

The Role of the New Media in Agenda Setting in Belarus

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The author starts with defining the nature of the political regime that acts in Belarus, providing a list of the key features that are important for media behaviour. The list is extracted from the relevant comparative researches focused on Belarus. After describing the regime as a set of rules for the media, the text then proceeds to the specific morphology of the Belarussian new media that do not comply with the basic characteristics proposed by media researchers and thus can be recognized as old media restructured to meet the ethics and principles of the Internet. Then the author deals with the agenda setting process in Belarus and proposes his own interpretation of the classical logistics of this process in specific Belarussian circumstances where the list of power-bearing actors is dramatically reduced. The paper is finalized with showing the new possibilities that the media as an actor of public policy have obtained in the agenda setting after appearance of Web 2.0 when sites they have been re-structured on the basis of the user-generated content which helps to retrieve the media's autonomy and possibilities to influence the agenda setting.

Key words: public policy theory, new media, agenda-setting process, political regimes

My paper will be focused on the transformations that occur to the role of the media in a political system that clearly differs from traditional democracy.

The aim of my paper is to define some principal differences of media behaviour in such regimes as Belarussian; these principles could help to create a new theory of the media dimension of authoritarianism and sultanism. The importance of such a theory can be grounded by the current replacement of the classic 20th-century authoritarianism by something new, by some rule with an authoritarian flavour which is rooted in the new media, presented in TV and uses different ways of supremacy, domination and subjugation than do classical authoritarian regimes.

To pursue this aim, the following **objectives** should be achieved:

- to analyze the process of agenda setting in the Belarussian public policy and to define the role of the new media in it;
- to catch the differences in the media behavior in classical democracies and in regimes with the deficit of democracy (Belarus) during the process of agenda setting;
- to understand changes in the media morphology which will help to increase the role of the new media in agenda setting.

As one can see from the title, I'm not going to touch the roles of old media or, as they are called by Dan Gillmore (We

the Media), the “big media”, described and analyzed elsewhere (for instance, V. Martynovich, “The role of independent media in constructing the public sphere in Belarus”).

By “new media” I mean Jan Van Dijk’s definition presented in his “Network Society”: “a combination of online and offline media, such as computer networks and personal computers, transmission links and artificial memories” (Dijk, 2006, p. 46) which are defined through three basic conditions: **interactivity, digital code and integration.**

The reason why I have decided to analyze the agenda-setting function of the new media lies in the fundamental underestimation of this function by current theories of public policy. Thomas Birkland (Birkland, 2001, p. 109) defines agenda setting as a process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public and elite’s attention. Birkland sees the media as an intermediary actor which helps groups and power to attract attention (Birkland, 2001, p. 110). Debora Stone’s social constructing theory (Stone, 2001, p. 35) comprehends the media as a host of the very body of discussion and thus plays the key role in agenda setting. This focus becomes more actual in the framework of the new media in the conditions of political authoritarianism, which recognizes society not as a group of physically impersonated entities, but as an aggregation of consciousnesses that can easily be manipulated through the massive propaganda.

The paper will be founded on the **methodology** of public policy analysis with features of media analysis and theoretical research in the interdisciplinary field that lies between public policy theory and the theory of the new media.

The nature of the Belarussian regime as a set of rules of the game for the media

Vladimir Rouda (2010) states that contemporary Belarus is a sultanism with some features of authoritarianism and dictatorship. M. Eke and T. Kuzio (Eke, Kuzio, 2000, p. 543) agree that the regime that acts in Belarus has a sultanistic spirit, and indicate its main features:

- 1) extreme patrimonialism, where the destiny of the state is closely related to the destiny of the leader, which manifests itself in the active promotion of the cult of the leader in Belarus;
- 2) fusion of private and public property, which leads to corruption in Belarus;
- 3) low level of institutionalisation and lawmaking, which enables the leader to act at his own discretion;
- 4) political plurality being frowned upon;
- 5) access to power, political and social benefits is ensured exclusively by the regime.

An ex-head of the Belarussian parliament, scientist S. Shushkevich, formulates his own definition of the regime – “neo-communism” (Shushkevich, 2002, p. 23). By “communism” Shushkevich means not the nature of ideology, but the *form of rule* in Belarus, which is – in his point of view – close to the former “Soviet dictatorship” (Shushkevich, 2002, p. 25), although there was no room for any form of opposition in the former USSR, while in contemporary Belarus not all political parties came under the ban. It is also possible to see non-governmental media, which was impossible in the USSR.

P. Usov (Usov, 2008, Chernov, 2008) proposes to recognize the Belarussian regime as authoritarian or neo-authoritarian. It lacks some classical features of a purely authoritarian regime (Belarus has a state ideology, the opposition cannot act freely even within the boundaries set by the state, the role of the leader is different and more suitable for a totalitarian system), but some authoritarian features defined by Linz and Stefan (Linz, Stefan, 1996, p. 56) are still here:

- apolitical population, enabling the regime to ensure the required social basis for itself;
- strong political control from the state: society is autonomous from the social and economic interference.

