change.

To be clear, I don't argue that social media possesses inherently democratic capabilities. Neither do I dismiss the role of digital tools in organising action on the ground, even though, as indicated by past research on political movements and a recent study on Belarusian protests, it was not the only, but one of several ways for protesters to communicate and coordinate their actions (Herasimenka et al. 2020; Lim 2012; Tufekci et al. 2012). Instead, I argue that social media responded to, facilitated and reinforced the emerging changes in the nation's socio-political fabric that have been found by previous scholarship to be of central importance to democratising change.

First, social media put a spotlight on the government's failure to deliver on its obligations, which allowed the public to discover common grievances against the state (and realise their wide spread), which could then be channelled into collective demands on the system. The catalyser of this change was the coronavirus pandemic. As the coronavirus was making its way through Belarus in the spring, and the protests were months away from gathering thousands, Alexander Lukashenko, the country's president, dismissed it as 'psychosis' and refused to get a handle on the crisis ('Report about...', 2020), leaving health care workers to face a shortage of protective gear and citizens with no guidance on protecting themselves ('Lukashenko: More than...', 2020; 'Meeting with Chairperson...', 2020), withholding information about the spread of the virus and censoring those who were sharing such information ('How Belarusian officials...', 2020).

By doing so, Lukashenko essentially undermined the key premise of the social contract with the Belarusian people. Having originated in the works of Hobbes (1985 [1651]), Locke (2004 [1690]) and Rousseau (1968 [1762]), the social contract can be understood as an agreement between the public and the state that establishes their mutual obligations and rights. The social contract does not have to be spelled out explicitly, but its conditions 'are accessible and known to everyone at least to the point of paying lip service to them' (Bertram 2004: 74) and serve to both effectuate and legitimise a particular socio-political order.

Under Lukashenko, the social contract in Belarus has grown to take the form of an 'authoritarian bargain', under which the public relinquished exercising its political rights for moderate, but relatively stable, economic and social well-being, and which served to buy citizens' loyalty and thus ensure regime survival without resorting to widespread coercion (Desai et al. 2009; Haiduk et al. 2009; Pranevičiūtė-Neliupšienė et al. 2014). The cornerstone element of this agreement is health care, which is constitutionally guaranteed to Belarusian citizens and has been touted as one of the biggest accomplishments of Lukashenko's administration – and thus one of the most salient conditions of the 'authoritarian bargain'. That is why the government's decision to largely ignore the unfolding healthcare crisis led to the disruption of its fundamental agreement with the Belarusian public, undermining the legitimacy of the regime. The alarming accounts about the growing human toll of the coronavirus and

the strain it had been putting on the healthcare system that were shared on Telegram and other platforms made the failure of the government to deliver on its side of the bargain particularly glaring.

The importance of these social media activities stretched beyond immediate information dissemination to create among Belarusian users 'shared awareness' (Shirky 2011), an understanding that their grievances are shared by, and visible to, others. As suggested by past research, in authoritarian countries, citizens tend to keep their anti-government views hidden. This silence can be only partially explained by the fear of repercussions. Another source of this silence is pluralistic ignorance, an inability to correctly perceive the opinion of others, which may fuel the perception that anti-government movement is not feasible (Tufekci & Wilson 2012). Viewing the traces of other people's anti-government views on social media – coupled with the work of video bloggers, such as Sergei Tikhanovsky and others, who featured ordinary Belarusians' grievances from across Belarus – may have contributed to disrupting the trajectory of this spiral of silence.

As similarly suggested by research, when the government disrupted internet service to prevent citizen mobilisation and information exchange ('Belarus Restricts...', 2020), this decision may have contributed to increasing the shared feelings of resentment and anger, which were found to have had mobilising qualities in previous protests (Lim 2012; see also van Zomeren et al. 2012). It also sent additional potentially mobilising signals about the anxiety and fear of the ruling elites on the one hand, and the feasibility of the protests on the other, both of which have been theorised to contribute to the success of protest movements (Jost et al. 2018; Shirky 2011; Spaiser et al. 2017).

