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LIBERALIZATION OF THE INTERNET AND REGIME SURVIVAL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The article dwells upon the state of Internet freedom and general position of online communities in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. The Arab states attempts to censor and filter the content online as well as put some pressure on the Internet users are analyzed in relation to the general political, social and economical situation in the region. To prevent escalation of social and international conflicts in the region Middle East governments, in author's opinion, should restrain from imposing new restrictions on the Internet and consider instead the option of gradual liberation of the web-sphere, as such a move could help to solve some long-standing problems of the MENA region and even make the Internet a venue for facilitating the dialog between the governments and their people, thus ensuring the current political regimes' survival in the middle- to long-term perspective.

Key words: Arab Spring, online-activism, Internet censorship, authoritarian regime

It is clear now that the role of online media and social networks in the initial success of Arab Spring has been exaggerated to some extent. The popular nickname 'Twitter Revolution,' often attributed to the uprisings that occurred in the Middle East at the beginning of the decade, could be erroneous and misleading. Indeed, at the earliest stages the Facebook publication containing the video of Mohamed Bouzizi's self-immolation served as a starting point for social unrest and managed to alert international community. However, further outrage and active resistance against the governmental oppression was spurred first and foremost due to the efforts of traditional media, such as Al Jazeera and other satellite TV-channels. It should also be noted, that online community was not the sole driving force behind the Arab Spring. In Tunisia, as well as in Egypt and Yemen the liberal-minded protesters were promptly joined by islamists of various, even the most radical fractions. It seems quite likely that Egypt and Libya long-standing authoritarian regimes could have withstood civil unrest and were brought down mainly by the efforts of dissatisfied military circles and NATO "humanitarian" intervention respectively.

The abovementioned exaggeration of the role, played by Internet during the uprisings was supported mainly by early works of Western scholars as well as publications of Western journalists and activists on the matter, but now it seems to be doing a disservice to the online community of Arab World. New and old governments throughout the Middle East are pulling the plug on the Internet freedoms, parallel to similar restrictive measures in other spheres of society. The desire of those in power to impose some restrictions is understandable in the face of general instability in the region, combined with domestic trend towards radicalization. However, in this article we argue that rulers of the Arab World are incorrect in their evaluation of sources of the threat to their stability and methods they use to contain potential online and off-line disobedience are crude and ineffective more often than not. Authoritarian regimes could actually benefit from the use of more sophisticated strategy of dealing with online issues and the gradual liberalization of the Internet could ensure relative stability of the regime as well as provide a solution to some of the problems that Arab society is facing today.

To prove our point we imply a relatively simple method of comparative analysis focusing mainly on three Middle East countries: the quasi democratic Tunisia, the second almost successful in its revolutionary endeavors country – Egypt and the main pillar of counter-revolution – Saudi Arabia. The article's main goal is not to merely describe how the governments of these countries oppress and censor the Internet, but rather to explain why they are doing it and why they should do it differently.

Nowadays a cautious and less optimistic approach towards the evaluation of outcomes of the Arab Springs and perspectives of countries which experienced it is shared by most of the scholars. In order to at least partially overcome the language barrier, which presents itself to most of the foreign researchers who wish to study the politics of MENA region, this research is based on publications issued by such scientific institutions as Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) and periodicals such as Foreign Affairs, which extensively recruit Arabic-speaking scholars to write articles in English. The same is true for the second source of information, which is mass-media publications by, for instance,

The New Yorker and Brookings, whose correspondents try to contact the local population directly, even if with the help of the interpreter. The third source of information for this research is the analytical reports by non-governmental organizations, such as Freedom House.

Even though the three states wielded different results from the Arab Spring and adopted different social systems, all of them exercise almost identical strategies towards their respective online communities, including adoption of controversial cybercrime and/or counter-terrorism laws, which limit freedom of expression and anonymity in the Internet, blocking the access to some previously available apps and services, such as Viber [5] and Telegram [2]. In some cases the newly established regimes act even harsher than their predecessors. For instance, the number of prosecutions for insulting the office and the president drastically increased in Egypt [3; 13] after the revolution in comparison to Mubarak's regime, which was fairly lenient in that regard. Each of the three states were engaged in prosecution and detention of online activists in recent years. Well known cases include prison terms for Egyptian teenagers who mocked Islamic State on YouTube [6], large prison terms for human rights activists and bloggers in Saudi Arabia [12], arrest and imprisonment of the news site editor [14] in Tunisia.

In our opinion Middle East governments fairly overestimate the dangers posed by social networks and other online services. The impact that Facebook and other services made during the uprisings was directed primarily outwards, targeting first and foremost international audience. Limited appeal of online media on local population was demonstrated both before (The Gafsa uprising in Tunisia in 2008 [9, c. 2]) and after the Arab Spring (Day of Rage in Bahrain in 2011 [4, c. 11]). Both events received significant coverage in online media all over the world but failed to mobilize sufficient quantity of actual protesters. A set of deliberate omissions, distortions and outright lies constructed in various social networks by Bouzizi family and friends concerning his social status, level of education and political aspirations were needed to really alert Tunisian society [9, c. 7-8]. It's possible that a pro-governmental counter-point also published on-line, exposing the lies and half-truths surrounding Bouzizi's tragedy along with more significant level of support provided to the street vendor and his family after the incident would have placated the mass outrage. Overall, increased presence of state organs on the Net and introduction of e-government structure would create a channel for presenting both individual and group issues directly to the government structures. Such a move could prove the dissidents' demands for change less valid, as they're often criticized for showing off before the international audience, while ignoring local problems [7, c.10].

