REGIONAL STUDIES

THE ELECTRONIC IRON CURTAIN AND VIRTUAL DEMOCRACY: LESSONS FOR UZBEKISTAN

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> If you shut the door to all errors,
> truth will be shut out.
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> *Rabindranath Tagore*

Introduction

At the beginning of July 2012, the media and Internet reported that a documentary film shown on Uzbekistan's Eshlar TV channel had compared social networks (in particular Facebook and Odnoklassniki) to machineguns and nuclear bombs. Social networks were also likened to weapons in the hands of the enemy.[1]

During the program, an expert from the Spirituality and Enlightenment Center asked the following question: "What is the difference between a terrorist and a blogger's page on a social network showing photographs of naked people?"

He also noted that "if terrorists kill people using weapons and bombs, Internet users are ultimately being killed with the aid of 'sweet words;' this kind of mass culture poses a direct danger to our state policy and our sovereignty."

Another expert accused Facebook and Odnoklassniki of propagandizing sexual perversion and "the extravagances of Western democracy."

The film called on young people to use local analogues of these websites instead—Muloqot.uz and Sinfdosh.uz.[2]

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[1] [http://www.iarex.ru/articles/27506.html].

[2] Ibidem.

Despite all the seriousness of such accusations, it should, however, be kept in mind that the number of users of social networks is steadily rising and already totals hundreds of thousands.

The reviews of some experts about social networks unwittingly makes us think of the recent past when, with the aid of the Iron Curtain, the state tried to shield people, primarily the youth, from the "pernicious influence of the West;" today many feel that this influence is reflected in advance of democracy in non-democratic countries.

All of this has prompted me to discourse upon what the social networks have added to our lives and to what extent they could be a threat to the country's national security.

Virtual Democracy

There are already as many as nine million Internet users in Uzbekistan (around 200,000 people are registered on Facebook); this figure comprises more than half of the residents of Kazakhstan and almost equals the population of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan put together.

It is not that difficult to calculate the number of worldwide web users, however, the "impressive figures" far from fully reflect the actual extent to which the Internet penetrates our lives. The most important indicator is the amount of time users spend on the social networks; today we are essentially seeing the virtualization of many sides of everyday life (private, public, family, and state).

It will be no exaggeration to say that virtual space is increasingly becoming the environment in which people feel most comfortable; it is where many insurmountable life problems are resolved. Furthermore, those who "live" on the Internet are turning into a certain demos with their virtual democracy and laws. These virtual laws are being manifested as a transfiguration and reincarnation of real democracy, the lack of which they are compensating for.

The appearance of virtual democracy has made it possible for authoritarian political systems, including post-Soviet, to figure out what failed democracy (analogous to the term failed state) is.

But this is only the visible part of the changes going on in society; in actual fact, there are deeper problems. While our ideologists are trying to find ways to comprehend the social networks using the old ideological methods, the Internet community continues to transform.

As Indian scientists Parag Khanna and Ayesha Khanna point out, having not yet fully entered the Information Age, we are already entering the so-called Hybrid Age, which is a new socio-technical era distinguished by the rapidly merging combinations of technologies with each other and people's increasing integration with technology, so humankind is becoming part of entirely new social relations. In so doing, the very essence of social activism, which goes beyond the boundaries of traditional institutions, is changing.[3]

Hybrid reality develops a new eclectic world outlook in people today. As soon as people joined the Internet and acquired cell phones, it was as though they stopped being Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Russians, and so on. People are now borrowing from different resources: other-cultural, other-national, and technological (extra-cultural and extra-national), whereby use of the latter is becoming increasingly important.

Borrowing has always gone on and is inherent in all peoples, however, the technological resource based on digital content that blends everything together has speeded it up beyond belief. Contemporary technological progress is fundamental and unique; against the background of new social engineering, the striving for democracy and the resistance of authoritarian regimes to it are losing their pertinence.

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[3] See: P. Khanna, A. Khanna, *Hybrid Reality: Thriving in the Emerging Human-Technology Civilization*, TED Books, 2012.

Parag Khanna and Ayesha Khanna show that we need a translator to become a link not only between the representatives of different cultures and nations, but also between generations, since today's young people are assimilating technological innovations much faster than their ancestors.

Some flag wavers and conservatives think that the social networks are to blame, however, to put it in their words, the "plague of the thing" lies in information technology, the Internet, and contemporary means of communication as a whole. They compensate for their inability to adequately participate in contemporary global information processes by creating, in keeping with Soviet tradition, the image of an external enemy and making the social networks a "scapegoat."

At one time, Uzbekistan indiscriminately accused international organizations of being the propagators of the so-called Color Revolutions; today, however, the Internet and social networks have become the target of ostracism. Such rudiments of Soviet thinking as "not allowed" and "permission not granted" have once more proven to be in demand; meanwhile, current reality is insistently demanding that proposals be drawn up called on to ensure the development of entirely new social, political, and even cultural engineering.