K. Matsuzata (2004), in his comparative paper on the post-communist regimes and the regime in Belarus, proposes to skip attempts to set it into some classical definition and describes it as “the populist regime that neglects the idea of free elections”. He promotes his own typology of post-soviet regimes (Western and Eastern) with the following unique features of the Belarussian regime:

- super-presidential republic with minimal role of parliament;
- no competition among clans in power, since there are no clans but Lukashenko’s clan;
- centralized system of regional power, the so-called “vertical”, with a possibility of the president to freely change any regional head;
- populist flavour – in contradiction with less-populist regimes of the surrounding countries.

Since defining the typology of the Belarussian regime is not the aim of the arti-

cle, we will not attempt to give a short and “final” answer to the question of the name of the combination of methods, techniques and forms of power which are implemented in Belarussian society as a political system or a political regime. What is important is that Belarus has enough signs to define its political regime as non-democratic, sultanistic (Eke, Kuzio, 2000) and authoritarian (Chernov 1998, Usov 2008). It also has some unique characteristics not fitting any typology (Matsuzata, 2004).

The reason why we do not attempt to give our own “final” answer to the question of the nature of the Belarussian political regime is not only the theoretical improbability to do this in a short article devoted to a different topic. As can be seen from the key words and our aim and goals, we are going to work in the paradigm of public policy theory and not in the field of comparative politics theory. It is the comparative politics theory that cares about such things as, for example, the level of democracy and the concentration of power by a presidency in different types of regimes. Public policy theory with a whole set of problems of agenda setting deals with the political system “phenomenologically” as with something which has already been designed and the process of this design is closed and finalized. For comparative politics theory, it is important to define the roles the media play in countries with different forms of rule (democracy, totalitarianism, etc.). Public policy theory recognizes any political system, with its limitations, the abilities and disabilities of actors, as a unique phenomenon and concentrates on the ways the actors increase their role.

To work with “agenda setting” and “windows of opportunities” in Belarus, it

is enough to know that the media as actors are limited by some circumstances (which comparative politics would care to define, and such definition would be the main aim of any theoretical effort). Thus, it is more important to list the qualities of the Belarussian regime that do have an impact on the media behaviour.

To this end, we shall move from comparative politics theory to the language of public policy theory. Let's start with the qualities which come from sultanism and are formulated by Eke and Kuzio:

- 1) **extreme patrimonialism.** For the media, it means that within the country there is no political groups that would be interested and or have a opposability to support any form of independent media;
- 2) **fusion of private and public property.** In the Belarussian case, this has a unique incarnation: there is no concept of private property which would be deeply implanted in mass consciousness and in rules of the game in policy economy. Each piece of property could be easily amputated from the owners with no indignation from the side of society. This implies the improbability of appearing a strong class of oligarchs which would be interested to invest money in the media to protect their business (since in no way the private media can protect business in a country with the population that is not used to the concept of private venturing);
- 3) **a low level of institutionalisation and lawmaking,** which enables the leader to act at his own discretion. For the media market, this means

that there is no written code that can protect anybody from the pressure of the government presidency authorities. You should respect some unwritten norms, observe some "invisible boarders" and implement self-censorship since in such nervous circumstances the more you care the better it is for you;

- 4) **destroyed political plurality.** For the media it means that, with no dependence on the ownership or political views of journalists editors, they should promote the general ideology of the state and popularize the views of the president;
- 5) **it is the regime that has an exclusive access to power.** For the media, this means that there is only one real hero of all the articles and all the interviews, a decreasing number of informational cases created by political actors that do not represent the government or presidency.

Now, let us see how the authoritarian characteristics of the regime (proposed by V. Chernov, P. Usov) impact the Belarussian media, what set of rules for newspapers radio and TV are created:

- 6) **apolitical population.** This fact guarantees that such topics as human rights, politically motivated arrests, meetings and strikes are not popular among the readers. It is not only dangerous to write about them. It is not effective in terms of attracting new readers or achieving more advertising. Policy-making is recognized in such societies as something "dirty" and belonging to the narrow circle of "initiated". Thus, most popular private newspapers

and Internet portals in Belarus are “Komsomolskaya Pravda” (the tabloid that concentrates on the private life of Russian and Belarussian TV and cinema stars; the issue of 8 September 2011 had 320 000 copies; compare with BelGazeta which is concentrated on politics: the issue of 5 September had 21 100 copies) and Tut.by (9 September – 1.5 million of unique visitors: mainly it is a web portal with free e-mail service. News listing has no news on human rights or opposition activities);

- 7) **autonomy of society from any kind of social and economic interference.** This creates an atmosphere of social dependence and kills the gravitation of individuals towards the private initiative. The state is recognized as a careful father which will help anybody to resist the difficulties. In the media dimension, it means that there is no big demand for non-governmentally owned projects. The most important information is the one created by the state. This means that anybody should get a subscription of the state-owned big media and not care to find some alternative channels of communication. Since even if you know more, there is no way for you to transfer this knowledge into social action;
- 8) **strong political control** from the state guaranties that any wrong or too critical word in the private media will be severely punished, and the government has enough mechanisms to perform such a punishment. To print and distribute a newspaper in Belarus, one has to obtain a li-

cence which is issued by the Ministry of Information. To loose this license, one should get three warnings from the Ministry of Information. Theoretically, it is possible to cancel this warning in the court and to get back the license, but it rarely happens. As admitted in point 5 of these characteristics, the regime has an exclusive access to power: the court of law is the same political subject as the Ministry of Information that issued the warning. There is no sense in the cancellation of warnings by the left hand while it was the right hand that issued it.

