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From the network to the streets: Online tools and democratization in Egypt and Belarus

INTRODUCTION

As digital media played a crucial role in the protests of Arab spring, the events soon came to be labelled as "internet revolutions." Before the uprisings in North Africa, the use of online communication in mobilizing for protest against repressive regimes had become a worldwide tool of prodemocracy activists. Yet, although internet and other digital technologies have been an irreplaceable tool for mass mobilization, they are by no means the 'cause' of the revolt nor its driving force.

This policy brief includes two case studies – Egypt and Belarus – that show how digital communication technologies were used in recent protest activities in both countries. Based on interviews with civil society activists and an analysis of the process, it provides recommendations to EU policymakers and argues for stronger EU endorsement of civic freedoms, including an uncensored internet.

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We argue that support for free speech including the one in virtual space of the internet has to go hand-in-hand with support for political movements who use these tools.

The use of the internet by protest movements should be seen in the context of the growing influence of digital technologies for political mobilization. High-profile examples include the recent political campaigns of Howard Dean and Barack Obama in the United States, or the global effect of WikiLeaks on politics.

In each of these cases, the transformational capacity of digital communication technology is due to its potential for cheap and easily scaling connections and the dissemination of information. The mass use of digital technologies for protest movement coordination goes back to at least the turn of the century and the N30 anti-globalization protests in Seattle, where e-mail lists played a key role. Since then, we have seen new media employed all around the world. Prominent examples include the 2001 protests in the Philippines, which brought down

Visegrad Fund

President Joseph Estrada, protests following Iran's presidential elections in 2009, and the so-called Twitter Revolution in Moldova of 2009.

In 2011, the Arab spring became a reference point for other protest movements – the Occupy Wall Street movement has frequently declared that it was inspired by North African demonstrators.

In each of these cases, commentators framing the protest as an Internet, Twitter or Facebook revolution run the risk of exaggerating the role played by digital communication technologies. *The Smart Mob*, a concept proposed by Howard Rheingold in 2002, suggests that new technologies enable swift assembly of ad-hoc groups that mobilize and coordinate significantly faster than traditional protest movements. In Rheingold's view, digital communication technologies - because of their instantaneous character and network scaling effects - provide a way to "supercharge" the protest and create "digital revolutions". It is, however, illusionary to see such protests as if they were organized by a new breed of activists not supported by traditional movement structures.

The critics - one of the most vocal of whom is Evgeny Morozov, author of the book *Net Delusion* - point out that the potential of digital technologies should always be seen in the local political, social and cultural contexts, which always serve to limit such capacity. First of all, successful online mobilization relies on traditional protest groups and organizations dependent on strong ties built beyond the sphere of online communication. Thus, the internet is not a miraculous pro-democracy solution, but one of many tools available to protesters. The critics also point out factors that complicate the use of digital communication technologies - for example, the counter-revolutionary measures taken by the regimes or threats to protesters' privacy.

As we will demonstrate below, digital technologies play an important, but not singular role in pro-democracy activities. Online activity is always preceded by offline organizing, and these two aspects of pro-democracy movements, the online and the offline, have to be seen as intertwined. Thus, although online freedom is more and more often framed in international

debates as a key dimension of democracy, it is important not to omit support for movements who give internet communication its content.

THE USE OF ONLINE TOOLS FOR DEMOCRACY IN EGYPT [2]

The Internet was introduced to Egypt in 1992 but its use was limited to governmental and official use until 1997. Up to the end of 1990s, the use of the internet was restricted to very small number of people from specific classes or professions. However, by the end of 2000, after the Second Palestinian Intifada, activists started to use e-mail for spreading news and expressing their solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada. The outreach of this communication was limited and its purpose was not to mobilize but mainly to inform.

