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HOW TO DEVELOP CONNECTIVE DIGITAL PLATFORM FOR URBAN ACTIVISM IN UNFREE COUNTRY: CASE OF “ROBIM GOOD” PROJECT

This article aims to analyze the “Robim Good” project – a digital platform for sharing urban knowledge and info about upcoming local campaigns. A vacuum among urban initiatives was established in Belarus because of the repressive policy of the authoritarian regime. As a result, around 965 non-profit organizations have been shut down. Nonetheless, there was a demand from activists to create a safe managerial organization that focused on urbanism. The “Robim Good” project became a solution. The research question is as follows: what is the value orientation of the analyzed digital platform that attracts new participants? The paper applies the value-based approach in NGO engagement. The analysis shows that one of the main promoted values and key characteristics of the digital ecosystem is security, which is directed at overcoming the dangers of the unpredictable regime. Subsequently, “Robim Good” has been able to engage volunteers and survive after a year of activity.

Keywords: digital transformation, platform, digital ecosystem, online participation, authoritarianism

The digital transformation of non-profit organizations has been accelerated since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world. The digitalization of non-governmental organizations in Belarus has been intensified due to state repression that has targeted civil society since the protests in 2020. Primarily, online participatory tools offer opportunities to people who may not be able to attend offline meetings because of safety reasons, distance, or physical constraints (Afzalan and Muller, 2018, p. 162). Regarding Belarusian NGOs, employees relocate abroad to avoid any risk that is specifically associated with the repressive policy. Despite such circumstances as prominent distances among the staff and volunteers, some organizations continue to operate by taking advantage of the benefit of technology. For instance, Belarusian ecological NGO “Ecohome” was eliminated by the authorities after a notice from the Ministry of Justice. Its managers (some of whom were detained or interrogated in 2020) decided to relocate the office from Minsk to Vilnius, consequently digitalizing its activities. This fact allowed them to continue monitoring air-quality and radiation levels

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with the help of a volunteer network – communication within which happened in Telegram chats. Besides transferring special equipment for measurements by mail, “Ecohome” consults civilians on their ecological rights, organizing free eco-consultation service “Green Phone” on Telegram, Viber, Instagram, Odnoklassniki, VK, Facebook, via email, and in a Telegram chatbot. Without a doubt, the main reasons for the relocation and subsequent digitalization were to escape persecution and facilitate engagement across geographies and citizens.

Why are Belarusian NGOs in danger? The thing is, the authoritarian regime stigmatizes and recognizes independent formations as drivers for electoral revolution. “These vile 1500 non-profit organizations [...] it’s clear what they have been doing. They were financed from outside [...],” declared Belarusian dictator A. Lukašenka (DW, 2021). With this, he has signaled to the apparatus to start the so-called *verification* of NGOs. The same signal that was disseminated on TV and the Internet came from a close circle around the politician; for example, from the ex-Foreign Minister U. Makiej: “Any further tightening of sanctions will lead to the fact that civil society will cease to exist. And it will be, I think, absolutely justified in this situation [...]” (Belsat, 2021). Thus, the ‘institutional uncertainty’ of authoritarianism forces the apparatus to keep horizontal threats at bay and to continue its systematic repression against civil society since the protests after the fraudulent presidential election of 2020 (Schedler, 2013, p. 47). As a consequence, more than 40,000 people have passed through the detention system, 11,000 criminal cases have been opened, 3120 people are in prison due to the protests, 10 or so people were killed because of their political views, and around 965 non-profit organizations have been closed or are still in the process of elimination (Lawtrend, 2022).

On the one hand, some of the eliminated NGOs were replaced by pro-authoritarian simula-cra whose role is to structure a ‘disciplinary society.’ For example, human-rights group “Center Systematic Human Rights” mostly criticizes the policy of EU states instead of focusing on the situation in Belarus. On the other hand, NGOs that are specialized in urbanism (such as Miensk Urban Platform or the “Take Care” project) stopped activity and were not replaced at the time, creating a vacuum among urban initiatives. Nonetheless, there was a demand from activists who were located in Belarus and forced to move online to launch a managerial and consulting organization. The “Robim Good” urban project was initiated due to this fact.