Let's now finalize the list of the characteristics of the Belarussian media scene with transferring the features of the regime proposed by K. Matsuzata (skipping the repeats like “the minimal role of parliament”):

- 9) **no competition among clans in power.** This homogeneity, absence of different competing centers guarantees that no draining of info into independent media is going to happen. In the 1990s, 4–5 years after establishing Lukashenko's power, there still were clans in the government, left from the plural Viacheslav Kebich's era (Viacheslav Kebich was the prime-minister of Republic of Belarus in 1991–1994). Editorial offices of independent newspapers of that time received a lot of anonymous letters with detailed and sometimes even documented descriptions of the machinations that have been happening under the cover of the government or presidential administration. By the end

of the 1990s, the design of a non-competitive system was ended; representatives of Kebich's clan were either fired from the state service or made to realize that now they serve only one master, Alexander Lukashenko. The power has become opaque and dense – newspapers and web-sites in their activities have to be based on the official sources with no chances for some exclusive story born as a result of info draining;

- 10) **centralized system of regional power**, absence of their own political abilities in the hands of local governors who are frequently replaced by the president shifting the location of job and even field of activity. That undermines the possibility of local (private) media owners, editors and activists to install interpersonal connections with representatives of regional power and to receive some special bonuses for their work (more freedom in return to a soft coverage of news on regional activities).

Morphology of Belarussian new media

Before turning to specific roles of the Belarussian new media in the agenda-setting process, we should present a specific morphology of the Belarussian new media. My thesis is that in this political system, new media do not have the clear set of characteristics, presented by Van Dijk.

As to the first feature of the new media – **interactivity** (Dijk, 2006, p. 5) – most of the Belarussian online media have such an embodiment of interactivity as the possi-

bility to comment on any article or piece of information presented on the website. At the same time, it is not done in a way it is done elsewhere in democracies.

The top-20 popular Belarussian web-sites presented in the Akavita rating table (seen June 7, 2011) do a pre-moderating of all forums and comments. Marshal and Burnett's Web Theory (Marshal, Burnett, 2003) claims that it is quite a popular measurement in new media of democracies, but the reasons BBC or The Guardian do the pre-moderating are different from the Belarussian editors' motivation. As Neil Thurman states in *Forums for citizen journalists? Adoption of user generated content by online news media*, pre-moderation is done to "provide [...] users with a good edited read" (Thurman, 2008, p. 144). In Belarus' top-20 web-sites, there performs some pre-moderation to defend themselves from legal consequences, since it is an editorial office of the media which is responsible for readers' comments by the president's decree N°60 adopted in 2010.

If the Belarussian (i.e. set in the BY post-domain zone) media do not cut or soften comments that might include harsh regime critics, it will have a problem with the state. It can end up with searching, confiscation of servers and even a total blocking of access to such sites from Belarus¹). The media that have their sites set outside the BY post-domain, such as Belarussianpartizan.org or Charter97.org, invented a pre-moderation to prevent the so-called "governmental trolling", which is described by

¹ Сайт "Белорусский партизан недоступен из Беларуси" [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011. <http://www.electroname.com/story/7434>.

Electroname² (see <http://www.electroname.com/story/4563>). In March 2011, Belaruspartizan decided to cancel the commenting option on the site to “stop the fools from flooding the site”.

As to the **integration** of the media, the Belarusian government does a lot to stop the very nature of integration as described by Van Dijk. In Dijk’s theory, integration means the tendency of combining all existing media into one online–offline aggregation (Dijk, 2006, p. 7). It is obvious that such aggregation, once it appears, would be very influential. So, the tendency for Belarus is an attempt (performed by the state) to segregate different types of media and prevent them from sticking.

Two non-governmentally owned newspapers that have web-sites, which are in Akavita’s top-20 (Narodnaya Volia, Nasha Niva), were put under the process of legal liquidation in spring 2011. Then the process was stopped, the trials were withdrawn, but the tendency is easy to read: the government intends to do as much as it can to weaken the agglomerations of paper and Internet media to fight integration as the main feature of the new media which empowers both Internet and paper editions.

In the world of Dijk’s new media, computer terminal in the Internet cafes, a notebook which is used in the Wi-Fi area of an international airport, a mobile phone with an access to the Web, or iPad which is used to read the news become as important media (or rather are considered *as media*) as the Internet sites that they allow to visit (Dijk, 2006, p. 7). The channel of communication starts to play its own game,

and this game, together with the game of media product, creates the phenomena of this aggregation in which it is quite hard to define the borders between a newspaper, e-mail service, news agency or just a mobile browser.

