Facebook Revolutions:
The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract. The dramatic events in North Africa at the beginning of 2011 attracted the attention of the scholars and laymen alike and produced discussions on social media and their roles in Facebook, Twitter, or generally e-revolutions, as the protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Bahrain and some other countries were called. These revolutions led to anti-government protests in Macedonia and Croatia, while an attempt of organizing similar protests was noticed in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. The failed attempt of organizing anti-government protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrated the (im)possibility of encouraging citizens' activism through social media due to complex structures of the general public in the one hand, and limited scope of the cyberactivism through the social media on the other hand. Ethnic and political division in B&H proved to be a key factor in constituting public opinion via social networks, while virtual activism reflected the latent character of the general public. Regardless of the failure, the attempt of organizing anti-government protests via social media introduced a new phase of cyberactivism in B&H, and showed that activism depends not only on social media users, but also on a number of other social factors, which transgress from the offline world into online communities.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, social media, protests, ethnic public, online activism, social changes

Introduction

The role of the social media in the protests against absolutist and anti-democratic regimes in the Arab world in 2011 has been indisputably significant. Social media have certainly been a vital tool for communication among the protestors and their communication with the others.[1] Perhaps even more important is the fact that the social media have been an important communication channel with the traditional mass media, which accessed up-to-date information on protests via social networks and disseminated it to mass audience through their own channels. However, scholars and common people are of different opinion with regard to the role of the social internet networks in encouraging social activism in the field and their role in encouraging social changes. The Arab countries' case showed a high level of harmonization between the online and offline social activism during the anti-government protests, when, despite the repressive measures imposed by the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and some other countries, opposition found ways to communicate and coordinate protests. Successful protestors used Facebook as their primary means to inform the public of their course of action and to communicate among themselves (Wright, 2011). The Libyan government occasionally denied public access to the Internet during the protests, as did the Egyptian government. However, they did not succeed in preventing protest activities, and despite the imposed restrictions, the social media significantly contributed to toppling dictatorships in the aforementioned countries (Satti and Mohamed-Nour, 2005). In the countries of Former Yugoslavia cyber protests first emerged in Macedonia and Croatia in 2010, while an attempt of organizing cyber protests was made in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. The Croatian case proved that social networks can, to a certain extent, attract protesters from the offline world, although no major social changes have resulted from this case, whereas the BH case showed that online activism couldn't achieve as much as organizing protests.

At the beginning of 2010 two Facebook groups were created: *Partija rada BiH / BH Labor Party* and *Svi na ulice / To the Streets,* with an aim, as it was stated on these groups' pages, to organize anti-government protests. *BH Labor Party* called for protests in Sarajevo on February 28th, 2011 via their FB page, but the attempt ended as a complete failure. Not even the organizer showed up for the protest. Two days later the other FB group, *To the Streets*, called for new protests and gathering, also in Sarajevo. With the exception of a few media representatives, once again, no one showed up. On the following days one of the groups was closed, marking the end of the first e-revolution in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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[1] Among the first e-revolutions were the anti-government protests in Moldova in 2009, named the Twitter revolution after the social network was used as a tool of reporting on protests.

Although this poor attempt of organizing protests failed in drawing the attention of the media or public, it is nevertheless interesting for the analysis of the phenomenon of the e-revolution and e-public opinion in B&H context. What was the role of the internet social networks in this attempt? Why was this model more successful in some countries but not in Bosnia and Herzegovina? How did the public perceive the possibility of organizing anti-government protests via social networks?

Theoretical background

Although scholars' opinion on investigating the influence of the internet networks on shaping public opinion and transforming it into action differ, it is clear that the power of these networks reflects mostly in the possibilities of establishing communication among different nods and avoiding official (institutional) channels, even at the wider public level, which was rather inconceivable in the traditional mass communication model. Regardless of the type of the group organizing the protests, it is of essential importance to inform the public of the aims of the protest in order to gain their support. Until recently, this could only be done via traditional mass media. However, the problem with the mass media is that the traditional media take inconsistent interest in social movements of such a character. They either give them primary interest or completely ignore them, or cease coverage shortly after the initial reporting of the events (Bennett, 2003b). Therefore, the groups organizing protests are never certain whether the public will be informed of their objectives and activities. The emergence of the Web 2.0 applications, which enabled social network creation and functioning, has profoundly changed communication patterns, and consequently, the character of activism of the formal and informal groups gathered around the common goal.

