

# Civil Resistance in the Digital Age: the Rise of Civic Tech in Belarus

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The digital age has added a new online dimension to human relations, creating new opportunities and posing new challenges. Building a people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented information society has been declared one of the United Nations member states' priorities.<sup>1</sup> The Internet has become “an indispensable tool for realising a range of human rights, combating inequality, and accelerating development and human progress”,<sup>2</sup> or, arguably, even a human right on its own terms.<sup>3</sup> However, as the digital age progresses, it is impossible not to notice how new technologies are used both with good and malign intentions.

For many democratic states one of the key questions regarding Internet governance is: “How can the interactions between the individual and the state be effectively digitised?” However, in autocracies the idea of e-governance is likely to cause more suspicion than enthusiasm among the general population. Although digitalisation in democracies is not completely free from concerns about privacy and use of personal data, it is primarily associated with a positive change towards more accessible, effective, and transparent digital ecosystems. Digitalisation in authoritarian states is usually associated with risks of governments exerting even more control over populations through increased surveillance and data collection.

Civil society technology, or civic tech, is one of the novel notions introduced by the digital age – a new form of social interaction and implementation of fundamental human rights. The dominating discourse that civic tech is about optimising and digitising public services is challenged by the examples of autocracies, like Belarus, where the rise of civic tech initiatives pre-, mid-, and post- the 2020 presidential election present examples of digital resistance to repressive state policies.

In this paper, we seek to analyse the notion of civic tech in Belarus, identify its distinctive features, the role it plays as a tool of digital resistance, and the impact it has on human rights.

## What is Civic Tech?

There is no uniform definition of civic tech, and existing definitions differ from each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter dated 7 October 2004 from the Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, [Report of the Geneva phase of the World Summit on the Information Society](#), A/C.2/59/3, 27 October 2004.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations General Assembly, [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue](#), A/HRC/17/27, 16 May 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Tatsiana Ziniakova, [The Right to Internet](#), Human Constanta, 28 July 2021.

- The Omidyar Network<sup>4</sup> broadly defines civic tech as “technologies that are deployed to enhance the relationship between people and government, by giving people more of a voice to participate in public decision making and/or to improve the delivery of services (usually by government) to people”, which “can be developed by either non-profit organisations or for-profit companies, or even by government itself.”<sup>5</sup>
- According to the founder of the 1991 Civic Tech Center,<sup>6</sup> civic tech refers to information technology solutions which link civil and government sectors. Civic tech encompasses services which ease the communication between citizens and state, and engage people in deliberating on issues of social importance.<sup>7</sup>
- The director of the Greenhouse of Social Technologies, Alexey Sidorenko, believes that civic tech in its broadest sense includes a whole range of technologies which help to increase transparency and accountability in relations between citizens and public institutions, and help to amplify citizens’ voices in the process of making socially important decisions.<sup>8</sup>
- UX designer Derek Poppert believes that civic tech has no clearly established borders – some actors in the civic tech field are non-profits, some are states or businesses. He suggests using a wide definition of civic tech as “technology used to directly improve or influence governance, politics, or socio-political issues.”<sup>9</sup>

Civic tech can take a number of forms: from an e-government system, created by the state to simplify its citizens’ interactions with state bodies and agencies (gov tech), to a type of online resistance to counteract repressive state policies.<sup>10</sup> In this paper, we are not seeking to exhaustively define civic tech, but instead to clarify its characteristic features. Civic tech, in all its varied forms, has two distinctive and essential features.

- **Civic tech aims to achieve a common social good and to realise human rights and freedoms**

Not every initiative launched online is aimed at solving a social problem or overcoming social injustice. An online shop may significantly ease the process of shopping, but its main goal is generating profit, not promoting human rights. At the same time, a protest art exhibition online, where one can purchase the works of persecuted artists, may qualify

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<sup>4</sup> The Omidyar Network is an American private philanthropic venture investment firm, specialising in impact and social entrepreneurship investment.

