

# **The Role of Internet Technology in the Development of Pro-democracy Movement**

**The Cases of Protests  
in Ukraine in 2013–2014  
and in Belarus in 2020**

Principal study findings

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**This study aims to investigate the functioning of Information and communications technology (ICT) in civil society, especially in terms of promoting civic participation on the way to the democratization of political regimes. We studied protests in Ukraine in 2013-2014 and the ongoing protests in Belarus in 2020.**

**The main sources that served our study are structured, in-depth interviews with experts (14 people), open statistics on the use of ICT during the protests on the Internet, media coverage, and academic publications. We used all this data to perform a comparative analysis of the use of ICT in protest activities.**

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# Principal Study Findings

The main prerequisite for unfolding of the protests in Ukraine in 2013-2014 and in Belarus in 2020 was the **governments defying the expectations of society** on issues related to both countries' strategic geopolitical choice (Ukraine) and basic political freedoms and social protection in particular in responses to challenges of COVID-19 (Belarus). The social and political circumstances that caused the emotion of protest in the society were intensified by **considerable Internet penetration and the prevalence of certain ICT instruments in the populations of these countries.**

While the development of **Ukrainian protests took place at the same time as an increase in the use of social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, the protests in Belarus are taking place at the same time as the decentralized messenger platforms such as Telegram are growing in popularity,** which determines certain characteristic features of both protest movements.

However, **both Ukrainian and Belarusian protests demonstrate characteristics of decentralized social and political movements that appear and develop with the help of ICTs that enable mass communication and grassroots self-organization of participants.** Such protest movements are usually characterized as 'mass', 'spontaneous', 'leaderless' etc. And although experts and activists mostly agree on the given definitions, the assessment of such characteristics usually prompts lively debate.

Upon analyzing our experts' responses, it is possible to say that the **protests in Ukraine and Belarus represent defensive reactions of society against the violation of both the 'social contract' and the basic rights and freedoms of the people.** It is not surprising that while protesters' demands start out as more political (the return of Ukraine to a pro-European geopolitical course and repeat presidential elections in Belarus), calls eventually shift towards restoring justice and punishing those guilty of using force against peaceful protesters. These calls increase proportionately to the use of force by the regimes, finally turning into the demand for the resignation of the government and/or the president of the country.

In the digital space, **decentralized local communities based on ICT without clear leadership or even necessarily offline acquaintance between participants became "centers of democratic power"**, that according to Gene Sharp include, among others, the institutions of civil society. In these digital communities, the important gatekeeper role is played by moderators and administrators, and the repressions of the government are mainly aimed at them, as it happened in Belarus.

At the same time, because of their **decentralized structure and lack of clear leadership, both protest movements have faced problems developing long-term strategy and consolidated vision or ideas for the systemic transformation of society in the form of 'future projects.'** Even though certain groups that have taken part in the protests offered their long-term ideas (such as electronic democracy in Belarus), as a rule, they do not end up on the general agenda of the protests.

Looking back on events in Ukraine, our experts **evaluate the decentralized structure and lack of clear leadership rather positively** in interviews, comparing Euromaidan with a modern approach to management that involves horizontal structures and agile approach. In this sense, Maidan resembled modern start-ups with many crowdfunders. At the same time, our experts **also identify weaknesses of protests in Ukraine, such as the situational actions and reactive demands of protesters**. They attribute these issues to the movement's **lack of ability to form a united political force capable of articulating and adopting a clear agenda of post-revolution reforms** and ensuring their further implementation.

In Belarus, with its more repressive regime and higher risks for protest participants, the movement's **decentralized structure and lack of clear leadership also receive mostly positive evaluation from our respondents**. Since these features have been key to ensuring the flexibility and persistence of the protests and make it impossible to 'decapitate' the movement.

In this way, **the decentralization of Belarusian protests through ICTs allows activists to identify themselves and communicate when and how to conduct their protest activities at a local level** – hang a flag between buildings, paint graffiti on its wall, or initiate a 'yard march' in the evening after work – where several dozen people will participate to be filmed and then viewed by hundreds of thousands online.

**Both Ukrainian and Belarusian experts agree that the disproportionate use of force by the government has been the most potent catalyst of the protest movements in the two countries**, and as a rule results in even more resistance in response. This effect is especially enhanced by the Internet technologies, as they provide the opportunity to multiply protest in a digital environment based on 'tsunami principle': when activists without prior agreement create decentralized online communities or make existing communities newly relevant and through them mobilize the locals for participating in the protest activities.

This way, **in modern protests that are also conducted in the digital space, government violence does not necessarily lead to suppression of protest, but may have the opposite effect**. Violent repression becomes a powerful trigger to multiply the protest, as images and videos of government brutality proliferate in the country's digital space, which further increases mobilization for participating in the physical space.

The geography of the protests impacts how their tactics are formed. In the Ukrainian protests of 2013–2014, protest activity spread over many cities, but the **Maidan (Square) of Independence in the capital became its center**. The ability of the protesters to hold Maidan as a symbolic space of freedom by preventing it from being seized by law enforcement transformed into the central story of the protest movement. On the other hand, the constant violent repression of protests by the authoritarian regime in Belarus led **protesters to choose not to have a unified center as a main place of protest in physical space**. Moreover, the country also had negative experiences of suppressed protests in Belarus in 2006 and 2010, when they were located centrally on Kastyryckaja (October) Square.

**Protests in the digital era are accompanied by the creation of a joint symbolic space that is supported by ICT**. These protests encourage resistance through symbols and visuals in the form of memes, posters, and videos, and are oriented around ICT instruments to both disseminate and crowdsource such visuals. This further allows for the mobilization of supporters for direct or remote (fundraising) participation in the protest.

The experience of Belarus also shows that **in 2020, authoritarian governments have a wide range of digital instruments and methods of using ICTs against protesters.** From Internet shutdowns and surveilling activists to hacking accounts and seizing digital communication platforms – Belarusian law enforcement officers have been employing the experience they have amassed over the past two decades using Internet technologies against members of opposition, human rights activists, and independent media.

However, like in Ukraine in 2013–14, **vertical structures of the Belarusian state struggle to effectively resist the new formats of horizontal decentralized protest, despite their experience and ICT infrastructure.** Thus, the Belarusian government resorts to suppressing protests with force more and more, which has continued to prompt the protesters' further resistance.

In the context of long-term democratic transformations, **decentralized protests, which are later identified in the historical memory of the people as revolutions, are capable of achieving their success and leading to a change in the political regime.** At the same time, the agenda of the protests rarely foresees developing long-term goals, and the role of ICT in mobilization, coordination, and spreading information is in greater demand than long-term planning. **The protests of the digital era can manifest as powerful instruments for restoring justice and resetting the social contract between the people and the state, but the success of these protests does not guarantee long-term democratic transformations of the country.**

Full text of the study is available here: in Ukrainian [bit.ly/researchUA5](https://bit.ly/researchUA5), and in Russian [bit.ly/researchBY5](https://bit.ly/researchBY5)

## About the author

In the recent years, Vitali Moroz has worked as Head of New Media at the NGO “Internews-Ukraine”, where he was responsible for the development of innovative projects for journalists and civil society. In particular, Vitali led a project on advocacy of the [Internet Freedom](#) in Ukraine and the Digital Security School [DSS380](#).

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