Scholars who have been researching into the features of online activism through social networks and its impact on the society claim that these networks represent a powerful tool of communication in mobilizing protests and demonstrations that can lead to social changes (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005; Langman, 2005; Wasserman, 2007). The Egyptian Facebook activists hence 'took up and extended the political platform that the Kifaya[2] movement had introduced into Egyptian political life, the same exact platform that has brought millions of Egyptians into the street these days' (Hirschkind, 2010). Anti-government protests in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya developed into full-scale revolutions, while some other countries failed to achieve such result. Certain scholars argue that the main reason for the absence of such a result is the fact that online activism is built around weak ties, which characterize low-risk activism, contrary to high-risk activism

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[2] Egyptian revolutionary movement (translated as 'Enough')

characterized by strong ties, typical of traditional revolutionary movements (McAdam,1986). Weak ties, typical of the social media, connect people who do not know each other in real life and only communicate occasionally; in that respect, an additional problem is the creation of fake profiles and features, which cannot be a basis for establishing strong ties. Ties of such nature limit the social media domain; thus, the social media have been recently linked to a so-called Dragonfly Effect. Andy Smith and Jennifer Aaker, the authors of the book *The Dragonfly Effect: Quick, Effective, and Powerful Ways To Use Social Media to Drive Social Change,* identify the advantages of the social media in pursuing specific goals. The authors refer to the case of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur Sameer Bhatia, diagnosed with leukemia, who needed a bone marrow transplant but couldn't find a match among his friends or family. In the attempt to save his friend's life, Bhatia's business partner sent an e-mail to all of his friends urging them to help Bhatia, who then forwarder the mail to their friends and posted similar content on their friends' Facebook pages and YouTube. Ultimately, 25,000 possible donors registered, one of whom a perfect match for Bhatia. According to the authors, short-term social campaigns like this one can produce extraordinary effects, but cannot cause social changes. Although the Western powers have approved of the role of the social media in overthrowing authoritarian regimes, at the same time, they insisted on filing lawsuits against the WikiLeaks (Morozov, 2011). Therefore, it is still difficult to discuss the precise effect of the social media. Furthermore, there are some other factors limiting the emergence of the social changes encouraged by the online activism. Theoretical discussions (Bennett, 2003a; McAdam, 2001; Mozorov, 2011), identify some other reasons which limit social changes spurred by online activism: non-hierarchical organizational structure, weak ties among the network members and the absence of a recognizable leader. Regardless of the conflicting roles of the social media in social movements, this is a rather interesting subject-matter yet to be investigated by a number of scholars. Social media as "communication tools may not lead to revolution immediately, but they provide a new rhetorical space where a new generation of leaders can think and speak freely. In the long run, this ability to create a new public sphere, parallel to the one controlled by the state, will empower a new generation of social actors, though perhaps not for many years"[3] (Zukerman, 2011: 2).

Methodology and analysis

Our research was built on the assumption that social media members in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot transform their cyberactivism into offline activism, nor can they constitute the dominant public opinion in terms of initiating anti-

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[3] http://ethanzuckerman.com/blog/index.php?s=psiphon (accessed on June 11, 2011.)

government protests. The research involved collecting data on B&H internet social media users, their profiles and habits. Then followed a quantitative analysis of the two sites initiated for the purposes of mobilizing anti-government protests, and a qualitative analysis of the comments posted by the respective pages' members and visitors. Furthermore, specially designed Lickert scale questionnaires were used on the random sample of 100 Facebook users to investigate their attitudes to this issue.