<sup>5</sup> Forbes, [What Is Civic Technology?](#), 19 September 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ukrainian civic tech ecosystem development platform.

<sup>7</sup> Delo.ua, [Civic tech: что такое гражданские технологии и зачем они нужны Украине](#), 11 January 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Теплица социальных технологий, [Civic tech – технологии, которые должны были разбудить в нас гражданскую культуру](#), 7 February 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Medium.com, [Navigating the field of civic tech](#), 16 August 2018.

<sup>10</sup> The role of digital initiatives and information technologies as protest tools became especially apparent during the Arab Spring. See, for instance, Al Jazeera, [Taking power through technology in the Arab Spring](#), 26 October 2012. Civic tech forms an important part of civil resistance in many protest hotspots, including [Hong Kong](#), [Lebanon](#), [Myanmar](#), and [Belarus](#).

as civic tech if its main goal remains raising awareness about a socially important issue, rather than making a profit.

A particular initiative's purpose and its founder's motivations may be subject to discussion and may influence whether such initiatives qualify as civic tech. For example, e-government projects implemented in authoritarian states to create more efficient systems of mass electronic surveillance and population control are unlikely to qualify as civic tech. At the same time, in functioning democracies, where people in power are part of civil society and interested in its continued development, the line between civic tech and gov tech gets blurred.

- **Civic tech is based on information society technologies**

A volunteer project where participants phone each other every week to gather and distribute food to people in need could not be called civic tech. Despite the clear social impact element, the technological element is lacking. At the same time, citizens self-organising through local Telegram chats to plan peaceful protests or volunteer at events does have this element.

Technologies used in civil society projects do not need to be revolutionary or innovative. In some cases, even the creation of a sustainable and secure online platform in the form of a website or Telegram channel, which serves a social purpose, can be a civic tech project. A relatively simple chatbot which tracks the imposition of fines for traffic violations in real time<sup>11</sup> can be as much of a civic tech initiative as a combination of complex technical solutions aimed at digitising the election process.<sup>12</sup>

Civic tech is a form of civil society transferring to online spaces, or civil society's digital incarnation. The mission of it is to create platforms for civil society cooperation and to realise the human rights of its members. Civic tech projects may emerge for the sake of convenience or out of an urgent need, and may be created and implemented with state participation or without such participation – and even as an act of resistance to state policies. For instance, in authoritarian states, in-person cooperation within civil society circles may be difficult or even unsafe, while online activism allows civil society actors to protect their anonymity and safety.

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<sup>11</sup> [Opendatabot](#).

<sup>12</sup> Civic Tech Field Guide, [Voting and elections](#).

## Belarusian Phenomenon

Belarus provides a vivid example of civil society initiative implementation without state interaction. The violation of voters' rights during the 2020 presidential campaign<sup>13</sup> and the violent crackdown on peaceful protesters that followed the announcement of Alexander Lukashenko's contested victory<sup>14</sup> have become key factors in civic tech development.

Online initiatives allowed Belarusians to verify and count votes in the presidential election, document crimes committed by law enforcement authorities and instances of unfair trials, provide assistance to political prisoners, set up online professional unions, and discuss new forms of protest. Civic tech projects made it possible for citizens to cooperate safely and effectively in order to realise their human rights, which are denied to them by the state.

### *Civic tech initiatives for electoral rights*

Presidential elections in Belarus are notorious for routine falsifications and violations of international standards.<sup>15</sup> However, in the summer of 2020 a series of initiatives – aimed at ensuring a transparent election process, preventing human rights violations, and documenting already committed infractions – were launched.

- The Honest People platform, acting primarily through its Telegram channel and website, called upon people to apply to election vote-counting commissions or become election observers, and guided people through the necessary procedures.
- The ZUBR platform collected and published information on the composition of election vote-counting commissions at each of the polling stations, allowing voters and observers to share information about the violations they witnessed.
- Without the lawful possibility of conducting exit polls in Belarus, the platform Golos, with the help of a Telegram chatbot, collected and verified information on the actually collected votes, comparing it to the official data published by the authorities.

