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E-politics from the citizens' perspective. The role of social networking tools in influencing citizens

Abstract: The progress of civilization, supported by the development of new technologies, has led to a series of social, economic and political changes. The information society, in its expectations and through access to knowledge, has significantly affected a change in the model of democracy, causing a kind of return to the original forms of communication in citizen-government relations. This has been accompanied by a shift of social and civic activism from the real to the virtual world. In literature, the use of information and communication technologies in the democratic system is named electronic democracy. One of its forms is e-politics, which is implemented at several levels: institutional, system and civil. A good example of the last type are the new social movements that in recent years have had a significant impact on politics.

The basic research problem in this paper concerns e-politics from the citizens' perspective, through the activities of the new social movements, especially of a political nature. The main research goal is therefore to present the role of social networking tools in influencing citizens and their subsequent activities that have triggered changes in the political system. The methods used in the paper are case study and comparative analysis.

Key words: Arab Spring, electronic democracy, e-participation, e-politics, Myanmar, new social movements

Introduction

The progress of civilization supported by the development of new technologies leads to a series of social, economic and political changes. Even the rivalry for political power is fought on new levels. In addition to traditional arenas of political competition, such as the electoral, parliamentary, governmental, administrative and industrial arena, Przemysław Maj identifies a sixth one – the Internet (Maj, 2011, p. 58). Those that use the Internet to achieve political goals, in his opinion, do so in five ways: (1) the Internet becomes a tool of battle for the electorate and serves to polarize supporters and opponents; (2) it is a tool of political competition, which takes place in accordance with the principle of bandwagon effect; (3) the Internet is an object of axiological and manifesto rivalry; (4) it is a tool of propaganda and “semantic battle”; and (5) it is used to “destroy the enemy” (mainly through negative campaigns). For the first time, new technologies were used in politics on a large scale in the election campaign of Barack Obama in 2008. It showed the leading role of new media in the system of tools and channels of political marketing: social networking, e-mailing, blogging, text-messaging, and crowd-founding.

The information society in its expectations and through access to knowledge, has significantly affected the change in the model of democracy, causing a kind of return to

the original forms of communication in citizen-government relations. It can be noticed that whereas in ancient Greece political decisions were based on the principles of direct democracy, owing to the relatively restricted group of participants, in the modern representative democracy power has been given to representatives, and – given the mass access to information and communication technologies today – civil participation in the political decision-making process is on the rise, significantly contributing to the development of participatory democracy. Many scholars believe that the application of modern technologies exerts a considerable impact on the increased civil commitment to public matters.¹ Jan van Dijk and Kenneth Hacker (2000, p. 1) recognize the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media for the purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication as digital democracy. The literature on this subject employs such notions as electronic democracy, 2.0 democracy and e-democracy.

In the plethora of typologies and interpretations, that of Mirosław Lakomy (2013, p. 152) is worth considering. In his opinion, e-politics is one of two components of democracy 2.0; the other one is the citizens with their network activity. This type of activity is well exemplified by new social movements² that have emerged as a result of numerous processes modern societies are going through. Many of these movements are highly efficient, and we have recently seen their considerable influence on politics. The basic research problem in this paper concerns e-politics from the citizens' perspective, through

¹ Not every scholar's interpretation of these phenomena is equally optimistic, as they claim that electronic democracy results in two opposite phenomena. On the one hand, a larger number of political actors engaged in institutional processes are involved in certain kinds of decentralist movements, which results in their online presence. Mass, off-line news media, which is the dominant source of political information for most, is becoming less informative. Those same online spaces and communicative exchanges, developing around the political center, are relatively insular and exclusionary. In other words, politics, for those already engaged or interested, is becoming denser, wider and possibly more pluralistic and inclusive. But, at the same time, the mass of unengaged citizens is being subject to greater communicative exclusion and experiencing increasing disengagement (Davis, 2009, pp. 745–761).