Let's take nuclear physics, for example. This science has produced the nuclear bomb, but no one is saying that nuclear physics should be banned.

There may be some amorality, vulgarity, and immodesty on Facebook and Odnoklassniki, but there is also (and much more than the first) open discussion among serious people of the present day (particularly young people) on the widest range of problems; this is where a powerful and new type of socialization is going on and where democracy is finding its own expression.

"But today's information revolution," writes Fareed Zakaria, "has produced thousands of outlets for news that make central control impossible and dissent easy. The Internet has taken this process another huge step forward, being a system where, in the columnist Thomas Friedman's words 'everyone is connected but no one is in control'."[4]

It is interesting that what those attacking the social networks are saying clearly contrasts to the official statements about the need to develop the Internet in Uzbekistan, whereby this process has indeed become irreversible. Internet cafes are overflowing with visitors (mainly young people and even children); today it is difficult to imagine homes and apartments without high-speed Internet connections; thanks to cell phones we carry the Internet around in our pockets. According to the monthly ratings, in terms of the number of users registered on the most popular world social network, Facebook, Kazakhstan ranks 103rd out of a total of 213 countries, Russian 25th, and Uzbekistan 143rd (this is reported on the site itself).[5]

So, although they have detected the problem, our ideologists have not correctly understood it and are not adequately responding to it.

It should be noted that the Iron Curtain, raised by Soviet ideology, was relatively effective only because at the time of the Soviet Union people were not engaged in global communication. From this it follows that it will be impossible to raise the Iron Curtain again for two reasons:

(1) the country and its people are engaged in world communication;

(2) post-Soviet ideology has not acquired monolithic and strict content and so is eclectic in nature.

The so-called Soviet syndrome being observed today in politics, public relations, and culture is capable of inducing (fortunately or unfortunately) virtual reflection in the virtual demos, which could regress back from the social networks to real society.

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[4] F. Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom. Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, W.W. Norton & Co Ltd., New York, 2007, p. 15.
[5] [http://www.meta.kz/624407-kazahstan-zanyal-103-e-mesto-po-chislu-polzovateley-facebook.html].

Instead of criticizing the social networks, it would be better to take a look at the anomalies of public life that are being prescribed exclusively to the influence of the Internet. However, we should not forget that the social networks only reflect the defects of society brought to them from real life and virtualized.

When arguing about whether Facebook is beneficial or detrimental, it must be understood that it is a social network where people look for new *friends* and reconnect with old ones. So attacks on social networks where FRIENDS and COLLEAGUES meet and socialize are absolutely inappropriate.

Virtual Democracy and Security

As we know, security (political, information, and ideological) has currently acquired a multidimensional nature, and many phenomena and areas of public life could become a target of securitization; this is what happened with democracy and the social networks. The dual attitude toward this problem has been manifested in such phobias and philias as Americanophobia and Americanophilia, Russophobia and Russophilia, Islamophobia and Islamophilia, Internet-phobia and Internet-philia.

In Soviet times, films about karate were banned, but young people managed to get their hands on them and watched them at home; when video players appeared they de facto stopped being taboo. The same happened following independence, "the discovery of America,"[6] the revival of Islam, and hooking up to the Internet. As a result, Islam and the Internet have become an important factor in the self-identification of peoples and the self-determination of the states of Central Asia. Nevertheless, we often hear America being criticized by those who know nothing about it, Islam by those who have not read the Koran, and the Internet by those who only know how to think as a censor.

Meanwhile, a very interesting trend has recently appeared in the democratic evolution of non-democratic countries: it can be called the *"licensing of democracy."* In Uzbekistan, it is mainly specially authorized people who talk about the problems of the country's democratic development at the public level: ideologists, journalists, public officials, scientists, and civil servants trained in a special way. Whereby they talk about democracy and violations of its principles with extreme caution, without daring to mention the existing problems.

In essence, licensed democracy performs the mission of restraint (consciously or unconsciously). Instead of promoting true democracy, it precisely repeats what Fareed Zakaria pointed out: "In a world that is increasingly democratic, regimes that resist the trend produce dysfunctional societies — as in the Arab world. Their people sense the deprivation of liberty more strongly than ever before because they know the alternatives; they can see them on CNN, BBC and Al-Jazeera. But yet, newly democratic countries too often become sham democracies, which produce disenchantment, disarray, violence, and new forms of tyranny."[7]

So the claim that the Arab Spring of 2011 was largely the result of a *Facebook revolution* is only partially true. The protest statements of the masses in the Arab countries were largely the result of what Zbigniew Brzezinski called political awakening. Something like political awakening, although in specific forms that define a different type of dynamics, is going on in the U.S. itself. This is shown by the recent events going on in this country. I am talking about the mass protest demonstrations and manifestations (particular the Occupy Wall Street movement).

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[6] I use the symbolic phrase "the discovery of America" to indicate the newly independent states' discovery of the U.S., the West, and the world community as a whole and the world community's discovery of the newly independent states.