The Honest People, ZUBR, and Golos initiatives' ecosystem became an “alternative Central

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<sup>13</sup> Настоящее Время, [Фальсификации на трети участков: "Голос" поставил под сомнение результаты выборов в Беларуси, объявленные ЦИК](#), 11 August 2020; The Washington Post, [‘Belarus Poll Workers Describe Fraud in Aug. 9 Election’](#), 1 September 2020; OSCE, Wolfgang Benedek, [‘OSCE Rapporteur’s Report under the Moscow Mechanism on Alleged Human Rights Violations related to the Presidential Elections of 9 August 2020 in Belarus’](#), 29 October 2020, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Council, [Situation of human rights in Belarus in the context of the 2020 presidential election](#), Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 19 March 2021.

<sup>15</sup> OSCE/ODIHR, [Election Observation Mission Final Report, Presidential Election in the Republic of Belarus](#), 11 October 2015; OSCE/ODIHR, [Election Observation Mission Final Report, Presidential Election in the Republic of Belarus](#), 19 December 2010; OSCE/ODIHR, [Election Observation Mission Final Report, Presidential Election in the Republic of Belarus](#), 19 March 2006; OSCE/ODIHR, [Election Observation Mission Final Report, Presidential Election in the Republic of Belarus](#), 9 September 2001.

Electoral Commission”<sup>16</sup> for Belarusians who did not trust the existing electoral system.

After the active phase of the pre-election and election processes, Honest People, ZUBR, and Golos continued to operate, organically transforming their functions.

- Golos transformed into a platform for conducting public opinion polls, including a poll on the need to conduct negotiations launched by the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya with the *de facto* authorities controlling the Belarusian state.<sup>17</sup>
- ZUBR, in November 2020, launched a new project on the civil control of judicial systems, which monitors court cases, and collects and systematises information about judges and punishments imposed on peaceful protesters.<sup>18</sup>
- Honest People transformed into an ‘umbrella’ initiative, uniting civil society and helping to launch new projects with a civic tech element, such as Honest University, Peramen, Center for Helping People on Strike, First Mutual Aid, Voter Fraud Case, and Crime Accomplices.

It is precisely the functioning of civic tech initiatives, aimed at implementing the right to vote and be elected, that allowed citizens to acquire credible information on the presidential campaign and be involved in political processes. Accessible and user-friendly online platforms allowed people, who used to be politically passive,<sup>19</sup> to realise their role as political subjects, actors of democratic change, and beneficiaries of human rights systems.

#### *Civic tech initiatives for crime documentation*

The 23.34, August 2020, BYPOL, Consolidated Book of Documenting Crimes, and Crime Accomplices initiatives are similar in their main function – documenting the violations of national and international law in Belarus – but different in the methods employed. For instance, the BYPOL initiative, launched by former Belarusian law enforcement officers, publishes insider information on the authorities’ strategies for countering protest; for instance, they have shared information on the creation of concentration camps for protesters<sup>20</sup> and shared evidence on the

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<sup>16</sup> Meduza, [Активисты в Беларуси умело используют интернет для самоорганизации, а власти — просто выключают его. Кто из них победит?](#), 2 September 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya calls for negotiations with international mediation to peacefully resolve the crisis in Belarus](#), 18 March 2021.

<sup>18</sup> TUT.BY, [Белорусы создали интерактивную карту судов, где видна статистика штрафов и суток ареста](#), 24 November 2020; TUT.BY, [Именно эти судьи дали больше всего «суток» по административным делам. Список](#), 29 March 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandra St John Murphy, Benno Zogg, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, [Belarus: There Is Such Thing as Society](#), 4 December 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Amnesty International, [Belarus: Leaked audio allegedly exposing top Interior Minister official ordering use of illegal force against peaceful protesters must be effectively investigated](#), 15 January 2021.

link between top-ranking Belarusian officials and the murders of political opponents.<sup>21</sup> The August 2020 and 23.34 initiatives concentrate primarily on collecting the testimonies of the victims of political repression. The Consolidated Book of Documenting Crimes initiative, launched by the National Anti-Crisis Management organisation and BYPOL, collects the testimonies of victims and witnesses, as well as reports and confessions from law enforcement officers for the purposes of future judicial proceedings.