The Belarussian state fights this kind of integration, too. On September 1, 2010, all Internet providers had to start filtering the content they were allowed to visit. This was ordered by the president’s decree N°60 which has already been mentioned. According to that decree, all providers should filter and block the sites that have “an extremist content” or “violence advocacy”³. In the language of the Belarussian public policy, “an extremist content” and “violence advocacy” mean any form of political alternative and any harsh regime critics. Thus, non-welcomed sites on Belarussian politics, such as Charter97.org and Belaruspartizan.org, became unavailable at all state institutions. To prevent providers from legal trials of users, they do that according to “written requests of users”.

The mobile phone operators that provide a web-access to smart-phone owners have also started filtering the content in September 2010. In autumn 2010, the Life and MTS mobile operators didn’t allow users to visit “bad” sites from their mobile phones.

All these steps cancelled the aggregation between the Internet providers, mobile operators and sites that they could help visit. Integration is not a proper quality for the Belarussian new media.

The third feature of the new medias, proposed by Van Dijk, is also far from be-

² Байнет захлестнула волна троллинга [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011. <http://www.electroname.com/story/4563>.

³ Интернет в Беларуси. Что изменится с 1 июля. [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011. <http://www.interfax.by/article/58690>.

ing present in Belarus. Dijk proposes to summarize all new media's content as a set of **digitalized data**, which has nothing to do with any physical reality and dictates its own laws (Dijk, 2006, p. 9). However, starting from 1 July 2010, there is no more anonymity in the Web for the users that have an access from Belarus. According to the president's decree N° 60, providers ought to perform an identification of the user's modems used to gain an access. Providers have to register each modem that uses their connection, and save these data for a one year period. Also, they are obliged to save the history of users' activity in the Web⁴. Internet cafés have to ask users for ID or passport and to keep their personal data for one year as well as the history of their activities in the Web. According to president's decree N° 60, all these data should be provided to militia's investigators, prosecutors, KGB, tax police, courts, etc⁵.

We have an example of how these state actors are using such data: on 4 June 2011, Belarussian KGB agents came to the private apartment of Siarhey Paulukevich who started a campaign in social networks, called March of Millions. They arrested Paulukevich and confiscated his PC to delete the web-page of March of millions⁶. According to Paulukevich, he was tortured in the KGB. Representatives of the KGB made him sign an agreement of collaboration⁷.

⁴ Интернет в Беларуси. Что изменится с 1 июля. [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011. <http://www.interfax.by/article/58690>.

⁵ Интернет в Беларуси. Что изменится с 1 июля. [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011. <http://www.interfax.by/article/58690>.

⁶ КДБ Вконтакте. [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011. <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=55280>.

⁷ Сергей Павлюкевич. Как меня вербовали и пытали. Details are provided in video-interview (in

Similar searching and confiscations happened in winter 2011 in the offices of Nasha Niva and Narodnaya Volia, with most popular LiveJournal blogger Evgeniy Lipkovich who during the Summer 2011 was put under trial for his writing activities.

By acting like this, the government proposes a very specific approach to the new media, according to which the new media are actually the old media. The predominant idea, broadly implanted in Belarus, is that no digital impersonation or an anonymous avatar can prevent a very certain blogger, live human with a passport, flat, job, etc. from having very certain problems with law if some invisible lines of self-censorship are crossed.

Analyzing the peculiarities of the Belarussian Web, some researchers come to the conclusion that there is no new media in Belarus; there are the old media, which are restructured according to the ethics and behavioral traditions of the Web⁸ (Anastasia Mialeshko and her thesis).

However, my thought is the following: despite the lack of the traditional features of the new media, the Belarussian new media do a job that is done by their counterparts worldwide: they do generate an alternative content which contradicts the censored (or self-censored) content of "big media"; they do produce a new discourse that differs from a lecture-type (Gillmore, 2004) discourse of the old media, they do induce civil society to act and mobilize public participation. Moreover, the existence of the elementary new media in

Belarussian). [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011. <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=59470>.

⁸ See Anastasia's Mialeshko MA thesis "Civil journalism as a form of critical Internet culture", defended in European humanities university July, 2011. Text of the thesis might be found in the University library.

Belarus creates some new specific social phenomenon.

Before the raise of blogs and achieving popularity by a number of anti-governmental web-sites, the civil society found itself deeply fragmented and isolated, and it was opposed by the well-organized and centralized governmental propaganda. The new media, with some not-yet-suppressed attributes of integrity, presented an aggregated reaction to propaganda, the answer called “BY-net”: forums can be pre-moderated, but the dominant mood in the Internet is rather critical towards propaganda. It seems that the Belarussian government is losing the battle with the new media; it controls only the traditional big media that rapidly lose their trustworthiness. Having no tools to out-argue the BY-net, they implement coercive mechanisms, such as the 60th decree, to stop the critics by employing non-verbal instruments.

Agenda-setting process in Belarus

According to Birkland (2001), in pluralistic regimes there is a big fight for proposing decisions, solutions and alternatives for public / political agenda. Kingdon (2002) states that two types of actors – visible and invisible – are involved in it.

In Belarus, visible actors are the president and his appointees, parliament, media, political parties, and the invisible actors are academic researchers, some bureaucrats, experts of the think tanks.

