



The discussion on the 'forthcoming netocracy', initiated in one of the recent Yaroslavl newsletters published by the Russian Institute, is once again crucial due to the revolutionary events in the Middle East. The RJ returns to this topic and gives the floor to Vyacheslav Nikonov, who is the President of the Polity Foundation and President of the Unity for Russia Foundation.

MOBILISED BY HUNGER AND FACEBOOK

Vyacheslav Nikonov

Revolutions have happened many times in the history of humankind, including in the era long before the invention of today's modern communications tools and even long before electricity was discovered. The success or failure of revolutionary actions is, by no means, determined by communications tools. However, good communication tools have contributed to the success of revolutionary actions.

Social media, including the social networks (such as Facebook and Twitter) that have emerged during recent decades, are the modern tools of political struggle and are used by various political forces. Certainly social networks are not able to take any action within society on their own. The latter is the domain of those who are entitled to use such tools to achieve their goals, with the exception of those who wish to contradict the law.

Before the Facebook era, the major revolution tools were mobile phones and flash mobs, which were demonstrated in the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine. Even before that — as the revolutionary processes of the late 1980s to early 1990s showed — the major tool of political struggle were newspapers. And before that radio and the word of mouth were used. The list is even longer. So the current social networks are nothing more than just means of communication that allow organising people quickly enough to take one or another action.

And as soon as people are mobilised, there should no longer be any reason to use social networks. Egypt serves as a good example of that. Given the current social disorder, there is no internet access in Egypt and, although one can log into Twitter via a mobile phone, it is not that popular in this country due to



the fact that few people have mobile phones. Consequently, we can say that these mass protests among the Egyptians were, by no means, organised with the help of Facebook or Twitter. They were not caused by the desire to answer a call from some social network, but rather were due to some deeper reasons, one of them being hunger.

It is my belief that it was the significant increase in food prices that motivated the poor people in the Arabic countries to take to the streets. Last summer's drought led food prices to rise. Russia — a traditional grain supplier for the Arabic countries — ceased to permit grain exports as a result of crop failures, and the Arabic masses were devastated. Revolutionary insurgency in the Arab countries is going to also cause price increases for energy resources, which has already previously happened. And this is an advantage. On the flip side, the disadvantage is going to be an outburst of Muslim extremism and terrorism. In the course of the revolutionary actions of the poor Arab crowds, most terrorists were released from prison and

they will naturally take advantage of the accumulated energy to a great extent.

Is there any link between terrorists' success and Twitter? I would answer both yes and no. The subject of social networks influencing politics is much discussed in Western countries. The main question asked by a large number of researchers is how much the expansion of the internet helps in terms of democratisation and stability in the world? There is no definite answer to that. The modern social networks that are wide-spread on the Internet are effectively used by both the civilians and the terrorists. Al-Qaeda, for instance, has a rather active presence on the internet. **The number of jihad sites is over the top, and they are mostly sponsored by citizens of Western countries.**

One should not forget the contradictory example of WikiLeaks. Some believe that it has strengthened global security. Yet others think that, on the contrary, WikiLeaks has weakened global security since it has effectively limited the ability of the United States to govern various situations.

Today it is safe to say that **matters of social stability are not dependent on Twitter or Facebook**; they depend on many other things, including cultural aspects. Now the most stable countries of the Arabic world will end up being those that have never experienced democracy and those with ruling monarchs who genealogically descend from the Prophet Muhammad. The leaders of these countries have established their power on mechanisms of legitimisation than markedly differ from those of non-religious republican regimes. ■

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