[7] F. Zakaria, op. cit., p. 18.

While Facebook is being criticized in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states, the social networks and the Internet, which are developing at a fantastic rate, are increasingly becoming a factor, means, and indicator of the development of the world's countries.

For example, it recently became known that Washington has become the first American state allowing people to register to vote via Facebook. "Once it is live, Facebook users can click on the application... They'll need to agree to let Facebook access their information, which will be used to prefill their name and date of birth in the voter registration form. Users will still need to provide a driver's license or state ID card number to continue."[8] Online registration will be opened before the U.S. presidential election scheduled in November 2012.

Politicization of Facebook is obvious and inevitable; the people belonging to this community are not going to discuss only everyday and worldly topics in chat rooms, as was the case at the beginning of Internet socialization. As a new type of community representing a virtual demos, they simply cannot help but talk about politics; after all, as Aristotle said, "man is a political animal."

A manifestation of the politicization of Facebook are the unique public opinion polls—the "like" surveys, which are a unique invention of virtual democracy. Here distortion of statistics, tailoring the data of social polls to fit the political situation, and false propaganda are impossible. It is precisely this Facebook truth that brought up the topic of securitization of the social networks.

The calls being heard in Uzbekistan today to take control over the social networks and create its own national social network on the Internet (along the lines of Facebook) could backfire. It stands to reason that the established and growing Internet community will not shift to national social networks, which will undoubtedly be more ideology-driven.

If ideological activity has little effect in real life, we should not expect it to have any impressive results in national social networks; it must be carried out with a "live" audience.

I think that the authors of the above-mentioned film are quite realistic in their thinking and understand very well the gist of the problem they have raised. However, their attempts to play along with official propaganda are doing the government a disservice. After all, the authorities are worried about the Arab revolutions (which they blame the social networks for) spreading to Uzbekistan and are striving to retain sociopolitical stability in the country. In this context it can be said that virtual (that is, liberal) democracy is mobile, while licensed (that is, non-liberal) is static.

On 10 August, 2012, *Rossiiskaia gazeta* published an article called "Iran is Launching an 'Internal Internet'."[9] It stated that the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) could join the list of states that rejects use of the Internet in favor of an internal intranet where only approved websites can be accessed. The article also contained a reference to a statement by Head of the Iranian Ministry of Information and Communication Technology Reza Takipur that the Internet is an "unreliable" environment and, what is more, is "under the control of one or two countries."

The author of the article says that "attempts by authoritarian authorities to take control over the entire online content and intercept attempts by the opposition to unite against the tyrant" are obvious. Furthermore, he notes that Iran's leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has registered an account on Instagram and prior to that opened a micro blog on Twitter. Incidentally, it was reported that several state officials would still be able to use the Internet, and the ayatollah would evidently be among them.

"Ironic Iranization of the Internet" revealed the paradox that the state officials of the IRI want to be able to enjoy the Internet while striving to keep their people away from it; this is simple proof of the mutual lack of correspondence between the virtual and real identity of the members of one and same society. In so doing, the Iranian regime is cutting its own throat.

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[8] [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/18/washington-facebook-voter-registration_n_1682366.html].

[9] A. Blagoveshchenskiy, "Iran zapustit 'vnutrenny internet,'" *Rossiiskaia gazeta,* 10 August, 2010 (see also: [http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1344672120]).

The people in power, ideologists, and licensed speakers need to hurry up and understand that Facebook does not pose any threat to national security. Maybe some think that there is too much talk about politics there. But we need to realize that Facebook is where an intensive information exchange is going on capable of promoting real socialization of young people and giving them the opportunity to raise their education level and make wide use of the academic discourse: this is where constant processes of enlightenment and cultural enrichment are going on, which authoritarian regimes can simply not keep up with.

C o n c l u s i o n

In the era of globalization and increase in the role of electronic means of communication (primarily the Internet), essentially all events going on in the private lives of people, society, and the state will inevitably shift to the free virtual space that is becoming a reflection, continuation, and kind of compensation for the social, cultural, and political deficiencies of real life.

What is more, *the Internet has added a new element to the lives of people today—a network and digital identity in the form of nicknames, logins, profiles, likes, chats, searches, uploads, downloads, and so on.*

An electronic Iron Curtain can neither shield young people today from the "perfidious influence of the West" (if there is such a thing), nor ensure a country's information security.

It goes without saying that there is an enormous number of sites on the Internet that can be viewed as a source for spreading and propagandizing violence, immorality, lies, and other human defects.

As for Facebook, virtual democracy has come to roost there today, which is sending down deep roots and putting forth an exuberant crown. So the only adequate response to the challenge of the social networks is to direct their "nuclear energy" toward the good of real democracy.

However, as strange as this may sound, the Internet needs to be reformed, on the one hand, while the state's information policy and ideology need to be revised, on the other.