Further, digital spaces not only allowed Belarusians to build shared awareness of the state's refusal to keep its side of the bargain, but facilitated their efforts to step into the government's shoes by picking up the obligations on which it failed to deliver. From a nationwide volunteer effort to create DIY masks, gowns and face shields for medical workers (Wesolowsky 2020), to facilitating crowdfunding campaigns to assist healthcare facilities in battling the coronavirus (Roth 2020), to organising water delivery after the contamination of water supply in several districts of Minsk in June 2020 ('Proud that...' 2020) and the disruption of the water supply system in the Novaia Boravaia neighbourhood in November ('In Novaia Borovaia...' 2020), those efforts, coordinated through social media, facilitated the (re)discovery by Belarusians of a collective identity that articulated Belarusians as efficacious, autonomous, self-sufficient agents – as opposed to politically and economically immature subjects who cannot fend for themselves and have to rely on the supposedly benevolent state, a representation propagated by government discourse (Kananovich 2015).

The democratising implications of these initiatives are far from trivial. As suggested by research, authoritarian governments recognize such seemingly apolitical social mobilisations as a threat to their regimes. For example, an analysis of China's censorship efforts found that, contrary to a popular narrative, posts that were critical of the state were not more likely to be deleted (King et al. 2013). Messages that attracted censors' attention were those that encouraged collective action and 'put the locus of power and control' outside the government (339), regardless of whether they were related to politics or cast the government in a negative light. These findings echo other studies that argued authoritarian regimes collapse not when people

start criticising the government, but when they stop bringing those grievances to the state as a legitimate solver of their problems (Cheng et al. 2016; Dimitrov 2008; King et al. 2014).

Notably, along with the widening national reach of some high-profile Telegram channels, Telegram has also seen another trend: the appearance of local feeds tailored at city neighbourhoods or courtyards. At the time of writing, a web catalogue of such digital spaces listed over 1040 groups and 170 channels ('Neighbourhood/ courtyard chats...', 2020), offering citizens an opportunity to coordinate collective action. These initiatives stretch beyond participation in political demonstrations to include non-political projects, from hosting tea parties, outdoor activities for children and music concerts to designing, and voting on, neighbourhood flags. Taken together, these activities contribute to creating group identity and strengthening horizontal ties, two factors that have been found to affect the outcome of collective efforts.

Ironically enough, the ability of social media to produce strong social ties has been questioned by experts. High-risk actions, which usually end up producing change, tend to be a strong-tie phenomenon (Gladwell 2010; McAdam 1986). Reliance on friends or members of other close relationship circles, the logic goes, can induce peer pressure and provide much-needed support in hardships and thus allow a protest to sustain (Gladwell 2010). In contrast, social media, which tend to be sustained by weak ties, while enabling the fast growth of loosely knit networks, may fail to sustain the high-effort action needed to make democratising change happen (Morozov 2011a, 2011b). It remains to be seen if the outcome of Belarusian protests will offer evidence otherwise.

Finally, the social media have been the key driver behind another characteristic of Belarusian protests: saturating public discourse with voices from ordinary citizens and lifting them to the status of celebrity-like figures and subjects of empowering memes: from 73-year-old activist Nina Bahinskaya, dubbed 'the mother of Belarusian revolution' (Rewyako 2020) to 'DJs of Changes', two musicians who hijacked a pro-government concert by playing a protest song ('Not only Schuchynschyna...', 2020). Some of the activists' words—such as 'I'm taking a walk', which Bahinskaya said to a riot policemen at a protest, or 'I'm going out', posted by artist Roman Bondarenko in a courtyard Telegram chat before heading to a playground, where he was brutally detained by people in plain clothes, transported to a police station and later died in the hospital—were shared on social media and made their way into posters, street art and protest chants ('I'm going out...', 2020; 'I'm taking a walk...', 2020). Taken together, these and other similar instances have contributed to disrupting the logic of official discourse in which Lukashenko is assigned the role of the major, if not the only, rhetor imbued with the legitimacy to speak on behalf of the Belarusian people.

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