² The concept of new social movements was introduced by Claus Offe (1985, pp. 817–868), who observed that political and non-political areas of social life in Western Europe have been merging since the 1970s. Offe noticed that citizens responded to the increasing influence of state policy on their life by attempting to restore more control over political elites. As a result of this politicization of civil society, public and private roles have merged, community and organization have been identified with one another, and the differences between organization members and leaders have become blurred. The spontaneously emerging new social movements operate by means of mass demonstrations, whereas organizations are based on informal cooperation networks and voluntary activities, and financed by voluntary contributions (unlike the old social movements: political parties and labor unions – mass hierarchical organizations that endeavored to implement social transformations projects). At the beginning of the 21st century, the literature on the subject introduced the term 'new new social movements' coined by Alain Tourain (2009, pp. 160–162). In his opinion, these evolved movements call more directly for the defense of human rights, which have to be recognized in the same way that workers' rights began to be recognized at the end of the 19th century. New communication tools have contributed to the emergence of different, frequently radical, public opinion trends, where political and economic systems were attacked first and foremost. The activities of the 'new new' social movements are primarily aimed against governments because these are governments that oppose the implementation of new policies inspired by non-governmental organizations. Political reality is frequently contested due to the lack of social trust in the institutions of the state.

the activities of the new social movements, especially of a political nature. Out of numerous examples of such movements, both in democratic and authoritarian countries, three are selected for analysis, namely the National League for Democracy in Burma, social organizations in South Korea and protest movements operating during the Arab Spring. They are examined by means of case study and comparative analysis. The main research goal is therefore to present the role of social networking tools in influencing citizens, and their subsequent activities that have triggered changes in political systems.

E-politics from the citizens' perspective

The term e-politics (or politics 2.0) covers the use of new media as a platform for political integration on the part of political elites, in order to acquire, exercise or maintain power primarily in democratic countries. Using the immense popularity of new media, including primarily Web 2.0 tools, politicians operate in a networked environment to gain an electorate, ensure its consolidation, polarize voters politically and strengthen their own legitimacy (Lakomy, 2013, p. 194). According to Darren G. Lilleker (2006, p. 72), e-politics refers to the embedding of political activity within the Internet, one that includes public activity as well as established political organizations. Therefore, e-politics may be implemented on different levels: institutional, systemic and civil. E-politics from the institutional perspective means the use of new technologies in political communication of the institutions (e.g. e-government), organizations and entities involved in active political action (e.g. websites of the political parties, political blogs, microblogs as Twitter, YouTube, computer games). From the systemic perspective, e-politics indicates the implementation of mechanisms of functioning of the political system from the point of view of democracy (e.g. e-voting, electronic political participation, the evolution of democratic principles). From the citizens' perspective, e-politics describes the role of network tools in influencing citizens (e.g. new social movements).

The development of the Internet has brought about an evolution from citizens to netizens, representing a new kind of grassroots driven democracy. Mark Drapeau (2009, p. 33) notes that the citizen 2.0 perceives the importance of democracy. This has evolved from the hitherto dominant model of passive participation to a participatory model. The interactive nature of the Internet is one of the main arguments for the democratic potential of this medium. The Internet is a medium created for various forms of activity, because it encourages critical reception of messages, expressing one's own views, and the ongoing expansion of knowledge. The Internet as a medium reinforces existing social relationships, stimulates the awareness and civic activities of its users. It has also allowed citizens to overcome the syndrome of alienation and uprooting that characterize modern times and offered a sense of community and solidarity implemented in new ways (Maj, 2009, pp. 176–177). Although virtual communities are not physical and do not employ the same models of communication and interaction as physical communities, the dynamics of internal interactions allows them to generate mutualism and support (Castells, 2008, p. 389). Manuel Castells (2008, p. 492) shows that a network-related social structure is a highly dynamic and open system that is susceptible to innovation at no risk to its balance.

Not only has the Internet become a new medium that facilitates the work of activists, it has also changed their organizational structures and operational procedures. The changes that have occurred in the circles of politically active Internet users can be analyzed on the levels of community, collective identity, democratic activities and the political system as a whole (Dorenda, 2010, p. 107). On account of wide access to the Internet, the weakest link in political processes – and in particular of political communication – the citizen, has considerably gained in significance due to enjoying better access to numerous mechanisms that facilitate participation in democratic processes (Lakomy, Porębski, Szybut, 2014, p. 11). The communication factor is of utmost importance here, since it exerts a considerable influence on the transformations in political participation. They generate a specific interaction between the rulers and the ruled, where the former can exercise a controlling function, initiate political processes and influence political decisions. The examples that follow refer to the public activities of both organized and spontaneous social movements that have brought about changes to political systems.