The increase in popularity of these new communication tools coincided with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. At that time, the activists moved from spreading news to organizing antiwar protests. At the same time, online forums started to become another popular tool for spreading and tracking the activism. Besides general public forums, political activists started to use specific forums to discuss and develop their ideas and activities creating specific online forums dedicated for the opposition's political discussions. Blogs started to be used for the first time, albeit by a very small group of bloggers.

By the end of 2004 and start of 2005, more space for reform opened up in Egypt. Many commentators see this as a consequence of

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RECOMMENDATIONS

• European countries should support the use of digital tools for pro-democracy activities as one of the key forms of EU assistance for pro-democracy and human rights activism around the world. This requires including appropriate goals and funding provisions in the European Development Fund (EDF), the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI) and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).

• The Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy published in May 2011 placed renewed emphasis on civil society as a crucial component of democratic change and consolidation. The review includes, among other things, a commitment to promoting media freedom by supporting civil society organizations' use of electronic communications. It is therefore essential that the new instruments for democracy assistance which the review envisaged, namely the Civil Society Facility and European Endowment for Democracy, prioritize such assistance in their grant-making programs. The EED and CSF would thus complement the existing instruments: EDF, DCI, ENPI and EIDHR.

• The blueprint for the European Endowment for Democracy should envisage a strong horizontal "digital democracy" program which would not only provide advice and coordinate EED grant-making activities but also monitor on an ongoing basis the uses and abuses of online activism in pre-transition, transition and post-transition regimes. Such a program could gradually build an "Online Activism Compedium" – a collection of the lessons learned from the use of new technologies around the globe. This Compendium could then be used by online activists and democracy donors operating in different regions of the world.

• The above-mentioned instruments for democracy assistance should encourage activities that combine the use of digital online tools with traditional forms of civic and political organizing, including the use of broadcast media and grassroots activism.

• An open internet is essential for democracy to take root. Therefore, European countries should support the model of an open, uncensored internet and the concept of digital freedoms as basic rights. At the same time, Europe should oppose any forms of censorship or limitations of the free flow of information and communication on the internet. Non-democratic regimes should be pressured to end internet censorship.

• European countries should avoid introducing limitations on online freedoms, such as permanent or temporary censorship or blocking of access to online sites. Such actions will make Europe look as if it is applying a double standard in internal and external policies and can serve authoritarian regimes as an excuse for censoring the internet.

• Activists should be provided with tools that allow them to conduct secure, uninterrupted communications and to avoid cases of censorship; also tools that make protest communication and organization less costly and more effective. Such tools are at best created by civil society actors: non-governmental organizations, informal groups and individuals with the necessary knowledge of digital technologies. Funding and support should be provided for creating and spreading these tools to activists.

• Democracy activists should receive funding and training related to the use of digital technologies, in particular on protecting anonymity and ensuring security of communication. Capacity should be built in pro-democracy organizations and movements for the use of information technologies, in particular for creating online tools and adapting existing ones.

• Funding and support should be provided for the Web-based activities of pro-democracy groups, as these can provide an important capacity for autonomous communication and for attracting more supporters. Even promoting basic digital literacy should be seen as an activity that increases the potential for the pro-democracy uses of online tools for broader parts of society.

• In order to be effective, online activities need to be strongly tied to traditional opposition and forms of social protest. New, networked groups should build strong links with traditional organizations. In particular, journalists from the traditional media struggling to free themselves from government-imposed constraints should receive hands-on training and funding which would develop their skills in using new media to enhance freedom of expression.

• The support of online activism from abroad will never be enough for pro-democratic change if it is not in concert with strong and clear political support for democracy and freedom from the political actors in the international political playground.

Western pressure on the Egyptian regime to introduce political reforms, which resulted in calling for the first presidential elections in Egypt's history. Others see the cause of these developments in general mobilization in the region after the Palestinian Intifada and the invasion of Iraq. These changes also coincided with the emergence of the use of online platforms as a new tool for activism. The offline protests and events were a good opportunity for bloggers to spread the use of their new tools among those interested in political activism. Also, the opposition movement on the ground used online tools for spreading information and news of its activities.