In a situation when legislative, executive, and judicial branches of power exist outside of the checks and balances system and form part of the same repressive machine, citizens cannot count on restoring justice within the walls of Belarusian courts and police stations. The cycle of ‘arbitrary detention, unfair trial, inhumane treatment’ has been completed by many Belarusians.

Before the digital age, information about mass repression was much easier to classify or delete. In the 21st century, mass repression and human rights violations leave a digital trace. Online initiatives have allowed the documentation of human rights violations to form an evidence base, which is needed to launch mechanisms of state and individual criminal responsibility.

### *Civic tech initiatives for providing assistance to vulnerable groups*

There are initiatives that are aimed at providing direct assistance to vulnerable individuals, groups, and organisations, suffering from state repression. For instance, Digital Solidarity is a secure online platform to fundraise and support verified civil society initiatives in a transparent manner, while Legal Hub is an anonymised and secure online platform, where victims of political repression can receive free legal advice.

Such platforms are to some degree mirroring the system of traditional public services, which are made effectively unavailable to people in Belarus. In a situation when open fundraising for a social cause is at risk of being qualified as ‘financing extremism’ under Belarusian criminal law, a platform like Digital Solidarity becomes a tool of moving the fundraising process onto a secure platform, which is out of reach for the Belarusian authorities. Likewise, in a situation, when laws on legal practices are amended to effectively prohibit private legal practice and lawyers are disbarred *en masse*, a platform like Legal Hub allows lawyers to continue providing legal advice to victims of human rights violations committed by Belarusian authorities.

### **Distinctive features of Belarusian civic tech**

The Belarusian civic tech ecosystem, formed largely during the course of mass protests in 2020, has several distinctive features.

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<sup>21</sup> BelarusFeed, [BYPOL publishes own investigation, names those allegedly involved in Roman Bondarenko’s death](#), 27 January 2021; Charter97, [Preventive blow launched against Lukashenka’s foreign special purpose formation](#), 15 February 2021.

- **Horizontality:** Belarusian civic tech consists of initiatives made by citizens for citizens. Digital initiatives are primarily aimed not at optimising the interaction of citizens and the state, but at citizens' self-organisation against a background of repressive state policies.
- **Decentralisation:** Due to self-organisation trends, initiatives often emerged almost spontaneously, with no centralised organisation. As protests evolved, coordination centres appeared that engaged in uniting and systematising civic technologies.
- **Telegram-centrism:** The majority of Belarusian civic tech has an online presence in Telegram messenger. Some resort to anonymous chatbots to collect information or conduct public opinion surveys, some maintain Telegram channels, and some use the Telegram chat function for coordination. Telegram, for many Belarusians, combines the functions of a social network and a media outlet. However, the reliance on Telegram as a key platform for communication and expression of political views also entails concerns for users' security and privacy, given recent criticism of the app.<sup>22</sup>
- **Adaptability:** A lot of civic tech organically transformed their functions as the protest movement progressed. For instance, the Golos platform, initially created to count and verify votes during the presidential election, became used for conducting public opinion polls, while the ZUBR platform launched a project on civil control of the justice system.

### **Belarusian authorities' reaction to digital resistance**

Despite the highly developed information technology industry in the country, Belarusian officials often do not have a high level of digital literacy. Many state apparatus representatives are not active users of online resources. In fact, at the start of 2021, Lukashenko predicted the decline of the Internet and the flourishing of television.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, some forces within the apparatus clearly understand that information technologies may be used by the protesters for self-organisation and getting relevant information. In order to prevent the coordination and self-organisation of civil society, Belarusian authorities have adopted various measures, which affect civic tech initiatives.