The real problems faced by states under analysis are pretty common for Middle East region and in all three cases at least partial liberation of the Internet can help to solve them. First of all, the three states have fairly one-dimensional economies, with the prime source of revenue for Egypt and Tunisia being tourism and for Saudi Arabia – natural resources such as oil. As number of tourists decreases because of the constant danger of terrorist attacks [11] and oil prices remain unstable, the governments should seek to diversify their economies. As traditional ways of earning money deteriorate the long standing issue of unemployment presents itself even more sharply. Saudi Arabia, being one of the wealthiest states in the region is able to approach the problem with lavish social programs, large subsidies and pensions for the unemployed. Such an approach, however, has only limited appeal and is unable to resolve one important aspect of the problem, which is radicalization of the society. This issue is most prominent for seemingly democratic Tunisia, but other countries of the region follow closely [8; 11]. Tunisia holds the first place in terms of quantity of its citizens who decided to go to Syria and join the ranks of ISIS, while Saudi Arabia shares second place with Russia [11]. Wealthy Saudi unemployed join ISIS with almost the same vigor as poor Tunisian unemployed do. Clearly the unprivileged social status itself matters more than amount of money granted by state in this case. The three issues are closely interconnected and it's clear that Arabian youth needs stable and well-paid jobs and firm and respected social status, instead of yet another dubious anti-terrorism law. Development of digital economy and building of the e-commerce structures is one of the possible and effective ways of achieving the necessary diversification and create new jobs. Significant efforts would be required from the state authorities to encourage participation of young and technologically savvy users at home and attract investments from abroad.

But to reap the economic and social benefits from the Internet Middle East governments should consider cancelling some limitations placed by them on the Internet access. This particularly concerns the opportunity to use some mobile apps such as BlueBerry or Viber. It's hard to establish a fast and stable Internet connection through the landlines anywhere in the Middle East, so mobile connection

remains the best option for the region. In fact, during the last years of Mubarak reign Egypt started to acquire leading positions on the regional mobile access market. Recent restrictions are bound to undermine that achievement. Taking into account the increased activity of radicals and fundamentalists, Arabian governments should also cease the prosecution of digital activists and dissidents. The liberal part of society is not the biggest threat to ruling regimes, as Internet activists tend to express their discontent in fairly harmless way by creating online petitions or organizing peaceful protests, which rarely gain significant recognition from the population. Right now the liberal on-line and off-line initiatives such as National Youth Initiative Against Terrorism are mostly ridiculed within the society [11], but with a measure of state support they could provide a healthy alternative to jihad in the ISIS ranks. Bouzizi's accident managed to appeal not only to the liberal movement of the Arab World, but also to the radical and religious groups within Arabic society, which in turn led to de-secularization and radicalization of Tunisian and Egyptian society. The alternative ideas could be spread with the help of online mediums and in this regard even the Muslim Brotherhood attempts to create Arabic alternative to Facebook could be useful [10, c. 9].

There is also the problem of the transition of power in the region. While Tunisia and to some extent Egypt are going through this process right now, this issue is hardly irrelevant for Saudi Arabia as well. The ruling monarch is old and not particularly healthy, the popular slogan "man cannot live by bread alone" [1, c. 14] points at increasing demand of political transformation that exists even within the privileged layers of society. This state of affairs bears some similarities to the pre-revolutionary Egypt or Tunisia, but even more closely resembles the situation in South Korea at the times of Roh Tae-woo presidency, when a wealthy and young population decided to acquire for itself the political rights and freedoms to match its material well-being. In Saudi Arabia the demand for political transformation is probably much smaller, but it is growing. The South Korea case demonstrates that such a transformation could be implemented peacefully. Once again, the Internet could serve as an instrument of conducting a dialog and reaching a consensus between the government and the people's views concerning the country's future political system. The Saudi government is not completely conservative and not without its share of technocrats, so such a dialog might be facilitated.

To sum up, it would be useful for Arabic governments to consider more closely the benefits and possibilities that the Internet is able to provide, instead of brooding over the dangers it might present. Of course, full-scale liberalization of national web-spheres in the Middle East can't be expected in the nearest future, as the governments have to balance between expectations of liberals and islamists of different fractions, the latter being much more prominent and vocal force. Nevertheless, the states in question could certainly refrain from the unnecessarily harsh moves, such as imprisonment of online-activists and placing new restrictions on connectivity. Instead, gradual liberalization combined with increased level of the government presence online should help to bridge the gap between the people and their governments and provide at least partial solution to some pressing issues, such as diversification of the economy, unemployment, radicalization of the society and negative image of the respective governments abroad. In the middle- to long-term perspective the Internet could even be a useful tool for facilitating either ongoing (in Tunisia and Egypt) or potential (in Saudi Arabia) transition of power and survival of the regimes.

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Первушин М. М., Лібералізація Інтернет-простору та збереження політичних режимів на Близькому Сході

Стаття присвячена стану свободи слова в Інтернеті та загальному положенню онлайн-спільнот Близького Сходу після подій Арабської весни. Намагання арабських держав цензурувати і фільтрувати контент в Інтернеті, а також здійснювати певний тиск на користувачів Інтернету розглянуті в статті у зв'язку з загальною політичною, соціальною та економічною ситуацією в регіоні. Для того, щоб не доводити соціальну й міжнародну конфліктність в регіоні до небезпечного рівню, уряди близькосхідних країн, на думку автора, повинні утримуватися від накладання нових обмежень на діяльність в Інтернеті і розглянути замість цього можливість поступової лібералізації віртуального простору, оскільки такий крок може допомогти вирішити деякі застарілі проблеми регіону і навіть сприяти тому, щоб Інтернет став місцем діалогу між урядами та їхніми народами, тим самим забезпечуючи виживання й повільну трансформацію існуючих політичних режимів у середньостроковій перспективі.

Ключові слова: Арабська весна, онлайн-активізм, інтернет-цензура, авторитарний режим