By the end of 2005, the internet had become a popular tool for organizing opposition activities. The internet had by that time about 4 million users, or 5% of the population. E-mail, emails groups, online forums, blogs, and, later, internet radio became popular tools among opposition groups and they were used for coordination of activities. The new tools proved more appealing than traditional communication of the opposition – a good example is the online radio station started by youth activists of the El-Ghad Party, which broadcast talk shows, comedy programs and music.

Between 2005 and 2008, Egyptian youth became very skillful in using the internet for their activism. In 2008, they used Facebook for the first time to organize a major nationwide general strike in solidarity with Mahalla City workers and to protest a sharp rise in commodity prices. Through a Facebook group, Egyptian activists called for a general strike in April 2008. In two weeks since its initiation in March until the day of the strike in April 2008 the group membership rose to 77,000 people.[3]

Late in 2009, after Mohamed Elbaradei, the Egyptian former Director of IAEA, expressed interest in supporting democracy in Egypt, some 250,000 supporters of his views gathered on Facebook and started to organize

and coordinate their efforts to further spread democratic ideas via the internet and on the ground as well. Elbaradei's supporters gathered online and then started to meet offline and to organize their work on the ground to reach those who were not online. They formed groups in the different provinces, and held meetings and conferences out of the capital and main cities, spreading leaflets and booklets to inform people about Elbaradei andhis activities.

In mid-2010, a brutal incident occurred in Alexandria, a major city in the north of Egypt. A young man named Khaled Said had been tortured to death in the street by two police officers. Afterward, a very broad online wave of solidarity broke out with a Facebook page of 770,000 members, a figure 10 times larger than the Facebook group created in 2008 in support of the strike in Mahalla. Similarly, the number of activists participating in the protests and activities on the ground grew by a factor of 10 from about 1,000 in 2008 to 10,000 in 2010.[4]

From 2008 up to the end of 2010, Egyptian online activists became proficient in the use of online tools. The range of technologies widened to include micro-blogging services like Twitter, video-sharing platforms like Youtube, photo-sharing services like Flicker, tagging platforms like Delicious, and Geotagging and Crowdsourcing platforms like Ushahidi, as well as tens of other applications, platforms, and networks. An example of the innovation were the tagging platforms, which proved to be a simple way to aggregate all the blogs addressing a certain topic in one place. Crowdsourcing was used frequently, especially to map violations and irregularities during the 2010 elections.

These were the last elections before the revolution, and fraud occurring at that time was an important motivation for initiating the revolution. Irregularities in the elections were documented intensively through social networks and mapping tools – and managed to create a general sense among internet users and their offline networks that the election had been rigged. The year 2010 represented the peak of the curve in using internet tools in activism, both

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3 In March 2008, textile workers in the city of Mahalla decided to start a strike on April 6th in protest of low wages. This coincided with a wave of increasing prices of commodities in Egypt. Various opposition groups decided to show solidarity and to call for a general strike on the same day. Young Internet activists supported the strike by initiating a Facebook group calling for a general strike, This call spread virally and supported the protests in the streets.

4 All the numbers are estimates, as no official count was made. These are based on first-hand relations of participants in these events.

in terms of the use of new tools and improved skill in their use by activists, and in quantitative terms as well, as the number of online networks that were calling or working for democracy increased in an unprecedented way, with numbers of members that was unprecedented as well.

All the activists who had been engaged in public mobilization since 2000 represented a wide and loose network that never had been organized in a traditional or hierarchical way and had never been fully interconnected. At some point, this network became focused on a single goal, though still without having any traditional organizational form. This occurred in January 2011, as Egyptian activists were inspired by the success of the Tunisian revolution. Of course, while at the general level this coordination was spontaneous, the activist network was comprised not simply of individuals, but also of smaller, organized groups. These were informal democratic or human rights movements, democratic organizations or even youth wings of political parties.