- **Internet shutdowns:** Belarusian authorities have blocked citizens' access to the mobile Internet during peaceful protests. Several Belarusian and international human rights organisations have informed the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus on the impermissibility of shutdowns under international human rights law.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Forbes, [Yes, Telegram Really Is 'Dangerous' For You](#), 22 April 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Reform.by, [Лукашенко предрек увядание интернета](#), 16 January 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Access Now, Agora, Article 19, Human Constanta, International Media Support (IMS), and Internet Protection Society, UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Belarus, [Call for Inputs Pursuant to UN Human Rights Council Resolution 44/19](#), 19 February 2021.

- **Criminalisation and extremism:** Many civic society initiatives are seen as extremist under Belarusian law, and any independent civic tech initiative is at risk of being labeled ‘extremist’. The consequences of such actions may entail both administrative responsibility for the distribution of extremist materials and criminal responsibility if individuals behind the initiative are recognised as an ‘extremist formation’ under Belarusian law.<sup>25</sup>
- **Online propaganda:** The popularity of pro-democratic Telegram channels has urged pro-government forces to wage an information war on the same platform. Telegram channels Yellow Leaks and Pool of the First regularly paint the protest movement in a bad light, while state-controlled media pay for anti-protest ads on YouTube.
- **Cyberattacks:** In March 2021 alleged pro-government forces committed cyberattacks against the Petitions.by portal,<sup>26</sup> the Telegram accounts of Nasha Niva journalists,<sup>27</sup> and lawyer Dmitriy Laevskiy, who represented high-profile political prisoners.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the low level of Belarusian officials’ digital literacy, which makes it hard to call Belarus a “digital autocracy”,<sup>29</sup> the tendency to use new technologies as a tool of political repression is currently developing. The Belarusian company Sinezis is on the European Union’s sanctions list because of the alleged use of facial recognition technologies in order to identify and persecute protesters.<sup>30</sup> Information technologies are already being used to spread propaganda, while more and more online civil initiatives are labeled ‘extremist’.

The rapid development of civic tech in Belarus inevitably entails a state response and a counter-effort to silence civil society. While at the moment Belarusian authorities are slow in navigating cyberspace and are losing the information war, in the future they may use online means to continue repression; for instance, by committing cyberattacks against activists or accessing their personal data. However, such risks may only stimulate advances in civic tech and encourage online initiatives to adopt security- and privacy-centred approaches to civic tech.

### Conclusions and implications

Technological progress can entail risks for civil society. Many states use technologies to control society and curb protest movements: they collect citizens’ personal data, control Internet traffic, introduce intrusive technologies for face recognition, block access to online resources, commit cyberattacks against ‘unwanted’ online platforms, and criminalise any form of digital activism.

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<sup>25</sup> Article 19, Human Constants, [Belarus: Right to freedom of expression and ‘extremism’ restrictions](#), November 2020).

<sup>26</sup> TUT.by, [Все же взлом. В Petitions.by рассказали, что произошло](#), 25 March 2021.

<sup>27</sup> DW, [В Беларуси взломали Telegram-канал издания "Наша Нива"](#), 26 March 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Naviny.by, [Адвокат Дмитрий Лаевский сообщил о попытке взлома его телеграм-аккаунта](#), 26 March 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Freedom House, [The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism](#), 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Kharon, [Belarusian Facial Recognition Software Rebranded To Enter U.S. Market](#), 22 March 2021.



Such violations of the right to privacy, freedom of expression, and the right to liberty and security of person may also be conducted by private companies – actions for which states may sometimes be held responsible under principles of due diligence. The tendency towards digital authoritarianism causes concern in the human rights defenders community.

Tech-based methods to preserve anonymity online – data encryption, overcoming state firewalls – have become vitally important for protest movements across the world. In an atmosphere of tyranny and repression, digital solutions give civil society a way to consolidate and build alternative networks and institutions to counterbalance state-controlled ones, and create an ‘alternative digital state’. As technologies progress, the role of civic tech as an instrument of civil resistance and as a means of implementing human rights is bound to increase.