This article poses the research question as follows: what is the value orientation of the analyzed digital platform that attracts new participants?

Content analysis and a short online survey were applied. The former covered social media posts; for instance, 18 promotional Instagram posts were selected and uploaded to QDA Miner software. Words that were associated with safety like “security,” “anonymous,” “verification,” and “Telegram chatbot” (a chat platform that provides anonymity) were counted and coded. The latter consisted of a short online survey on the perception of urban volunteer opportunities in Belarus and was conducted on the “Robim Good” channels (Telegram and Instagram). This contained the following question: “Are you ready to engage in volunteer campaigns?” The options to answer were as follows: “I’m ready,” “Yes, but it depends on what kind of campaign,” “No, I don’t have time,” or “No, I’m worried about my safety.” In all, 137 people took part in the short survey, which was 6% of the total audience.

The paper applies the value-based approach in the NGOs’ engagement to the analysis of the volunteers’ participation in urban campaigns. The acceptance of a technological platform

basically relies on the fact that “NGO volunteers are more interested in the values of the organization itself and the social causes that it defends, rather than on the visual image or the brand name” (Saura et al., 2020). The iconographic design, the identity of the web pages, and the visual content played minor roles. Usually, the visual identity of a platform merely contributes to the online reputation of NGOs that can positively affect organizational promotion. Volunteers perceive the utility of a digital platform because of the content and words that form the messages that they share: “These messages can influence users in different ways about their intention of use and behavior when they interact with the content on digital ecosystems” (Saura et al., 2020). From this point of view, the values of a digital platform become a crucial component in attracting volunteers and promoting urban campaigns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital participation and platform studies are well-developed topics. Prominent contributors exist, such as scientists J. van Dijk and A. van Deursen. According to them, the motives for spending time on the Internet are more related to shopping and career rather than social interaction. Besides, the motive for connecting with virtual groups is indicated as one of the lowest motivations (van Dijk and Deursen, 2014, p. 517). Another issue is the low effectiveness of online conversations and debates:

Frequently, the debate was dominated by a few people. Finally, there was not much pressure to come to a conclusion, let alone reach consensus in electronic debates as compared to face-to-face discussions. There were only weak attempts to resolve a collectively perceived problem (van Dijk, 2013, p. 7).

The argumentation definitely needs to be examined by the “Robim Good” case. Nevertheless, certain researchers evaluate digital participation as producing social effects after all:

The literature currently suggests that, in many cases, online and offline activism correlate, either because people’s online and offline behaviors are intertwined or because one person’s online activism can mobilize others for offline protest (Greijdanus et al., 2020).

It is believed that online activism can facilitate offline actions through advertising and management. For example, some of the non-profit organizations in Spain recruit volunteers with the help of digital tools, thereby promoting offline projects and achieving organizational goals. The recruiting process is successful if some favorable conditions are met: NGOs place importance on the values of an organization and are not centered on the graphical nor design elements (Saura et al., 2020). Researcher D. Mercea revealed the significant contribution of online communication to the mobilization of the unaffiliated in Romania and the UK. The scientist concluded:

At the high-risk event, the unaffiliated seemed to have a sense that using the Internet to prepare for their participation had influenced their decision to attend. At a low-risk protest, the unaffiliates relied exclusively on the Internet to glean information about the event and interact with the organizers (Mercea, 2012).