Examples

Out of numerous examples of new movements (The National League for Democracy, Myanmar/Burma, 1988; The Zapatista Army of National Liberation, Mexico, 1994; Red Devils, South Korea 2002; Color revolutions: Yugoslavia's Bulldozer Revolution, 2000; Georgian Rose Revolution, 2003; Ukrainian Orange Revolution, 2004; Iranian Green Movement, 2009; Arab Spring 2010/2011; Hundred Thousand Against the Internet Tax, Hungary, 2014; The Committee for the Defense of Democracy, Poland, 2015), three have been selected to be analyzed in this paper: The National League for Democracy in Burma, online organizations in South Korea and the activities of the opponents of authoritarian systems in Arab countries that led to the outbreak of the Arab Spring.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) in Myanmar was founded on September 27, 1988, and has become one of the most influential pro-democracy parties in Burma. The NLD won the 1990 parliamentary election, but the ruling military junta rescinded its results and took power.³ The party is headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, who also serves as the Honorary President of the Socialist International and is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate (1991). After the election, Suu Kyi was placed under home arrest, while other party members suffered persecution. Burmese minorities across the globe responded to the operations of the government, initiating on the Internet a struggle for democracy to be reinstated in their country. Users of such communication tools as email, online discussion groups and the *BurmaNet* (<http://www.burmanet.org>) portal covered the developments in Burma, thereby becoming an alternative source of information about the situation there. The government rapidly set up its own website and implemented restrictive laws that provided for imprisonment and fines for the possession of unregistered modem or fax devices (<http://www.myanmar.com>). In this way, the Internet became a platform for the struggle for power in Burma. Harvard University students joined this struggle, setting up the *Free Burma Coalition* website (<http://www.freeburmacoalition.org/>). One

³ The name of the country was decreed to change from Burma to Myanmar then. For more cf.: M. Lakomy, 2013, pp. 291–293.

of the main postulates promoted there was that the US should break relations with the government in Myanmar. In 1997, President Bill Clinton made the decision to impose a ban on relations with the Burmese military junta.

Regardless of the international criticism of the Burmese government's policy, the ruling military junta continued to breach human rights and persecute opposition activists. Mass protests against the policy of the government broke out in 2007 during the "Saffron Revolution." These were triggered primarily by the decision to raise food and fuel prices. The demonstrations were organized by Buddhist monks and the Burmese intelligentsia (Kobyłka, 2007). The protesters demanded the introduction of a democratic system, respect for religious freedom and putting a stop to the rise in gas prices and breaches of human rights. Although the demonstrations were peaceful, the authorities responded with violence, killing many monks. This was heavily criticized by Internet users who reported on the events as they unfolded. Due to grassroots pressure from the people and the determined standpoint taken by the international community (including the European Parliament adopting a Resolution on the situation in Burma, P6_TA(2008)0178) the renewal process was initiated.

The situation in Burma started to change in 2008: a new Constitution was adopted, political prisoners were released, censorship was abandoned, relations with the West improved, and Burma opened its borders to tourists and foreign investment. On November 13, 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from home arrest. Despite numerous reservations as to the intentions of Burmese authorities, especially as regards the non-democratic character of some constitutional provisions and the attempts to reinforce their position in the political system, a historic election took place in 2015, when the National League for Democracy won a sweeping parliamentary victory in both houses of the Assembly (Fisher, 2015). Although Suu Kyi could not become the President or Prime Minister on account of legal restrictions, she continues to serve as the party leader and sets the direction of changes in Myanmar. It can therefore be acknowledged that over a dozen years of struggling for democracy has been successful, and the process of political transformation has been initiated.

The second significant example of civil activity within the framework of e-politics involves political organizations in South Korea (The Red Devils, Nosamo Roho). The Internet developed quickly there, on account of the government project *Ten Million People Internet Education*, implemented from 1999–2005.⁴ South Korean society entered the global communication network, making it less polarized and more diverse as civil society began to grapple with previously neglected or marginalized issues, such as gender, youth, sexuality, disability and so on. As Soyang Park (2010, p. 201) noticed, "at the same time, its neo-liberal insertion in the changing global economy also reconfigured the relatively older issues of political and economic justice while society continued the process of democratic consolidation. One of the key vectors of this diversification and energization of the social forces in the post-authoritarian society was the development of a *netizen* culture, greatly enabled by the rapid spread of high-speed Internet networks after 1997."

In 2002, South Korea and Japan hosted the 17th FIFA World Cup. Football fans of the Korean national team from the Red Devils fan club started a website (<http://www>.