The unemployed dental technician Ivan Pernar is considered to be the organizer of the so-called Facebook protests in Croatia. Shortly after creating the group *Započnimo revoluciju u Hrvatskoj / Let's Start a Revolution in Croatia*, Prenar managed to gather more than 30,000 votes and, more importantly, mobilize the protesters to gather in the streets of Zagreb. The anti-government protests soon turned against HTV (Croatian Radio-Television / Croatian Public Broadcaster) and the leading publishing house in Croatia EPH (Europress Holding), which, according to the organizers of the protests, incorrectly reported the number of protestors. At the same time, war veteran associations took the streets of Zagreb; however, the veterans kept their distance from the Facebook protests, linking them to the government. The government, on the other hand, held the opposition accountable for the protests, while the opposition denied any connection with the protests, which generally caused widespread confusion. The failure of e-protestors to coordinate their activities and join forces with certain non-governmental organizations was reflected in poorly presented demands and the inability of keeping the initial support from the citizens. Other Croatian cities encountered a somewhat weaker effect of the Facebook revolution, Zagreb protests soon ended and Ivan Pernar formed a political party. These protests inspired B&H cyber activists to do the same thing by forming the groups *To the Streets* and *B&H Labor Party*. On the day of the protests Facebook group *To the Streets* counted more than 25,000 members, while the other group had far less members and an insignificant number of posts and comments, which were not included in the analysis. During the research period (a week prior to the first announced offline protests) the page had 168 posts with 1,680 likes and over 8,000 comments. The comments were divided into negative, positive and neutral. The comments related to subjects' attitudes towards the anti-government protests, so that positive comments reflected the opinion that it was possible to organize the protests, the negative claimed it was impossible to do so, while the neutral comments referred to some other issues that the visitors discussed.

There were 23% positive comments, 31% neutral comments, while the negative comments accounted for 64% of all comments. It is interesting to note that a significant portion of negative comments (21%) related to ethnic and national

issues.[4] Furthermore, a number of visitors expressed a rather negative opinion of the group's founder and administrator. 46% of the respondents completed the questionnaires, but only 35% of them were valid. Most of the respondents agreed with the claim that it was possible to mobilize mass anti-government protests (85%) but not via social media (27%), and claimed that online activism could not be simply transformed into offline action. The role of the leader (organizer of the protests) was regarded highly and most of the respondents claimed it was important who the leader of prospective protests would be (81%). Ethnicity of the leader and protestors was also stressed out as very important (58%).

Discussion

Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of two entities and one district: the Republika Srpska, the Federation of B&H and Brčko District. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is administratively divided into 10 cantons and mostly populated by Bosniaks and Croats, while the majority of Republika Srpska and Brčko District population consists of Serbs. The estimated population of Bosnia and Herzegovina is approximately 3.8 million (48.3% of which Bosniaks, 34% Serbs, 25.4% Croats, and 2.3% of other ethnicities).

The country is among the poorest in the region with underdeveloped economy, declining industry and a high unemployment rate. The average net wage is less than 400 Euro, the balance of trade is negative, since import is double the value of export, the unemployment rate is 24,1% , while GDP barely exceeds 3,000 Euro per capita. (B&H Agency for Statistics, 2011). It is estimated that more than 20% of employees work without a permit, which in addition to high Corruption

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[4] Some of the comments on the site *To the Streets*: "My good friend, Bosniak, asked me if I celebrated the Bosnian Independence Day? He knows I am not a nationalist, that I never resort to nationalism, but he also knows I can think for myself and that I have my own opinion! I was offended that he ... asked me something like that! I told him – what's there to celebrate, maybe what came after, the fratricide – it was March 1st, 1992 !!!!; Turks, is there any b*** among you available for a slow dance? .... We attacked you motherf*****, we f***** your Turkish mothers and your uncles' mothers as well"; "Mad, Vahid is written with a capital V, you could have written in Cyrillic letters I can read Cyrillic letters as well, your people attacked me in the war but I have survived and even after the war I survive, just so you know ALLAH IS THE GREATEST" ...."Vahid, you belong to a lower class, you are the traitor to SERBIAN PEOPLE, of course I'll write your name with lower-case letter v, got that .... another thing you fled from the war, but you won't escape from us the next time !!!!!!!!" Eldin I see you watch SERBIAN FILMS, such as We're not Angels 3, hahahahaha, just take the icon lamp and convert to Orthodoxy, I promise that I will not slaughter you, boooaahahaha'" "Motherf****** Serb.. . Your mother is a f****** stinking whore. ... You are Serbs b******. … I wish there was another war so I could f*** you up. ... you attacked the unarmed people, women and children and you think you are f****** heroes. … If I saw you I'd slaughtered your mother with my own teeth you motherfuc****... provocative piece of sh***"