PERSPECTIVES OF EGYPTIAN ACTIVISTS ON THE ROLE OF INTERNET TOOLS IN THEIR REVOLUTIONS

During the last 10 years, online tools have been used by pro-democracy movements in a variety of ways. During the April 6th protests, online tools were used to overcome geographical distance - Facebook was used to organize the committees of the movement in the different provinces in Egypt. The main Facebook group was an interface for the movement, where new people could learn more. Also, there were geographical Facebook groups for recruiting people in the provinces, and thematic groups such as media groups for publishing news, education groups for spreading ideas and strategies, as well as secret groups for discussions between the movement leaders in the different provinces and making strategic decisions without meeting physically or traveling.

Some of the activists mention protests that had been completely organized online – through Facebook groups, discussion boards and walls, wikis, blogs and other tools. They offer as an example one of the biggest campaigns – for the independence of the judiciary system – that took place in 2006. In some cases, the protest itself was the first time the activists who organized the event met offline.

The internet in Egypt has also been used for documenting events and violations. The above mentioned case of Khalid Said was, for example, one of the main reasons for the revolution in 2011. The official report on Khaled Said's murder stated that he was a young drug addict who violently resisted the policemen and swallowed a hash packet that caused his death. Yet the details of this case had been uncovered by bloggers and new media activists who filmed testimonies of witnesses and then posted the videos online. This started the wide wave of anger and mobilization which resulted in a protest against police brutality on Egyptian Police Day (25th of January).

The main purpose of the protest was a call to dismiss the Minister of Interior, and when many Egyptians acceded to the call, this turned into a protest against the whole regime. The internet has also been widely used for communication outside of Egypt, whether contacting and communicating with international media and journalists and other supporters, or even with Egyptians living abroad. This helped to obtain assistance in the form of financial support for democracy movements, advocating for democracy in Egypt internationally, and running and performing some online tasks and activities for the movements.

The regime had not initially felt threatened by the bloggers and online activists, and it had treated them as youth playing on the internet. It started taking the internet seriously only when the activists started organizing events on the ground and engaging more people. Over the years, activists that had been communicating online came to realize the importance of organizing their movement on the ground: to have local groups in the provinces, to hold meetings, conferences or marches in the streets, and to distribute more leaflets and stickers.

THE USE OF THE NEW MEDIA BY THE REGIME

Almost all the activists that have been interviewed agree that the regime had not been able to communicate successfully through the new media and online tools. The regime never used internet tools on regular basis - as there was nothing to be said to the citizens, especially those present online. In the last few years before the revolution, some groups in the regime tried to build a media portrayal of regime change and pro-youth orientation. This was led by the son of president Hosni Mubarak, Gamal Mubarak, described in the state-owned traditional media as a leader of change. Despite the effort, this portrayal was not widely trusted by internet users.

However, the regime started using online platforms to attack the opposition. From the start of online activism until 2008, there were some minor attempts to counter the opposition on the internet. After 2008 and the beginning of more intensive use of Facebook to organize protest, the regime started to deal with the internet in a different way. The security forces allocated a security department for dealing with online activists[5] and police officers received intensive trainings to do this[6] – as a result, they succeeded many times in breaching activists' privacy and in monitoring their online accounts.

There are also accounts that the ruling party started to recruit and appoint people to use the internet on daily basis to monitor, counter, attack, and defame the opposition, opposition movements, and opposition figures. The opposition movements did not have the necessary level of organization to form a systemic strategy to counter these threats. Working publicly and exposing the contradictions in the regime's statements and actions were the only tools the opposition had to oppose this.

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5 On May 7th 2008, Ahmed Maher, the head of the April 6 group, was kidnapped by the state security and he was shown by them a department for police officers working to counter and track youth online activism inside the Ministry of Interior.