⁴ At present, South Korea is one of the eight leaders in online education, data by ICEF Monitor: <http://monitor.icef.com/2012/06/8-countries-leading-the-way-in-online-education/>, 15.03.2016.

reddevil.or.kr/) to exchange information and comments about the players and games. This website was used also to facilitate organizing support for the national team, such as fan zones, watching the games together and organizing marches after games were won, and so on. Their group identification was supported by wearing red tee-shirts, singing songs and dancing in the streets. The phenomenon of the Red Devils fans has become the most significant public event since the minjung movement in the 1980s. A tragic accident occurred during this football event, when two Korean school girls were killed. The perpetrators were US soldiers stationed in Korea. After they had been acquitted by a court, young people in Korea organized themselves online and took to the streets to demonstrate their aversion to Americans. On November 30, 2002, thousands of Koreans participated in the *Candle-light Anti U.S. Demonstrations*.

These events were taking place during a presidential election campaign. The presidential candidate, a member of the democratic opposition movement in the 1980s and human rights defender, Roh Moo-hyun, was among the participants of these demonstrations. He had set up his own website, starting in 2000, and his supporters established an online *Nosamo Roho* club (Lakomy, 2013, pp. 297–298). Roh Moo-hyun won the presidential elections in the early 2003 (in 2004, Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski distinguished him with the Order of the White Eagle). His election to the office of Korean President was perceived as the breakthrough in the political history of this country. Named the “Internet President,” Roh Moo-hyun has become independent from conservative elites, and become the guarantor of constitutional reforms (Park, 2010, pp. 212–213). This was among the reasons for the impeachment procedure initiated by parliament in 2004. His supporters protested in the streets of Korean cities against the motion to depose him. Having organized themselves online, the activists of *Nosamo* managed to summon approximately 50,000 protesters in Seoul to stage the greatest social demonstrations since 2002. Eventually, the President stayed in office by virtue of the verdict of the Constitutional Court.

The public activity of Korean society, undertaken both in the virtual and real worlds, evidences increased political participation and the development of civil society. These changes stem from cultural and historical factors on the one hand, and the common access to the Internet on the other. Given the opportunity to use new communication tools, Koreans are able to control their representatives in the authorities, initiate public debate and run political campaigns more efficiently than before, when they did not have access to the web. It should be also noted that increased online political participation has resulted in South Korea making the decision to implement a master plan for electronic voting, an agenda that introduced e-voting from 2005 in different elections at different phases.⁵

The last example of how the Internet was applied for political struggle, and the most serious one, was the Arab Spring revolution. It started at the turn of 2010 and 2011 and broke out as an expression of discontent with the economic, social and political situation in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. After many years of authoritarian regimes wielding power, widespread corruption, the lack of prospects and economic deterioration, an incident sufficed to spark the revolution. On December 17, 2010, a young Tunisian man, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire to protest against his humiliation and the confisca-

⁵ This plan was adopted by the National Election Committee in 2005 (Choi, 2006, pp. 65 & 73).

tion of his wares. He died in the first days of January 2011, and his death triggered mass protests (Dzisiów-Szuszczkiewicz, 2011, p. 43). Social media allowed Tunisians to communicate easily and efficiently without government control. The response of the military was also important. The Commander in Chief refused to defend the President and use force against the protesters (Armbruster, 2012, p. 67). This led to President Ben Ali fleeing the country with his family and a part of his enormous fortune.

The uprising in Egypt was organized primarily by young people from large cities. The events at the beginning of 2011 were started by a call posted on Facebook to commemorate Khaled Said,⁶ killed by the police. The first protests were staged during the “Day of Anger,” on January 25, when hundreds of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets of Cairo to demonstrate their opposition to President Mubarak’s regime. Further demonstrations featured the “Friday of Anger” (January 28) and the “March of One Million People” (February 1). Unlike in Tunisia, the authorities resorted to violence, which resulted in numerous casualties. Ultimately, President Mubarak resigned on February 11, and a Supreme Council of the Armed Forces took power in Egypt.

Both in Tunisia and Egypt, Facebook was used to organize and disseminate the news of the protests against the authorities, because this social medium had been translated into Arabic in 2009, thereby allowing the masses of ordinary people to access social media. According to Zeynep Tufekci (2014, p. 4), such a huge importance of social media for the spread of the revolution in Arab countries resulted from the “fact that the country went from an extremely controlled public sphere to a fairly open one in a short period of time. The effects of the introduction of the Internet were weaker in societies that were already more open, such as Western countries, because they did not experience the catalyst of going from a very controlled public sphere to an open, chaotic one in just a few years.” During the Arab Spring, social media attracted the attention of international opinion (and of other states, or international organizations, as in Libya and Syria), they made it possible to escape censorship and obtain information concealed by governments and, by this token, their users, first and foremost young people, were the carriers of democratization processes in this region (Tufekci, 2014, p. 2).