Visible actors affect the agenda, while invisible actors affect the alternatives. This works well in plural systems, but it does not work in Belarus where we have a scheme that fits in the “policy monopoly” frame proposed by Frank Baumgartner

and Bryan Jones (Baumgartner, Jones, 2002). According to this scheme, three main groups of actors that participate in agenda setting support each other to gain a complete control over proposing solutions. Groups of interest support parliament electoral support, receiving a friendly legislation in return. Bureaucracy is supported by interest groups with lobbies and gives law regulation in return. Parliament is supported by bureaucracy in policy choices and receives funding and political support. This scheme is represented in the so-called Pulitzer’s “iron triangle” (Birkland, 2001). The essence of this scheme is that there is no room left for any accidental player in the game. Even in the “iron triangle” type of policy monopoly, the role of the media is minor. But it becomes even more tiny when we see the Belarussian (or, more generally, the authoritarian sultanistic) type of “policy monopoly”.

As pointed out above, in the characteristics of the Belarussian regime as a scene for the media, authoritarianism and sultanism tend to cut the number of real actors that have any influence on the agenda setting. In Belarus, instead of Pulitzer’s “iron triangle”, we see a very different pattern where all solutions and alternatives are proposed by a single node and there is no need for mutual support and interaction of, for example, parliament, government bureaucracy and interest groups. The reason is the following: all of them in such regimes are basically the same, presidency and government, bureaucracy, parliament, interest groups are *the president* (or the prime minister if it is the prime minister who has monopolized the policy making).

Let us see how the other characteristics of the Belarussian political regime affect

the possibilities of the media to influence the agenda setting process.

As to the **extreme patrimonialism**, this means that any problem presented in the media should be sold as a problem that is actual for the president. The only way to make it high in the agenda is to prove that the president and his administration are aware of the problem and its importance. If you want to criticize the regime, it will make you sound, but at the same time it makes your possibilities to become minimal. Another agenda setting measurement of extreme patrimonialism: since there is only one subject that can affect problems and solutions, there is also only one subject that should be influenced in the country. Extreme patrimonialism leads to the absence of public opinion: if there are no channels of converting massive disappointment by any solution in different ways of solving problems and since the presidency is to decide what way of dealing with problems is ideal, this means that all media in the country begin working for only one reader / viewer / listener – the president. This, of course, only matters when we are talking about the agenda setting process (since the president is the only political subject whose opinion in the situation of policy monopoly matters and whose opinion should be constructed by the media).

Fusion of private and public property, absence of big private money in the media lead to the situation when the media simply do not have their own interest in the agenda-setting process. Today in Belarus there are five officially registered private newspapers, which circulate in all cities of Belarus through the Belpochta governmental system and are on a regular basis writing about politics and economy:

BelGazeta, Belorusi i rinok, Narodnaya volia, Nasha Niva, Solidarnost. Only one of them is profitable and works with advertisers. All others are funded through human rights and freedom of press international foundations that do not have their interests in the Belarussian agenda. Actually, they have interests (fostering democracy in Belarus, defending human rights, transformation of political regime), but these interests do not easily fit in the conventional Belarussian agenda (since, in conditions of extreme patrimonialism, only the themes that are actual to the president matter – and the authoritarian sultanistic president does not feel the need of democratic reforms or protection of human rights).

The low level of institutionalisation and lawmaking, together with the **state's strong political control** of the media role in agenda setting, mean the reduction of the media power. The media feel unprotected by the law and will not participate in raising the problems that will touch the interests of the president and his governmental incarnations. For example, in the middle of the 1990s, the issues of out-of-budget arms trade by some chosen and close to power Belarussian companies were raised by deputies of the parliament. However, in conditions of the Belarussian policy monopoly (in 1996 the president initiated the constitutional reform that brought the parliament under the control of presidency), the media do not touch this topic, since it is recognized as dangerous. No law in Belarus prohibits writing about illegal or barely legal trade in arms that break international restrictions and UN embargos. However, since the legislation is weak and problems are often solved without any regulations, there is no chance that some legislation will

protect from closing the media that dare to write about illegal trade in arms. One of the features of the low level of law culture in the Belarussian media is the underlined stupidity of some legally based regulative steps of the government. For example, on 1 June, *Nasha Niva* received the last warning from the Ministry of Information (after that, the process of liquidation was started). The reason of this final warning was the absence of the postal index in the printed version of the newspaper⁹. In December 2010, *Narodnaya Volia* received a warning for the incorrectly composed list of newsstands where the customers may buy it at a reduced price¹⁰. By acting like that, the government states: since we are able to close any media for technical mistakes, we can stop any media at any time, with no serious legal reasons. So, you should care about what you are writing, but not about the legal groundings or laws that would protect you. So, there is no way you can use the power of the media to present some problem in a way which is dangerous for policy monopoly. And the regime's **exclusive access to power** will guarantee that there will be no actors that will dare to do that.