6 It remains to be confirmed who provided the regime with the training.

ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Most of the interviewed activists agree that we cannot exaggerate and describe what happened in Egypt in the last year as internet revolution, in spite of the great role the internet played in mobilizing people. The revolution was in their opinion inevitable, though without the internet it might have taken more time to happen. As one activist stated, "The reachable online population was the spark of the revolution for those who are not reachable offline." However, it is important to remember that on the 28th of January - which was the main day of the protests – Egypt was totally offline, as the regime had disconnected the internet.

The internet was one factor among many that sparked the eruption of the revolution in Egypt. It is clear to activists that the movement offline preceded the movement online, and the movement online suffered when there was a wide gap between online and offline activism. Also, many argue that it was the poor people, those without internet access, who took the initiative in fighting the police troops blocking the way to El-Tahrir square and that they should take credit for opening the way to El-Tahrir square for the more internet-savvy activists. The use of new media and internet tools is generally perceived as a natural development, along the lines of the use of printing machines during the French Revolution or audio cassette tapes during the Iranian Revolution.

Initially, bloggers were acting as elites or intellectuals. With the use of Facebook, activists became more active offline, and conducted their activities in the streets. Bloggers and other activists using social media played two roles.

One role was to spread the thoughts and ideas that created a general context for opposing Hosni Mubarak's regime and refusing the succession of Gamal Mubarak.

The second role was their use of the internet in creating a critical mass of activists that formed the solid core of the revolutionary movement that went to the streets among the huge masses of protesters on the 25th of January and convinced other people to join them. According to one activist, internet-savvy youth started and called

for acts of disobedience and protest – and then the rest of the people joined them. It is important to remember that the calls for the protests on the 25th and 28th of January were initiated online.

Some try to exaggerate the role of online activists, and some try to overly downplay their role and to describe the revolution as that of solely the poor and marginalized. Both are wrong and ideologically driven. Young online activists started out several hundred strong and then became some hundreds of thousands - and they formed the core of the revolution that played out offline in the streets. This linkage was the missed factor over the years.

The political elite were separate from the people in the streets, and the people in the streets were apathetic about political reform or change. This was summed up by one activist who stated that, "Our generation is that of the sons and daughters of the apathetic street men and women who linked the political opposition with the ordinary apathetic people and inaugurated the revolution."

ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS AND DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS

After the last presidential elections on December 19, 2010, Belarus found itself in a deep political crisis. After the crackdown, almost a thousand protesters were detained and more than 40 opposition leaders, together with some of the presidential candidates, were sentenced to years in prison. Political life was paralyzed and pro-democracy activists focused on supporting those who were in jail and their families, organizing solidarity campaigns. In the spring of 2011, the political crisis was aggravated by a severe currency and economic crisis, which significantly worsened the living conditions of a majority of the population and increased their dissatisfaction with the Belarusian authorities.

But due to the high level of fear within Belarusian society, this discontent resulted neither in a revolution nor even in mass protests, as had happened in the late 1990s. This summer, Belarusians chose to participate in protest activities that cannot be attributed as oppositional or anti-governmental. Most of them were organized not by oppositional parties or movements, but by non-partisan activists and

resembled flash-mobs rather then opposition rallies or demonstrations. All of these activities were announced and coordinated with the help of various social networks on the internet.

REGULATIONS AND RESTRICTIONS OF INTERNET USE

Until 2010, only limited regulations applied to online activities, mainly covering retail e-shops. In February 2010, the President of the Republic of Belarus issued Decree No. 60 *On the Measures to Improve the Use of the National Segment of the Internet Network,* which entered into force in July 2010, and was later supplemented by a number of subordinate acts.[7]

The general idea of Decree No. 60 is to ensure that every user connected to the internet can be identified. According to the Decree, providers must identify every subscriber's unit (ADSL/3G modem, mobile phone, etc.) and such unit must enable identification of the user (individual or a company). Identification must be ensured by the provider of internet services (personal ID must be provided by individuals, legal address and business name are required from companies). The use of proxies or anonymizers is not prohibited and there is no legal ground to block such services for private users. The owners of collective access points - including home networks not secured from external connections - also must provide for identification and recording of information about each session.

