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presents

**Websites of Small Towns in Belarus
in the Context of Urban Development**

by

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Project Introduction

Official sites of district executive authorities have become a mandatory part of the State Information Policy. At the same time there are various active unofficial sites of cities, as well as sites of individual organisations or institutions (schools, museums, religious communities, businesses, etc.) that could be the subject of urban development ideas and have their own views and plans for the development of the city. The major purpose of this research study was to evaluate the potential of this segment of the communication sphere in the context of city development.

Main Findings

1. There is not enough diversity in how the internet is used for the purpose of urban development. The issue is purposefully used by government agencies who position themselves as the only subject of urban development.
2. Materials at both official and unofficial sites mainly connected to past events.
3. None of the reviewed official sites have forums or commenting options for news or other information. Conversely, among unofficial sites only three cases was a complete lack of interactivity observed. In other cases, at least one of the functions worked, but often there are no forums, or no comments. The function of feedback is usually not available or does not work. 2/3 of the news and forum topics are not discussed at all and only 4% are discussed by more than 10 people.
4. On most sites, the number of authors is limited to 1-2 people. Among the official sites, only a few "produce" material and news, whereas the majority is reprinted from other sources. At the informal sites, own materials predominate.
5. All sites of the executive committees have almost the same system of banner ads and links: the site of President of Belarus, the site of the regional executive committee, and the most common legal portals. Among unofficial sites, about a third has no banners or links.
6. The way of presenting information is overwhelmingly monotonous and do not contribute to the development of the sites or the towns. Communicative models are not oriented towards dialogue.

Areas for Potential Development

The potential of the internet for urban development depends on a purposeful attempt to rethink the role of sites of small cities. Most websites are created *without a focus on the problem of urban development*. The challenges of development require from the authors and creators of the sites *special activities* which should be directed towards several goals.

- a) Broadening the circle of people that share different views on public and urban life.
- b) Creating and implementing modern forms and ways for the organisation of communication, that stimulates dialogism.
- c) Creating internet communities that could become prototypes for the local community.