Destroyed political plurality, absence of competition in power, together with **apolitical population and autonomy of society**, disable the whole Kingdon's concept of the windows of opportunities (Kingdon, 2002, p. 165–195). Kingdon describes successive agenda setting as a result of effectively used possibilities that

appear in the media agenda. These possibilities remain opened for only a limited period of time. Each time when there is a disaster, plain crush or whatever else that deeply affects people and makes them interested or shocked, there is a chance for some groups and their interests to use this as a “window” and pose their question high in the agenda. “If the participants cannot or do not take advantage of these opportunities, they must bide their time until the next opportunity comes along” (Kingdon, 2002, p. 166). But the agenda setting process works as a set of windows and competition between different agents for an efficient use of this window only when there is a multitude of actors and political groups. If political plurality is destroyed, if only the president's voice matters, if there is no public opinion or strong civil society, than there is no need in windows of opportunities for raising questions. Questions in agenda can be raised, moved upper or down any time when it is necessary for the government. Since there is only one real empowered political actor, “opening the window of opportunity” or “using the policy window” means proving to the president that some solution is ideal or some topic is a problem and needs solving. However, to influence one person you do not need to influence the whole nation. That is why decision making and agenda setting in such regimes is often invisible, set behind closed doors, far away from the public. This undermines the role of the media both as a stage for agenda setting and an actor that influences the agenda setting.

New media and their play

As one can see from the previous part, literally each characteristic of authoritarian sultanistic political regime deeply af-

⁹ «Наша ніва» получила новое предупреждение от Министерства информации. [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011. <http://news.tut.by/society/233902.html>

¹⁰ “Народная воля” получила четвертое предупреждение от Мининформации. [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011. <http://new.racyja.com/content/narodnaya-volya-atrymala-chatsvertae-papyaredzhannead-mininfarmatsyi>.

fects the possibility of the media to influence the agenda setting. If there were only “old media”, all problems in such “public policy” would be solved with no media interference. Luckily, there are new media, and the limitations and affects listed above cannot be expanded by them. While all the traditional media in such regimes (both governmentally owned and privately run), in terms of agenda setting, **are** the mouthpiece of the president and act according to his will, the new media play their own game.

First of all, they do not share the common ethos which is actual for traditional media. Three representatives of the management of Belarussian non-state owned media¹¹ have confirmed that there is a tacit rule, based not on any written law or decree but on the oral agreement between owners of the media and the Ministry of Information: to get the license, the editor-in-chief of such media should have at least 2 years of experience of working in a managerial position in the Belarussian media. This is done to give an access to the acting in Belarussian “policy monopoly” of only those new actors and personalities that are aware of some unwritten rules and do know that they should support any governmental initiative or alternative raised in the agenda.

However, when we deal with the new media, we have a **decentralized system** of content generators. They do not obey the secret rules simply because they do not know about these rules from their experience or socialization.

The key moment in the agenda setting process (Birkland, 2001; Stone, 2001) is the phase of converting conditions into problems. Those who convince that some issue is not a condition about which nothing can be done, but a problem that can be solved, win. And, as Stone underlines, those who successfully describe problems, at the same time propose the solution to this problem (Stone, 2001, p. 35). Kingdon states that conditions are constructed as problems through indicators, focusing events and feedbacks (Kingdon, 2002, p. 167). Stone adds that there are the causal stories and numbers that also matter (Stone, 2001, p. 36).

But if there is a “policy monopoly” that includes the media, then the indicators, focusing events, feedbacks, causal stories and numbers are used only to construct the problems in the way interesting to the government. On 18 May and 7 June 2011, the state-owned enterprise BelNeftekhim raised the gasoline prices. State-owned newspapers and TV constructed this focusing event as a condition¹² about which nothing can be done. Non-governmentally owned big media were not brave enough and did not have any interests to advocate it in the way that the increase of prices was a problem that had some solutions.

But Web activists, bloggers and representatives of the group called “Za Avto” started a street campaign which recognized the gasoline prices as a problem.

¹¹ Igor Visotskiy, editor-in-chief of BelGazeta. Interviewed by author 1st of September 2011. Julia Sluckaya, ex editor in-chief of Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus, interviewed by author 15th of March 2009. Igor Kashlikov, owner of Ranak Plus publishing house (Svetlogorsk), interviewed by author 24th of August 2011.

¹² Горючая тема (газета “Советская Белоруссия”, 07.06.2011). [Interactive]. Seen on SB’s web site 25 of September, 2011. <http://www.sb.by/post/117660>. Also: Белнефтехим с 7 июня повышает розничные цены на реализуемые через АЗС нефтепродукты в среднем на 31%. (газета “Советская Белоруссия”, 07.06.2011). [Interactive]. Seen on SB’s web site 25 of September, 2011. <http://www.sb.by/post/117685>.

The government crushed the site of the campaign¹³, but the KGB could not stop spreading the information in the social networks: the site was restored at a different Web address¹⁴. The campaign led to a massive street protest on 7 June 2011, which appeared in big media worldwide, including Russian TV news¹⁵, and led to the immediate reduction of gasoline prices by a presidential order¹⁶.

This story helps to understand the nature of a successful participation in agenda setting for the new media in such regimes as Belarussian.

The key quality of the new media that helps to find a solution for an effective participation in raising issues in the agenda is **networking**, but not integration, digital coding or interactivity. To raise an issue, one should organize a social action presented in the Web, a social action that lacks a clearly articulated infrastructure, hierarchy, budgeting – all the features that enable any kind of control and interaction from the state.

