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## **INTERACTION AND CONFRONTATION BETWEEN DIGITAL DIASPORAS AND AUTHORITARIAN STATES**

The article presents an attempt to analyze the ways in which Digital Diasporas and authoritarian regimes interact and influence each other. Particularly, the article pays close attention to the regularities and peculiarities of such interaction at times of domestic crisis and unrest. The perspectives of Diasporas trying to influence the situation in the homeland from abroad with the help of digital technologies are taken into account as well as the point of view of Diaspora community, forced to operate and preserve its national identity within the borders of an authoritarian state. Some advantages and weaknesses of Digital Diaspora in comparison to the state are outlined and contemplated so that the conclusions can be made concerning the Diaspora's efficiency in the struggle against governmental oppression.

**Keywords:** Digital Diaspora, authoritarian regime, online activism, Internet censorship.

The emergence and development of the Digital Diaspora phenomenon significantly undermined (although, by all means, not eliminated completely) one of the basic features of a traditional diasporic community, which is complete or almost complete isolation from homeland. For example, former Russian aristocracy, forced to leave the country after the revolution, could barely hope to ever return to Russia. Even if someone managed to do that and avoid the attention of authorities, the issue of re-assimilation and reintegration still remained, as the home country obviously changed drastically during the time of exile. For that reason, a traditional Diaspora community, set to preserve its identity, is generally inclined towards overemphasizing its national traits and customs and avoiding full-scale integration into the host country's society. Members of the Diaspora kept close together and rarely let the outsiders in.

The same can't be said about Digital Diaspora, members of which can certainly allow themselves to be much more open-minded and flexible. In fact, a relatively simple process of traveling and communication in modern society allows some scholars to argue that Diasporas are now defined not by territorial location, but rather by their mentality and set of values<sup>1</sup>. A person can spend most of his or her time abroad, settle in a foreign country, acquire some property and close relations there, but still not consider him- or herself an immigrant. This recently acquired flexibility and fluidity of structure, as well as lack of clearly established boundaries, makes the Diaspora community a fitting actor for the World Wide Web. The Diasporas, often perceived as "ideal representations of transnationally organized networks"<sup>2</sup> easily accomplished the task of integrating themselves into the World Wide Web. On the other hand, traditional states, with their comparatively rigid structure and clearly established limits of authority, certainly experience some difficulties in exercising both benevolent and oppressive sides of their power over the Internet.

However, traditional states still retain at least some measure of control over the cyber-space as well as the Diasporas' online-activity. This is especially true in those cases when a diasporic community is forced to keep the traditional 'closed circuit' structure both online and offline, being an ethnical minority within the borders of an authoritarian state (such as Uyghurs in China or Kurds in Turkey) or when the expat's possibility to communicate and somehow influence the homeland through online activity is limited by oppressive measures implemented by the homeland's authorities.

So, this article focuses on the oppressive side of state's power and aims to analyze the ways by which Digital Diaspora reacts to such oppression, whether the state threatens rights and freedoms of the diasporic community itself or those of the homeland society. The article outlines some advantages that Digital

<sup>1</sup> Schmidt, H., Teubener, K. (2007). *Virtual (Re) Unification? Diasporic Cultures on the Russian Internet. Control + Shift. Public and private usages of the Russian Internet*. Nordenstedt: Books on Demand GmbH, 123.

<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, H., Teubener, K. (2007). *Virtual (Re) Unification? Diasporic Cultures on the Russian Internet. Control + Shift. Public and private usages of the Russian Internet*. Nordenstedt: Books on Demand GmbH, 121.

Diaspora holds over the traditional state in the cyber sphere, as well as some of the Diaspora's weaknesses and limitations in this regard. This paper proceeds from some general observations on how the Diaspora activity can shape and re-shape the national segment of the Internet to more particular cases which illustrate how a Digital Diaspora can help to undermine the regime and protect itself from possible backlash. Thus the author hopes to construct a complex and multi-layered picture of the way authoritarian states and diasporic communities interact and confront each other online and how both sides are influencing each other in the process of such an interaction.