Meanwhile, platform studies highlight how platforms' affordances simultaneously allow and constrain expression as well as how technical, social, and economic concerns determine platforms' structures, functions, and use (Plantin, 2018, p. 298). At the same time, platform studies show how platforms recalibrate how citizens are used to know, interact, document, and traverse (Barns, 2019, p. 10). They are simply represented as a mode of digital socio-spatiality. For example, the platform model of Uber acts as a standard for future transport services. Airbnb releases "latent space" within existing buildings and allows tourists to be able to "live like a local" (Barns, 2019, p. 5).

Thus, the "Robim Good" case lies at the intersection of different optics, such as digital participation and platform studies. However, there is a gap in the literature that is dedicated to the comprehensive research of digital platforms in unfree countries (Greijdanus et al., 2020). This is why the current research contributes to the topics of digital participation, platform studies, and comparative authoritarianism.

DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM OF "ROBIM GOOD" BETS ON SECURITY

A digital platform is a centrally controlled and designed system that constitutes a model for innovative products (Plantin et al., 2018, p. 299). Some of the basic characteristics of a platform are as follows: "many-to-many" form of content-sharing between producers and consumers, facilitation and maximization of interaction, co-creation, and participation (Barns, 2018, p. 4). "Robim Good" is a platform on the robimgood.org website that was launched on September 21, 2021, for exchanging urban experiences and information about upcoming local campaigns among citizens, local activists, and experts. The reason for the launch was described in an interview by the manager of the project (his/her name and surname are not mentioned for security reasons):

In general, there was a request from activists since they had been saying that there was no safe platform that would collect initiatives (so that you know what kind of initiatives you can join). Moreover, we wanted to help them with our expertise to implement their projects, since most often it's difficult to understand where to start, where to go, and to whom to write appeals, how to challenge municipal decisions and monitor their adoption.

As seen, one of the purposes of the project is to help citizens by providing expertise on improving living conditions in their yards, streets, districts, villages, towns, or cities. Not only does the website function, but the whole digital ecosystem does. In short, the digital ecosystem consists of interconnected sets of services through which users fulfill various cross-sectoral needs in one integrated experience (Chung et al., 2020). Thus, the urban project is represented by different channels with different purposes that are combined under urban topics (Tab. 1).

First, the platform provides step-by-step consultations and legal and documentary support for users who make requests on a Telegram chatbot or directly through a moderator on Telegram (the link is provided on the website). According to the manager, the top two requests for consultations were as follows: "How to improve my yard" and "How to make a mural in my neighborhood." Experts package textual support with information that concerns legal

grounds, responsible institutions, and opportunities to improve a space. At the same time, they draft an appeal that could be sent online to these institutions, asking officials to improve a common space by using local budgets.

Table 1. Digital ecosystem of “Robim Good”

Channels	Links	Tasks
Website	robimgood.org	publishing of initiatives, documents, and experiences on “Map,” link to chatbot
Telegram	t.me/robimgood_bot t.me/robim_good_chat t.me/robim_good t.me/Robimgoodmoderator	step-by-step consultations, discussions, volunteer network, verification, posting
Instagram	instagram.com/robim.good	posts on urban topics, video reviews, advertisement, communication
Facebook	facebook.com/robimgoodpage	posting
Zoom	team sends link by email after registration and verification	#urbantalks, online meetings, discussions

“Robim Good” is similar to Public Service 115.бел to a certain extent, whose function is to collect requests from citizens about infrastructural problems in cities and react to them. However, there are at least three issues with the service: it does not always respond, it belongs to the repressive state, and it does not promote initiatives.

Second, one of the aims of “Robim Good” is to facilitate the interaction and participation of users by motivating them to share and publish their initiatives and experiences in campaigning on the interactive “map” (robimgood.org/#map). According to the robimgood.org website, 32 active initiatives are currently on the interactive map. All of these initiatives passed through the procedures of verification and consultation. There are already completed projects: for instance, the improvement of the forest park in Navapolack, the organization of an animal shelter in Barysau, the renovation of a dog-walking area in Navapolack, and the yard updating in Vierchniadzvinsk. Most of these began online and were accompanied by local volunteer support. Posted on the “map,” social networks, and Telegram, the initiatives are usually promoted by “Robim Good” if the applicants do not mind. This means that the team looks for volunteers, media coverage, and financing. With this, applicants can also easily post their successfully completed campaigns, attach accompanying legal documentation for solutions to problems, and join initiatives as volunteers by making requests through a chatbot or moderator.