The first action of that kind was organized in Belarus after December 19 and was called “Personal Angel”¹⁷. Activists of this action focused their attention on the problem of political prisoners in Belarus.

¹³ [Interactive]. <http://za-avto.unit.by>. Seen 8th of June, 2011. There was a note “По техническим причинам Ваш сайт временно недоступен! Приносим извинения за предоставленные неудобства”.

¹⁴ [Interactive]. http://za-avto.by/index/stop_benzin/0-9. Seen 8th of June, 2011.

¹⁵ НТВ: Пешеходы и велосипедисты поддержали протест велосипедистов. [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011. <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=55424>.

¹⁶ Лукашенко распорядился снизить цены на топливо. [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011. http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/president/Lukashenko-rasporjadilsja-snizit-tseny-na-toplivo_i_558182.html

¹⁷ Permanent Web address: <http://help.roh-roh.net>. [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011.

The state proposed to treat this as a condition, since nothing could be done to liberate the prisoners. Representatives of the “Personal Angel” proposed a technology of interference in this situation, converting a condition into a problem. Anybody who cared could choose one prisoner from the list of a hundred and become his/her “personal angel” by organizing packages with warm clothes and food deliveries for this person. This Web initiative brought a problem of political prisoners high in the agenda and proposed a reasonable solution for the quality of maintenance in Belarussian prisons.

Another instance when the networking proved its efficiency was the gasoline initiative; it helped people to solve the problem of the shortage of currency after the currency crisis that Belarus suffered from March 2011 to September 2011. To buy dollars and euros, people organized in networks using the web-site Prokopovi.ch¹⁸. The site worked as an electronic currency exchange office.

In the situation of limited possibilities for political protests and political participation, networking became the main mode of Belarussian political life in 2011. All political rallies that happened or are scheduled in Minsk in summer–autumn 2011 (7, 8, 15 June, 3 July, 21 September, 28 September, 8 October, etc.) are announced through the Web networking.

As admitted in the part of the article devoted to the morphology of the Belarussian new media, the state did a lot to cancel such quality of the new media as anonymity. All providers in Belarus have to save data on

¹⁸ Permanent Web address: <http://prokopovi.ch>. [Interactive]. Seen 25 of September, 2011.

ID-numbers of users' modems and keep these data together with info about the Web sites visited and the activities performed on these sites. Absence of anonymity of users requires all activities done or organized through the new media in Belarus **to be soft and non-hostile** towards the Belarussian regime. This leads to the familiar results as extreme patrimonialism does with agenda setting capacities of the traditional media: the only way to solve the problem is to construct that problem as something that is interesting to the president or done (led) by the president, because, if you construct it in the way that opposes president's interests, the problem will never be solved positively: all groups and actors that have access to power will block it in the interests of political stability and safety. In case with Web activities, to present some problem in a "soft manner" means to prove that participation in solving it or the activities of posing this problem cannot be dangerous to the system. Otherwise, the activists that are posting this problem in their blogs or Facebook accounts will have a chance to repeat the fate of the arrested Web activist Paulukevich or the searched blogger Lipkovich. All networking activities (care about political prisoners, fight against high oil prices, electronic currency exchange office) were accurate in terms of political self-promoting. Those who proposed to care about prisoners did not present this project as a reason for some changes in Belarussian law implementations or political freedoms. They proposed only to help people who are under pressure because of their political views. Automobile activists who fought for the decrease of oil prices didn't tell that it was the government or the president that raised the prices or led the

country to such a bitter situation. All that they proposed to do was to ask Belneftkhim, the oil refining monopolist, to reduce the prices. And they repeated a number of times that the participants of street rallies should not take any political symbols with them or raise any political demands. The same thing was with currency exchange. In fact, all these three cases were an example of people joining together in using the new media to get their problems solved. If any of the organizers of these initiatives proposed to deal with high prices in the classical political manner, with demanding a new government, with attempts to propose their own representatives in the key roles of this government, such an initiative would simply fail in a system such as the Belarussian one, since the only way to make the president, a single node of the system who has an access to power, to act in a manner desired by you is to show him that there are also a lot of others who desire it.

As we have admitted, the classical media are incapable of creating social movements – in the circumstances when their owners are not interested, their readers are apolitical, the system is un-plural and there are no legal ways to protect you in a court in cases when this movement can make the government unhappy. But the Web 2.0 media, any site with a user-generated content, any Web-page of networking initiative as a community of people that do not know each other, do not have an "owner" and are organized only for pursuing their interests, can be extremely effective. The more people join, the more effective it is. And to make them join, one should make the joining safe – by creating the visibility of the soft character of what is done.

The initiatives that do not seem to pretend to political change provide a political change and influence the agenda. The main streets of Minsk, which had been blocked during the June 2011 car protests or massive appearance of silent protestors (June–July 2011) who didn't proclaim any political demands and just appeared on the streets to show the government that they exist and there are a lot of them, created some new mood and made power holders bear in mind that they should care more about political stability.