After the events in Tunisia and Egypt, similar demonstrations were staged in most Arab countries in response to the abuse of power, censorship and breaching of human rights. Their outcomes involved the deposition of dictators (in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya), new constitutions enacted (in Tunisia in 2014, Egypt in 2011 and 2014), election laws amended, free elections conducted and the onset of a process of political transformation. This region remains neither secure nor democratic, as evidenced by the civil war (in Syria) or the establishment of Islamic State. The events of 2011 certainly concluded the stage of authoritarian regimes and initiated a process of historic changes.

Remarks

The development of communication technologies and emergence of an information society has been accompanied by the growth of new social movements that use the internet as a platform for political interaction and, as a consequence, for common

⁶ Wael Ghonim, the author of this post has approximately 1.5 mln fans on Facebook.

participation to promote political change. In the above examples, social media were no longer a mere source of information and entertainment, and became the realm of general communication, mobilization and organization of new social and political movements that aimed at democratic changes. In authoritarian states that cannot fully control online activities (unlike other fields) the Internet often offers the only opportunity to conduct opposition activities and achieve democratic goals.⁷ It can therefore be said that such features of e-politics as: directness, openness, commonness, effectiveness, mass character, being out of control – especially from the citizens' perspective, make it possible to respond to a crisis of democracy and a need for action in a way which is always up-to-date. It is a kind of participatory democracy, and creates a democracy of new generation, representing a new concept of freedom and leading to a network society.

The development of the Internet of the second generation (Web 2.0) in the first decade of the 21st century created the necessary conditions for the expansion of the existing model of interaction between the rulers and the ruled. Network users acquired a tool with which they could take part in public debate as equal interlocutors. That's why the collective online presumption of policy is gaining in importance. It expands the sphere of public debate, because the content of new media increasingly penetrates the mainstream discourse (the political blogosphere, Twitter diplomacy). It appears both in authoritarian countries, as a protest against dictatorship and the struggle for freedom, and in democratic countries, in achieving important social goals.

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⁷ In democratic countries the outcomes are different – huge street protests brought on by austerity policies and inequality have not yet resulted in fundamental changes to these policies, perhaps because these protests do not signal the same capacity to threaten, disrupt, or replace government. See: Tufekci, 2014, p. 16.

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E-polityka w perspektywie obywatelskiej. Rola narzędzi sieciowych w wywieraniu wpływu na obywateli

Streszczenie

Postęp cywilizacyjny, wspierany przez rozwój nowych technologii, doprowadził do szeregu zmian społecznych, gospodarczych i politycznych. Społeczeństwo informacyjne, w jego oczekiwaniach i dostępie do wiedzy, znacząco wpłynęło na zmianę modelu demokracji, powodując pewien powrót do pierwotnych form komunikacji w relacjach obywatel-rząd. Towarzyszyło temu przesunięcie aktywności społecznej i obywatelskiej z realnego do świata wirtualnego. W literaturze przedmiotu wykorzystanie technologii informacyjnych i komunikacyjnych w systemie demokratycznym nazywa się elektroniczną demokracją. Jedną z jej form jest e-polityka, która jest realizowana na kilku poziomach: instytucjonalnym, systemowym i obywatelskim. Dobrym przykładem ostatniego typu są nowe ruchy społeczne, które w ostatnich latach wywarły znaczący wpływ na politykę.

Podstawowy problem badawczy tego artykułu dotyczy e-polityki w perspektywie obywatelskiej, realizowanej poprzez działania nowych ruchów społecznych, zwłaszcza o charakterze politycznym. Głównym celem badawczym jest zatem przedstawienie roli narzędzi sieciowych w wywieraniu wpływu na obywateli i ich aktywność prowadzącą do zmiany w systemie politycznym. Metody zastosowane w artykule to analiza przypadku i analiza porównawcza.

Słowa kluczowe: arabska wiosna, elektroniczna demokracja, e-partycypacja, e-polityka, Myanmar, nowe ruchy społeczne