To achieve this goal quite a number of scientific papers connected to the issue have been analyzed, ranging from the earlier publications on the subject of Digital Diaspora in general, by such authors as Deiberd and Rohozinski, to the more recent and practically oriented case studies by, for example, Graziano, Shadziewski and Reyhan. Some online resources and blogs, whose authors are occupied with the issues connected to Digital Diaspora, have also served as sources of information for this article. However, despite the variety of already existing sources, there is still some room for improvement. The abundance of separate case studies does not diminish the necessity of conducting a systematic and thorough study of the issue of operation of Digital Diaspora within and outside of authoritarian state. This article could be one of the first steps in that direction.

In fact, Digital Diaspora's impact on the development of a national segment of the Internet can be tremendous. At times the Diaspora even proves itself able to exercise some functions, generally attributed to and performed by a state. This can be illustrated by comparison of the development of Chinese and Russian Internet. In China the government supervised and controlled this development from the earliest stages, providing the country with access routes, servers and communication networks, thus helping to shape modern Chinese web-sphere with its own alternatives to worldwide social networks, search engines, video aggregators etc. Meanwhile, in Russia a similar job was done largely by the Diaspora, as the first servers and Russian-language sites were established by Russians living abroad, only later joined by enthusiasts from the homeland<sup>1</sup>. The line between the former and the latter became blurry nowadays, as can be proven by an example of the blogger Anton Nosik, who created one of the first Russian-language sites while living in Israel and later became more closely affiliated with his country of origin. The reverse exchange is also possible, as in case of the VK and Telegram creator Pavel Durov, who started his online-activity within the country but was forced to immigrate, hoping to evade the growing attention of Russian authorities<sup>2</sup>. So far the oppressive measures of Russian authorities, directed at Mr. Durov's most successful Telegram messenger failed to inflict even commercial damage upon disobedient billionaire, as Russian segment of Telegram's audience remains comparatively small. At the same time, thanks in part to significant Russian-speaking community in Europe and America, more and more customers from those regions continue to use the messenger, oblivious to restrictions, imposed within the borders of Russian Federation. Thus, the RuNet as we know it was, to a significant degree, created by the Russian Diaspora, while state-led attempts, such as the creation of a national search engine Sputnik, have so far proven to be unsuccessful. Similarly, while the evidence concerning the popularity of Cyrillic domain .рф in comparison with the usual domain .ru remains incomplete and inconclusive, it is clear that usage of Cyrillic domains creates significant obstacles for the sites' correct indexing in the search engines, while also providing some difficulties for browsers. Possibility of creation of fully operational e-mail service on the base of said domain also remains debatable<sup>3</sup>. Due to these factors, even though there is a tentative trend towards increasing of the quantity of sites, operating within domain.рф<sup>4</sup>, it hardly looks set to become a leading domain of the Russian segment of Internet in the nearest future.

Naturally, states tend to perceive as a threat any non-state entity that has the potential to at least partially replace them. Sometimes they're correct in their perceptions. The Diasporas' online activities are not always noble and well-intentioned by their nature. Some scholars go as far as naming the Diaspora

<sup>1</sup> Schmidt, H., Teubener, K. (2007). *Virtual (Re) Unification? Diasporic Cultures on the Russian Internet*. Nordenstedt: Books on Demand GmbH, 120-147.

<sup>2</sup> Hakim, D. (2014). Once celebrated in Russia, the programmer Pavel Durov chooses exile. *The New York Times*. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/technology/once-celebrated-in-russia-programmer-pavel-durov-chooses-exile.html>> (2018, June, 02).

<sup>3</sup> РосГид (2015). *Чем Плох Домен.рф*. <<https://rosgid.ru/article/chem-ploh-domen-рф.html>> (2018, Июль, 01).

<sup>4</sup> Coordination Center for TLD RU\РФ. (2017). *CCTLD. РФ is dashing for popularity*. <[http://test.cctld.ru/en/news/news\\_detail.php?ID=1158](http://test.cctld.ru/en/news/news_detail.php?ID=1158)> (2017, June, 23).

websites among the so-called “dark web” networks, alongside with criminal and resistance networks<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, diasporic communities are often engaged in some unlawful activities, contributing to the state’s shadow economy and arranging the illegal processing of funds outside the state’s financial system. While at times such activity can be regarded as one of the ways to thwart a corrupt regime, in some cases it’s plainly harmful to society.