Perception Index,[5] represents an obvious economic and social issue. However, political division and ethnic polarization of the population in B&H is still perceived as one of the key issues and obstacles to progress and democratic processes. Although the current B&H structure of government was established by Dayton Agreement in 1995, almost 20 years later the constitutive peoples have not yet accepted it as the optimal solution to their expectations. The political scene of B&H perceives the Agreement as the means of coercion of the division of the country into entities, hence restating the conflict, genocide and ethnic cleansing. Serbian public, on the other hand, perceives RS as its legal and territorial entity since 1992, which was not "formed by Dayton Agreement, but was merely verified by it; therefore, the existence of RS cannot be brought into question. The Croatian political scene argues that Dayton Agreement opened a Croatian national issue, structuring the society at the expense of the Croatian people. They try to resolve their dissatisfaction by demanding formation of the third entity" (Mujagić, 2010: 57). Political situation was further radicalized in 2011, after the general election held in October 2010, when it took more than 6 months to constitute entity government, while the state government has not been constituted almost one year after the election. This brief overview implies that B&H is a favorable ground for organizing anti-government protests similar to those organized in a number of European and non-European countries recently. There have been occasional instances of protests led by several organizations or social categories, which would end protest shortly after the government or organization management would meet their demands. However, no significant anti-government protests caused by unfavorable conditions in the country took place. Not even after the attempt of mobilizing such protests via internet social media. Internet social media are very popular in B&H. The most popular social network among internet users is Facebook,[6] with over one million members (a quarter of the population), which places B&H on the 72nd place in the world. The majority of the members are aged 18-24, more than 340,000, followed by the group of users aged 25-34 (Socialbakers, 2011). Other social networks are not as popular and merely 5% of the B&H population uses Twitter, while only 1% of the Internet users in B&H use MySpace. According to GfK BH, approximately 1/3 of Facebook users in B&H are not members of any groups, but 12% of them have joined over 50 different

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[5] Corruption Perceptions Index 2008: 3.2 (92nd out of 180 countries) Transparency International report http://www.transparency.org/publications/gcr/gcr_2009#6.4 (accessed on June 20, 2011).
[6] Facebook already has over 800,000 users, half of which logs in on a daily basis. Average user has 130 friends on the site and is connected to 80 community pages, groups and events. More than 2 billion posts are liked or commented and over 250 milllion photos are uploaded daily. Facebook is a genuine global network available in over 70 languages, and almost 500 mobile operators provide services to more than 350 million users who access Facebook via a mobile device every day (Facebook Statistics 2011). http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics (accessed September 18, 2011).

groups. As a matter of fact, 155 of the users formed a group. Of all the services that Facebook has to offer, B&H users mostly use FB chat services, 53% use chat at least once a day, followed by e-mailing used by 43% of users on a daily basis, commenting on friends' posts (23%) and playing online games (19%). Other activities such as posting photos, taking tests, data search or browsing advertisements are less practiced. (GfK BiH, 2011).

Behavioral patterns of Facebook members were reflected in the manners of online communication among the members of the groups created to mobilize and coordinate anti-government protests. Despite the fact that the protest groups gathered more than 25,000 members in matters of days, their internal communication was absent and their activism reduced to occasional *likes* and comments, which often escalated to heated arguments spurred by ethnic intolerance. Online activism in B&H has not even succeeded in cultivating a leader, such as Wael Ghonim, a Google regional marketing director, a key person in organizing protests in Egypt, Dschalal Al-Kwafi, a Libyan blogger who called for protests, Mohammed Bouazizi, a street vendor who set himself on fire in protest against the government's repressive measures, thus inciting revolution in Tunisia, or Tal-Al Mallouhi, a blogger from Syria accused of spying for a foreign country, sentenced to 20 years of prison. These people are internationally recognized as leaders or initiators of the e-revolutions. In the B&H case, the creator and administrator of one of the pages remained virtually unknown for the general public. The creator of the FB group To the Streets was mentioned only in the page visitors' comments, mostly negative ones, which accuse him of various misdeeds ranging from having dozens of fake profiles or groups favorable for economic and political marketing to being a fraud from Switzerland, a shady character in need of spotlight and so on. These comments[7] reflected the B&H public perception of