Third, “Robim Good” has its own initiated campaigns; for example, the campaign against destroying a Soviet mosaic in Minsk, participation in a design-concept competition in Viciebsk, online lectures, and offline volunteering actions for improving the local infrastructures of Belarusian cities. Local authorities were ordered to paint over a Soviet mosaic in Minsk; because of this, the team organized a campaign to protect a mosaic. The appeal to the municipality was prepared together with the online community and signed online by about 300 citizens.

A competition that was dedicated to reorganizing public spaces in Viciebsk was announced by the local municipality in 2022. The campaign united the team of “Robim Good”, volunteers, and locals in elaborating a design concept for Victory Square. Corresponding to the manager, the campaign achieved results from online discussions via Zoom, and a design concept was already completed. The educational component is represented by public lectures called #urbantalks, whose roles are connecting Belarusian urbanists and activists. There are lectures and seminars on urban development in Belarus that are promoted by targeting on Instagram. The topics that were discussed on Zoom were dedicated to comfortable cities, citizen participation in Belarus, cycling in the EU and Belarus, and public debate as a mechanism of influence.

How exactly does the “Robim Good” team convince its users of the safety of this platform? The answer is this: by promoting security, which is practically achieved by value orientation, verifications of actors, and Telegram-based usage. According to the content analysis, “Robim Good” promotes the value of safety. A software QDA Miner showed that there are 13 mentions of “security” (8 times) and other words that are associated with safety, such as “anonymous” (twice), “verification” (once), and “Telegram chatbot” (twice) within 18 promotional Instagram posts (8 posts also mentioned the value of security). There are mentions on the website as well. “All ‘Robim Good’ initiatives run exclusively within the law system of the Republic of Belarus. A chatbot does not ask to necessarily leave your data,” claims the website.

Key characteristics also mean that a request in a chatbot can be made anonymously, and consultations are completely free. All requests (and volunteers who are willing to join campaigns) are verified by a moderator through interviews, and double checked. It is worth saying that Telegram is considered to be a secure means of communication and the second-most-popular messenger in Belarus (Auseyushkin, 2021). It provides a confident privacy policy: all of the stored data is heavily encrypted so that even local Telegram engineers cannot gain access. Furthermore, the “Robim Good” project keeps its agenda outside political topics to avoid the unwanted attention of the authorities. This is controlled by a moderator and a copywriter. “For security reasons, do not repost from channels recognized as «extremist»”, t.me/robim_good_chat says.

To sum up, the urban digital platform is primarily about interactions among citizens, activists, and experts to facilitate engagement and urban knowledge. Resulting from digital participation, the platform develops the self-organization of communities and achieves certain goals by using a secure digital ecosystem.

CREDIBILITY

It is worth mentioning that the level of the participation of Belarusians in NGO activities is low. As reported by the Center for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), “only about 4% of respondents had worked for a non-governmental organization or a political party” (ZOiS Report 3, 2021, p. 12). According to ZOiS, Belarusian society is characterized by low social trust (ZOiS Report 3, 2021, p. 13). In such a context that is conditioned by state repression against civil society, an NGO operates.

A low level of social trust is affected by the authoritarian regime that keeps citizens at bay and prevents initiatives and community-building. This is why a digital platform should

focus on security issues, verifications, and trusted channels to convince users of the greater advantages of participation rather than non-participation. How are messages effectively sent to users and volunteers to convey credibility? “Robim Good” relies on a value-based approach, providing a secure digital ecosystem and predictable organizational behavior. The project promotes itself mostly by targeted ads on Instagram, by collaboration with secure accounts, and media that is “permitted” by the authorities (such as CityDog.io and Realt.by).