However, in the face of a truly oppressive government, the Digital Diaspora can certainly help the homeland in a number of ways, especially in times of crisis. These include breaking the state monopoly on information, alerting the international community, financing the anti-governmental activity etc. For example, during the Arab Spring the Diaspora saw its main task in facilitating “information escape, the reproduction and structuring of information”<sup>2</sup> as well as finding ways of broadcasting important information from the homeland online during the massive shutdowns of the Internet in rebellious countries<sup>3</sup>. Sometimes, in countries with especially poor infrastructure and Internet connection ranging from slow to nonexistent, the Diaspora is forced to look for ways to use off-line channels to deliver information, which was first published online abroad, to the homeland. Such is the case of Eritrea, where the Diaspora activists first publish the information, unveiling the misdoings of Eritrean government or calling for the people of Eritrea to fight for their rights on their sites, and then deliver the message to Eritrea by stationary phones or in the form of printed hand-outs distributed manually<sup>4</sup>. In cases when the Diaspora itself is created within the boundaries of an authoritarian state, digital technologies could be vital for its consolidation and preservation of national identity, as in the case of a relatively young and recently established Uyghur community in China<sup>5</sup>.

However, the states also possess some advantages when facing the Diaspora. Digital Diaspora is clearly not a monolithic structure, and its connections with the Motherland are not always recognized. Speaking of the Russian Internet, there are prominent cases of both homeland users dismissing the Diaspora’s online-activity as harmful or simply useless<sup>6</sup> and Russian-speaking users living abroad, refusing to consider themselves as part of the RuNet even while hosting a Russian-language site<sup>7</sup>. In a similar fashion, some scholars consider the impact made by representatives of the Iranian Diaspora on Iranian revolutionary uprisings of 2009 to be insubstantial, as their tweets and posts were written mostly in English instead of Farsi, thus never reaching the majority of homeland audience<sup>8</sup>. The language barrier can also work both ways for the benefit of the government. It is relatively safe to discuss sensitive topics on Uyghur-language sites, but Uyghur online-activists face trouble for expressing their views in Chinese<sup>9</sup>. Iranian dissidents face exactly the opposite problem. Farsi-speaking blog-sphere is large, but heavily censored, so controversial issues are discussed on English-speaking blogs, with limited appeal within the country. In fact, the amount of self-censorship and inclination to avoid discussions of political nature in the case of Iranian blog-sphere is defined not by a blogger’s location, but by a blog’s language<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the choice of language reflects the choice between security and efficiency of publications. There is also a usual danger of incorrect perception of domestic events while observing from abroad. It’s true that digital technologies enhanced the immigrant’s ability to receive relevant information concerning the domestic affairs, but often

<sup>1</sup> Deibert, R, Rohozinski, R (2008). *Good for liberty, bad for security? Global civil society and securitization of the Internet*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 125.

<sup>2</sup> Poell, T (2014). *Social media activism and state censorship. Social Media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in an Age of Facebook, Twitter and Youtube*. London: Routledge, 203.

<sup>3</sup> Communication Crisis (2012). *Digital Diaspora in Conflict and Disaster*. <<https://communicationcrisis.net/2012/31/digital-diaspora-in-conflict-and-disaster/>> (2018, July, 01).

<sup>4</sup> Winter, C. (2014). Eritrea’s Communications Disconnect. *Bloomberg* <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-0-26/eritrea-worlds-least-connected-country-tech-wise>> (2018, June, 26).

<sup>5</sup> Reyhan, D. (2016). Diaspora ouïghoure et Internet. *Etudes Orientales. Aperçus multiples du Monde Uyghur*, (27-28) Paris : L’Harmattan, 161-186.

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt, H., Teubener, K. (2007). *Virtual (Re) Unification? Diasporic Cultures on the Russian Internet*. Nordenstedt: Books on Demand GmbH, 120.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 120-147.

<sup>8</sup> Esfandiari, G. (2010). The Twitter Devolution. *Foreign Policy*. <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/08/the-twitter-devolution/>> (2018, June, 08).

<sup>9</sup> Szadziwski, H., Fay, G. (). Trapped in a Virtual Cage: Chinese State Repression of Uyghurs Online. *Uighur Human Rights Project*. <<https://docs.uhrp.org/Trapped-in-A-Virtual-Cage.pdf>> (2018, June, 16).