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[7] Some of the comments: "Against Safet Kurtovic Salatana," "to the creator of this page:, let me tell you something, we were on the hills fighting from '92 to '95 and we have had enough of this crap, why don't you come here and be here, on the streets, it is easy to bullshit from Switzerland you don't give a shit," "People let this go, can't you see that this guy is screwing with us from Switzerland. Calm your passions and let this jerk get a good psychiatrist and start with the treatment ... He invited us to the streets, you go to the streets MF, you don't care that the poor would suffer again, why don't you come to Bosnia and do the same thing, we'd kick the crap out of you "STUPID JERK... There is no government, or party in the world for which I would take arms again\ I WAS A FOOL I HAD DONE IT THE FIRST TIME\ None of the B&H parties work for the people, they fill their own pocket with ministerial salaries, they fight to get as much as they can while on duty and when you catch them in the act they say \ THE PEOPLE VOTED FOR ME \ the people did vote for you, but you should work honestly and not steal," "This man is a fraud named Safet Kurtovic, he has been creating fake FB profiles and groups under false names for years. Alić said that he was a victim of the fraud by Safet Kurtović. According to the available information from the Facebook profiles that bear his name, Safet Kurtović lives in Switzerland, and was born in Novi Pazar. Sources claim that the purpose of his activities in Facebook groups that have an enormous number of members, mostly naive people, who support the declaration of the specified goals for positive change, is a matter of trade.

leadership as inherently deceptive, manipulating and frustrating, which is in accordance with the public opinion polls on political leaders in B&H.[8] The public opinion on issues of importance to our research was in line with the results of the research into the features of the political scene in B&H, which is, according to some scholars (Nuhanović, 2004; Mujagić et al., 2010), built upon the ethnic axes, unable to recognize the common grounds beyond the national, or rather nationalistic scope, and hence latent and responsive only when one's vital national interests are endangered (Nuhanović, 2004). This was also reflected in the comments posted both by the members and visitors of the FB protest groups and other users of this social network, who stated this was an important issue, even in the domain of the cyber activism. A rather insignificant number of posts, as opposed to numerous likes and comments posted by the visitors, demonstrate there was no hierarchical structure within the group, nor was there any coordination among the members. The very fact that only reporters showed up for the protests indicate that cyberactivism failed to initiate offline demonstrations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The FB group *To the Streets* continued with its online activities and now has over 35,000 members. No further calls for the protests or anti-government demonstration have been made by the group.

Conclusions

Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently in one of the most critical political and economic crises since the end of the 1992-1995 war. The state government has not been constituted even one year after the general election of October 2010, economic crisis is more severe than ever, the unemployment rate is on the rise and the geranial safety is rather worrying. However, no strong protests[9] which would lead to significant social changes have been organized. The attempt to mobilize B&H citizens to protest and initiate the change in the country failed only three days after its inception and thus demonstrated that the possibilities offered by web 2.0 platforms do not account for much unless supported by well-coordinate activities in the offline realm. B&H cyber protestors have not succeeded in transforming their

Large Facebook groups are suitable for every type of marketing, from commercial to political, and a good business plan and personal advantage often hides behind the alleged calls for a change".
[8] In the Global Corruption Barometer Report for 2008 BH political parties and their leaders were evaluated as the most corrupted among the political parties and leaders of South East Europe (http://www.google.ba/#hl=hr&q=report.globalintegrity.org+2008+bosna+politi%C4%8Dke&aq=f&aqi=&aql=&oq=&fp=e6f8b95ae44abb&biw=1280&bih=576, (accessed on April 24th, 2011).
[9] With the exception of war veteran protests in 2010, or students' protests in February 2010, which managed to gather over 3,000 protestors. However, these were not anti-government protests; the main reason for initiating the protests was the protestors' dissatisfaction with high public transport fares!

online activism into offline action and gather the protestors in the streets. Their cyberactivism was reduced to posting links, likes and comments, thus rendering it to one-click activism. Not even in the virtual world have the members and visitors of the group managed to constitute a dominant opinion or achieve political consensus on the issue, solution or aims of the protests, let alone initiate social changes, hence reflecting and retaining the ethnic and national divisions of the offline public even in the online realm. The low-risk activism in Bosnia, typical of social networks, did not evolve into a high-risk activism which characterizes revolutionary social movements, but it did mark a new era of the political activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Transforming the internet-supported activism to internet-based activism (Van Aelst, 2004) will be the next phase of cyberactivism in B&H when the offline realm reaches a consensus on social changes and public grows from ethnic-oriented to civic-oriented.

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Further resources

http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/bosnia-and-herzegovina − last visit on September 30, 2011.)

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