Based on the results of an online survey entitled “Are you ready to engage in volunteer campaigns?” on Instagram (2140 followers) and Telegram (145 followers) in August 2022, the majority of the respondents were ready to become volunteers (59 and 84%, respectively). The answers were represented as follows: “I’m ready” (both 33%), “Yes, but it depends on what kind of campaign” (26% and 51%, respectively), “No, I don’t have a time” (19% and 8%, respectively), and “No, I’m worrying about my security” (22% and 8%, respectively). In all, 137 people took part in the short survey (which was 6% of the total audience).

Even though the audiences were mostly from Minsk and between 25 and 34 years old, the results showed differences between social networks and messengers: Telegram has more confident users who feel safe.

DISCUSSION

The management of “Robim Good” is based on a flexible team that is not necessarily linked to a specific geographical point. Distancing themselves from the physical place of their offline activities and the peculiarity of a digital ecosystem protects them from an unpredictable repressive regime.

The same can be said for volunteer networks that are verified by moderators and formed for specific campaigns and then break apart. However, it cannot be said with certainty that this is related to “unhidden” activists who communicate directly with state institutions to resolve any emerging needs. For this reason, the platform behaves as an initiative that is not politically oriented to somehow guarantee safety. The content analysis showed that the central message that accompanies the promotional texts of “Robim Good” is security. Foremost, security relates to protection from acts of violence (Martin, 1999). The dynamics of local support by providing anonymity and verification, coordination by flexibility, and local ‘bridge-building’ with “permitted” organizations certainly contribute to the protection but, unfortunately, do not provide an absolute guarantee for “unhidden” volunteers due to the unpredictable regime.

Also, the specifics of the platform are that most online activities are on Telegram, which Belarusians perceive as a relatively safe platform. It is the second-most-popular messenger in Belarus with the so-called ‘digital underground state’ (Avseyushkin, 2021).

At the same time, the digital platform showed the usefulness of online participatory tools. According to the manager, discussions on Telegram and Zoom came to conclusions and achieved practical results (petition, design-concept) that refuted skeptical views regarding online participation. One more observation of the manager is that volunteers use the urban knowledge that the platform provides in such online conversations, showing mutual influence.

Thus, the case of “Robim Good” likely reveals some explicit aspects of the livability of an NGO under an authoritarian regime: a digital platform, and clear and predictable value-based organizational behavior.

Considering that the ZOiS survey that was dedicated to social trust in Belarus was conducted in December 2020 (before the sharp increase in the digitalization of NGOs), there is a need for broader evidence of credibility in digital platforms and online participation in Belarus to examine their viability.

CONCLUSION

In short, Belarusian Telegram users can receive step-by-step instructions on resolving urban issues and promote their initiatives on the interactive “map,” social networks, and messenger. To consult with the team of urban experts from “Robim Good,” they leave a request through a chatbot or text a moderator directly. In addition, the robimgood.org platform aims to exchange urban knowledge and info about upcoming local campaigns among citizens, activists, and experts. The project also elaborates its own online and offline initiatives using Facebook, Zoom, Telegram, Instagram, and its website.

Why are people not afraid to leave their digital footprints here? Because “Robim Good” promotes the value of security, verifies actors, and uses Telegram-based communication. All initiatives and volunteers who are willing to join urban campaigns are carefully verified by a moderator, while Telegram provides a confident privacy policy: all data is stored encrypted. As a result, “Robim Good” was able to survive after a year of activity, promoting around 32 different campaigns up until now. An online survey showed that users of “Robim Good” are ready to be volunteers despite the fact that repression is going on in Belarus. Probably, the project has created a trustworthy platform – an example that can be followed by other NGOs that work under the pressure of authoritarianism.

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