During election days and opposition rallies (or during the so-called "silent protests" in 2011), Belarusian authorities blocked specific internet sites that provide independent information, namely online portals of independent mass media such as *Charter '97, Radio Liberty, Belarusian partisan*, and social networks like Livejournal, VKontakte and Facebook. During this year's protests, Belarusian authorities also blocked social networks and major independent news media, amongst others. Although such a

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7 See report "E-LAWS IN BELARUS", 9 December 2010 - http://www.sorainen.com/UserFiles/File/Publications/Belarusian-IT-Newsflash.December.2010-12-09.eng.pdf

blockade was fairly easy to overcome with a use of anonymizer, it created a serious obstacle for those who used social networks via mobile phone during the protests. This in turn seriously limited information sharing and coordination on the field. For the time being the authorities do not block internet sites on a continuous basis.

As an example of the regime's activities, Belarusian security services tracked coordinators of the *Revolution through the social network* (RTSN) community, searched their homes and seized computers and data storages. The KGB tracked the activities of Dzmitry Niafiodau, who was one of the coordinators of the RTSN and conducted a search at his place, as well as that of Paulyukevich Siarhiej, the coordinator of another VKontakte community, who later admitted that the KGB forced him to sign an agreement on cooperation. This shows that Belarusian activists using social networks have very low levels of anonymity and that Belarusian secret services (namely the "K" department within the Ministry of Interior and the KGB) can effectively track protest groups' organizers on the internet and prosecute them.

OPPOSITION AND THE INTERNET

After the presidential elections of 2006, when many of the popular independent websites had been blocked, information about events in the central square of the capital instantly spread through the popular internet social network site LiveJournal. In 2011, social networks have been used not only to monitor the electoral process or to exchange information not available in the official media, but they have additionally become a venue for political campaigning. The Belarusian opposition has functioned for many years without access to the wide audience of the traditional media. The internet not only has given the opposition a platform for communication, but also has become a kind of testing space for ideas, since in social networks one discusses different issues, often with a neutral audience as well as with those who do not share one's beliefs.

On the VKontakte social networking site (according to some sources, there are more than 2 million registered Belarusian users of this site) more than ten groups have been formed that focus on presidential elections. Users have registered most actively in the groups supporting opposition presidential candidates. At Facebook (about 150,000 Belarusians have accounts), the most famous group was formed by the public campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections". Among the presidential candidates the most popular was the page of Andrei Sannikau (5,300 followers). Finally, the popular blogging site LiveJournal (more than 75,000 accounts in Belarus) has a number of politics related communities.

Despite the fairly large audience of social network users and the variety of social media that are available in Belarus, there is almost no debate – even within activist circles – about their possible use in the political process. The traditional opposition prefers the old ways of campaigning and rallies, and even considers the politicized internet community as competitors on the political field. The authorities, in their turn, tend to show online social media in a negative light. The First Belarusian TV Channel recently aired a documentary about the destructive nature of social networks, where it showed how foreign intelligence units organize revolutions in different countries using social networks. Examples given were those of Egypt and the riots in London.

RECENT PROTESTS – ELECTIONS, STOP-PETROL, SILENT PROTESTS

Since the presidential elections in 2010, the network activity of the Belarusian authorities' opponents can be divided into two stages. The first one occurred between late December 2010 and February 2011 and in this phase social network activity was mainly focused on disseminating information about the events of December 19th in Minsk, attempts to expose the actions of the government to falsify elections and organize provocations during the protests, and raising money and organizing assistance to those arrested on December 19th-20th

and their families. In the next phase, between April and July, activities were concentrated on the preparation and organization of peaceful protests within the campaigns "Stop-petrol" and "Revolution through social network".