<sup>10</sup> Rigby, A. (2007). *Looking for Freedom: An Exploration of the Iranian Blogosphere*. University of Sheffield.

it's not quite enough. For instance, the Tunisian online movement is often rebuked for being elitist, lacking commitment and lousing touch with the homeland issues. This claim is reinforced by the fact that many sites of the Tunisian Diaspora are not even owned and operated by Tunisians<sup>1</sup>.

In most cases the Digital Diaspora is inclined to follow the general domestic political discourse, instead of defining it<sup>2</sup>. If the situation at home seems to be relatively stable, the majority of Diaspora tends to support the current government. Such an attitude is characteristic for large parts of Chinese and Russian Diasporas, which are inclined to express vehemently nationalistic and pro-governmental views, even if the homeland government is engaged in some openly oppressive activities.

Finally, states don't always have to survive this confrontation on their own. Apart from the Diasporas, there are others non-state actors, which are able to transcend national boundaries and are even better suited for operating within the cyber-space. These entities are known as transnational Internet corporations, which sometimes openly support even authoritarian states in their fight against ethnic minorities. For example, Facebook almost openly supports the oppression of Kurdish online community by the Turkish government. Not only Facebook heavily censors and blocks official pages and publications of the leading Kurdish parties and organizations, which could be understood, as those parties are often engaged in overtly terroristic activities, but sometimes fairly neutral publications by Western activists, mildly supportive of the Kurdish struggle for independence, are also deleted<sup>3</sup>.

To conclude, the interaction between the Digital Diaspora and authoritarian regimes retains its ambiguous nature. The Diaspora certainly has the power to influence, and in some cases even define both face and structure of the national segment of the Internet, thus surpassing the state's capacities in this regard. It can also provide some valuable support to the cause of both online and offline struggle against the oppressive government by bringing the local problems to the attention of global community, providing alternative sources of information, arranging financial and material support for the dissidents etc. In general, the more educated, open minded and technically savvy the homeland population is, the stronger is the ties between the homeland and the Diaspora. However, the Diaspora's ability to help is often undermined by a wide range of factors, such as the language barrier, the detachment from local problems, the lack of consensus within the Diaspora itself, and the hostility of Internet corporations towards some ethnic minorities. Thus, government structures could counter the Diaspora dissident activity by simply being more consolidated and systematic in their approach to online disobedience. It would certainly be correct to point out that sometimes the very meticulousness of regulatory bodies renders them ineffective as is the abovementioned case with the Russian Federation's recent blockings of uncontrolled social network and web forums that refuse to give the Russian government access to encryption keys, which were supposed to target Telegram, but ended up uncompromisingly taking down millions of unrelated IP addresses. As was stated above, while dysfunction was spreading through the Runet, Pavel Durov's position remains quite strong in the face of the state's oppressive machine. At the same time, we must take into account the fact that while Telegram problem is doubtlessly perceived by the authorities as a matter of national security, only on the surface it remains a purely political affair. Durov himself clearly aims to use pressure of the state as a basis for an elaborate PR-campaign of his products, in view of his ambitious large-scale projects, which include creating a brand new algorithm for crypto-currencies (using the ever-growing Telegram community as a base for ICO) and launching of several new interfaces<sup>4</sup>. Even if Mr. Durov also perceives this situation as an opportunity for political protest, he has yet to try calling for support of Russian Diaspora. All in all, the Durov's case should be perceived rather as an exception than the rule, for diasporic communities usually don't have that kind of resources and influence at their disposal. It's clear that at the current stage of development Digital Diaspora can only play a supportive role in the homeland struggle against the statist oppression, and is unable to initiate some significant changes in the homeland's political system when acting on its own.

<sup>1</sup> Graziano, T. (2012). The Tunisian Diaspora: Between "digital riots" and web-activism. [Special issue. Diasporas on the Web]. *Social Science Information*, 51 (4), 544.

<sup>2</sup> Kalathil, Sh., Boas, T. (2003). *Open networks, closed regimes: the impact of the internet on authoritarian rule*. Washington D. C.: Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 149.

<sup>3</sup> Lifesay, C. (2015). After battling ISIS, Kurds find new foe in Facebook. *PRI*. <<http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-10-07/after-battling-isis-kurds-find-new-foe-facebook>> (2015, June, 07).

<sup>4</sup> Costine, J. (2018). Telegram plans multi-billion dollar ICO for chat cryptocurrency. *Techcrunch*. <<https://techcrunch.com/2018/01/08/telegram-open-network/>> (2018, June, 12).



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