To effectively influence the agenda setting in authoritarian sultanistic regimes, the Web initiative should not only be structured according to the rules of networking, not only propose a thematic framework that will be safe for the participants to attract many of them, but also it should be massive in terms of the number of participants. The influence of a printed newspaper is determined by the quantity and quality of its readers. The influence of the Web 2.0 media or the agenda's level of any problem raised through the new media is determined exclusively by the number of participants that have subscribed to the event, followed the tweet or shared the Facebook page. This concerns not only the influence, but also security, since for the state it is simple to put under control another 100 of followers, but it is almost impossible to survey 40 000: militia or KGB simply do not have enough resources.

Conclusions

1. Deep in the idea of liberal technological determinism lies a dream about inventing the technology that will liberate society from any form of domination. The scientists charmed by this dream

hailed the appearance of the Internet, saying that the media obtained a new channel of [unstoppable] communication, which requires no paper or printing facilities or TV frequencies. Then they hailed the appearance of Web 2.0, saying that now society has obtained a new source of independence from the media domination, that now everybody is the media and everybody has one's own channel for spreading the unmanipulated knowledge and info. The media have transformed themselves under the influence of these new circumstances, they became interactive, they glued into one aggregation and digitalized, but that did not really help to increase their role in raising issues in such regimes as Belarussian. When every individual involved in communication becomes the media, he starts copying the logic of the media, which lies in attempts to soften co-relations with government and focus on one's own income instead of participating in agenda setting, proposing problems and solutions. The only way to dodge the suppressing power of the state for new medias is to cancel the characteristics of the old media they often bear as rudiments (classical ownership, centralized management, budgeting) and start using the features of the new media that help to avoid any form of control. These features are:

- decentralized infrastructure
 - broad number of content generators
 - absence of the management that can be horrified and thus manipulated.
2. To obtain a broad number of content generators, the media or Web initiative

that acts in an authoritarian sultanistic regime should stay away from the topics that are dangerous for the government or recognized as a threat by the state. This, on the one hand, reduces the possibilities of the new media to influence agenda setting, since the main problems that are high in agenda are always connected with governmental interests and policies. On the other hand, the new media and those who generate the content or organize a political participation through them can provide a “soft” interpretation of the problems that deeply disturb society, as was the case with the “Personal angel” initiative or gasoline prices.

3. The “old media” are recognized by the public policy theory as an actor of the agenda setting process, one of informal actors that has its own interests through the interests of its owners. This approach should be reconsidered for authoritarian sultanistic regimes, since the roles of classical media in taking decisions is minimal and owners often simply do not have their interests. As pointed out, when the media market is suppressed and the level of media freedom is minimal, when there are no legal mechanisms of protecting the media business, private owners become less interested in investing in the media; the media turn into a grant-receiving projects managed from abroad. Usually, their agenda (democratization, reforms, human rights) is simply not acceptable for the institutional agenda of such countries. At the same time, the small number of those who have access to power make agenda setting unclear; the absence of strong alternative groups

enables power not to inform the public on what is happening, what questions are raised and what solutions are proposed. This turns the “old media” into outsiders of the whole process.

4. At the same time, the classical approach of the public policy theory to agenda setting function of the new media in such regimes should be reconsidered on the level of subjectivity. The very moment when such media become an actor, they obtain all the weaknesses of the “old media” and come out of the game. To effectively participate in agenda setting, the new media should behave not as an actor, but as a scene for different actors to express their views on problems, conditions and their solutions. In the case of the “Personal angel” initiative, the Web site didn’t play its own political game; it invited a multitude of actors to join the proposed game. The situation was the same with the other Web 2.0 initiatives that showed their efficiency in Belarus, such as the electronic currency exchange “Prokopovich”, the oil price reduction campaign, the silent protest campaign. Facebook, VKontakte, www.prokopovi.ch were used as a playground for the real actors. In the March of Millions (silent protests) there were 40 000 of subscribers who signed for the events and by their participation showed that the whole initiative was serious and the problems and solutions that they would propose to agenda should be considered. Thus, every content generator should be considered as a separate actor. The media that hold the content are only a space for them.

5. The role of the new media in the agenda-setting process in Belarus lies in providing a tool for different (unconventional) interpretations of problems and solutions during the social constructing of problems. While the old media interpret problems in the way useful for the president and his interests, the new media have a courage, independence, and possibilities to provide alternative interpretations by different actors who emerge and exist in the public policy exclusively through the new media, since they are not seen in the “old media”, banned on TV and not welcomed in newspapers as their points of view might be too “politicized” or “partisan-looking”. “Old media” in such types of regimes exist as a system based on unwritten conventions, self-censorship and “invisible borders” that are not allowed to cross. The new media are not included in this system, since their structure is de-centralized, editors often do not know the content generators and have no tools to influence them.
6. The effectiveness of the new media for agenda-setting is limited by the country’s level of connectivity and sociology of connectivity. The more connected people visit Web 2.0 sites with grassroots journalism, sites that consist of a user-generated content, the higher is the new media’s potential to influence the agenda.
7. The above conclusions may be valid for agenda-setting in all mixed regimes of authoritarian sultanistic type and not only in Belarus. To provide rounding, another study could be in place, and it should be a comparative study focused on a number of post-soviet countries defined as holders of authoritarian sultanistic regimes.

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