During the first stage, LiveJournal and Facebook were mainly used to disseminate information about the crackdown on election day, about the arrested and convicted activists and efforts to collect money for the victims of the repression. Coordinators of this solidarity movement were well-known Belarusian bloggers at LiveJournal. They also used Facebook to inform people about their activities. Coordination between the activists was maintained mainly by mobile phones, but the messaging features of Facebook, Google-Talk and Skype were used as well. The information went even further with the help of independent mass media and their online versions (*Nasha Niva* weekly, *Charter'97*, Naviny.by, *Narodnaya Volya*, etc.).

The second phase started with the campaign "Stop petrol" in April 2011, organised in response to rising fuel costs in Belarus. Car owners dissatisfied with the rising prices blocked the central avenue of Minsk in October and this action continues at the time of writing. Campaign information was distributed through the internet site of the organization (http://za-avto.by) and independent media. News about preparations for the protests was spread through social networks, including Facebook, Vkontakte and Twitter. Feedback from the participants of these actions was received with the help of the these networks and e-mail, although coordination of participants during the actions was at a minimum level.

REVOLUTION THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORK

The very name of the campaign says that its initiators intended to organize mass civil protest using social networking. In the Russian social network VKontakte, activists of the Movement of the Future created a community *Revolution through social network* (RTSN), which quickly became very popular among users. This is the VKontakte community which became the main platform for generating ideas, exchanging information and mobilization of participants for silent protest. The main purpose of this community and associated protests was change of the political regime in Belarus.

Organizers of the campaign have used, besides VKontakte, other social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, but as auxiliary tools. Thus, there was a feed channel organized from VKontakte to Twitter, but the main communication and selection of creative ideas took place in the VKontakte community. The organizers explain their choice of this social network with its popularity among Belarusian users (which they believe is higher than the popularity of the other social networks) and convenient tools for reposts and share of information. To communicate amongst themselves organizers use Skype and Google-talk in Belarus, and regular cell phones abroad.

On the basis of the RTSN, the organizers of the protests maintained regular feedback from community members and protesters. The organizers set only the most general framework for the protests, and tactical details emerged from discussions within the community.

The "silent protests" organized by the RTSN took place every Wednesday, in places where previously no one had organized public protests, and during the first month (June) attracted many people from all over Belarus. The Belarusian authorities did everything possible to stop the spread of protest activities. They blocked VKontakte and other social networks and some internet sites, and threatened potential protesters with the possible use of force and imprisonment.

They also blocked the center of Minsk and central metro stations to prevent people from gathering. After the harsh counteractions from the riot police in Minsk and other cities and towns, the amount of protesters in the street on Wednesdays started to decrease and in August the organizers of the community announced a time-out for the street actions. According to one of the leaders of the silent protest campaign, Viachaslau Dyanau, the potential of mobilization through social networks is very high and so far has been only partially tapped into.

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN RECENT PROTESTS

During the 2011 protests internet technologies played a crucial role – more so than in the previous years. According to the coordinators and participants of these protests, mobilization and organization of the majority of protesters took place through social networks such as VKontakte, Facebook and Twitter. For the first time in the history of protest activity in Belarus, it was a social network that acted as an organizer of mass actions.

Under conditions where there is a state monopoly on electronic media in Belarus, independent newspapers have a very small circulation, platforms for public debate are almost non-existent and the political opposition is weak and divided, internet social networks and communities work as platforms for discussion and the development of concepts for social action. The great achievement of social media during the protests in 2011, compared with previous years, was the mobilization of a new segment of the population that is not normally associated with the opposition and civil society organizations. Thus, the creators of the internet communities managed to go beyond the traditional "opposition ghetto" by organizing events like silent protests or flash-mobs.

However, the use of social media to organize mass rallies in Belarus has had its drawbacks: for instance, some participants noted the very poor coordination in the field during protests, that there were no obvious organizers and leaders as there usually are during traditional opposition rallies. Since the authorities blocked access to social networks on the days of "silent protest" it was very difficult to coordinate activities through online tools, or to gather information. Journalists from the independent mass media played an important role, but their information in terms of speed of dissemination cannot be compared with the exchange of messages through social networks.

Another minus of social networks usage in organizing civil protests was the fact that the internet and social networks are used on a regular basis only by limited categories of people, e.g., office personnel, students, freelancers,

etc. Therefore, the demographics of protesters were limited to these social groups. For this reason, silent protests and other actions initiated online failed to attract workers of large industrial enterprises. According to some participants of the protests, a revolution in Belarus can only occur when workers of large Minsk plants (like the Minsk Tractor Works, Minsk Automobile Plant, etc.) join the street protests and strikes. Thus, silent protests and other actions inspired by social networks users had little impact on the society and on the political process in Belarus.

Finally, social media allow a number of Belarusian civil society activists to work from abroad, carrying out mobilization among internet users, while remaining inaccessible to the Belarusian secret services. Thus, political refugees do not feel excluded from political life and continue to communicate with their colleagues and friends and the general public.

To summarize, although this year in Belarus social networks have been one of the centers of protest activities, they do not have sufficient capacity to go beyond flash mobs or to organize mass protests which would have serious political consequences. Social media have limited access to certain categories of society which are very important for the success of such protests. It should also be recognized that social media can be an additional tool in the coordination of protest actions, but not the central one.

A key role should be played by political organizations (political parties and movements) with a widespread network of activists and clear leadership. Social media without the support of the traditional opposition can be centers for the coordination of protests and can mobilize broad masses of people only if the central government is weakened and not ready to use violence against protesters. In Belarus, the incumbent power retains full control over the political situation in the country and is ready to actively resist any attempts of revolutionary change.

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CONCLUSIONS

• Neither Egyptian nor Belarusian activists frame their recent protests as "internet revolutions." At the same time, they clearly acknowledge the importance of digital tools for organization, mobilization and the spread of information. They emphasize that in order to be successful, online activities need to occur together with offline, mass protest.

• Both cases show that the use of digital technologies is a result of a longer process, and forms and intensity of their use have developed over time. The ability to quickly mobilize is dependent on a longer history and experience with the use of digital tools for protest activities.

• The use of digital technologies by social and protest movements depends on the general digital literacy of the society and the access to digital technologies. In particular, large user bases of social networking sites improve the effectiveness of the use of digital technologies for protest.

• Digital technologies play an important role beyond that of immediate protest organization, in ways that might not be publicly visible - for example, by providing communication space to protest leaders and key movement activists. Also, factors such as the ability to spread information or to mobilize broad bases of supporters, even if they do not participate in protest, are an important effect of online communication methods.

• Digital technologies play also an important role in external communications, beyond the borders of a country - with supporters, the international media, or the diaspora for a given country, whose members are often involved remotely in pro-democracy activities.

• The same online technologies are used by the regime for the purpose of counter-revolutionary communication; and evidence provided by online content can pose risks for protesters who can be identified on their basis. Social networking sites used by protesters usually provide low levels of anonymity. These negative consequences need to be taken into account alongside the positive factors.

• The use of digital technologies by protesters and regimes has to be seen as a constant mutual challenge, in which protesters seek new ways to avoid the barriers and censorship enforced by the regime. One example of this is the use of telephones in Egypt for international communication, once the government had switched off the national internet.

• Both in Egypt and Belarus the cooperation of online activists and traditional forms of protest and organizations are seen as crucial to the success of the democratization process. Yet digital technologies do not offer a perfect solution in this regard. While in Egypt the activists have managed to build such connections and achieve a general coordination that led to the revolution of the 26th January, in Belarus online activities did to some extent mobilize a new demographic group, but other than that failed to spark broader protests.

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