

Social Protests in 2011: International Perspective and Information Access

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the interrelation of social protesting and informal economy, core values of protesting class and the level of information accessibility for the ones involved in social unease. To perform this analysis we have used both quantitative and qualitative data: qualitative data was related to the core values of protestants and was collected via semantic analysis of their social media posts. To perform quantitative evaluation, we have used the rankings on Internet freedom and mass media transparency; yet as the main analytical tool was semantic, the conclusion on how core values influence person's desire to be involved in social protests was made on the basis of qualitative analysis. The research had confirmed that growth rate of informal economy is a good predictor of possible unease based on dignity-based values.

Keywords: Communication, information accessibility, Arab spring, social protests, Internet, social networking, Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

2011 has been referred to as a year of social protests started with Arab spring and then witnessed bloodshed in Zhanaozen in Kazakhstan, which appears to have a few common specific features. First of all, those movements seem to have no distinct leader – and henceforth they are quite different from Rose and Orange revolutions of mid-2000. Secondly, it usually looks like the aims of those social movements are quite unclear even for their leaders, and at the same time, one is able to find very different people among participants of social protests. Finally, these protests are claimed to be connected with Internet-based societies, since almost all of protesting communities were organized with a help of Facebook, YouTube or Twitter.

The main question which occurs if one starts to analyze social protests of 2011 is why they happened only in 2011. The problems that had caused those protests were present in the countries in question for a long while, so we would argue that protesting level is related information accessibility, and information accessibility seems to be the factor defining scale of social protest.

Proposition 1. 2011 social protests were influenced by the information accessibility (available from mass media sources and social media which plays a role of a

certain filter and allows people to check experts' opinions which are quoted by regular mass media.

We would argue that the suggested theoretical framework and measuring instrument can predict social unease outburst in the short-term period.

Proposition 2. The growth rate of informal economy in case of limited or partly limited information accessibility is a signal of upcoming social protests in the country. In case information inflow is limited or restricted massive rebellions are postponed and are likely to occur when information becomes accessible.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The main analytical tool that was used for the purposes of this study was text analysis, performed manually. The authors were searching the keywords used by the parties both involved in social protesting and the ones that were against such involvement. To achieve this goal the authors have collected posts from the social media, specifically looking for the posts explaining personal motivation for being involved in protesting, and the supportive and opportunistic comments to such posts.

The search for data involved studying over 1000 posts of the described nature in Russian, Syrian, Moroccan, Tunisian, Belorussian and Kazakhstan social media, and over 2500 comments on those posts (keeping the parity of supportive and opportunistic

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comments). The limitations of the study arise from the fact that only a part of social media posts were analyzed (in accordance with language limitations – we have read the posts in Russian, Belorussian, English, Spanish and French, while the ones in Arabic, for instance, were left out). Still the dataset was balanced in terms of gender and supportive and opportunistic comments thus allowing the authors to draw conclusions from the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to understand the reasoning behind social protests which occurred in 2011, and also to find out why did it happen only recently (taking into account that leaders overthrown in Arab spring were in power for over 30 years, Belarus and Kazakhstan leaders – over 20 years, etc., and for a few years they had been acting the same as they did in 2011) we would like to cite people's reasoning as it was expressed in social networking systems (citations are given from informational agencies reports, Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte and YouTube services).

First of all we took a look at Arab spring reasoning, and feel it is necessary to provide some quotations. "You don't want to see this, it's horrible, but you must. You have a moral obligation to look at what is happening in your country."; "This is revolution of dignity" (Tunisia). "The politicians want us to remain apathetic. So my message to others is: do something. Act on your ideas." (Nicaragua). "I'm 27 years old, and I have nothing, nothing for the future. I'm single, frustrated in this country. ...I don't know what exactly the future will be with this bad situation" (Yemen). "We need to build our state. We have to depend on law in the future. We shouldn't do what our regime did for decades" (Syria). "We no longer want to be subjects. We want to be citizens." (Morocco).

As it can be seen from the citations, one can figure out that 1) there is a certain list of most important values Arab spring was expressing and 2) there is one specific feature which had, in our opinion, been overlooked in current research of those events. In order to understand the first finding we need to mention that R.Barrett, whose values assessment framework we are using in this research, had figured the following values for Arab spring (Barrett, 2011): freedom, equality, accountability, justice, fairness, openness and transparency, which belong to self-esteem, transformation, internal cohesion and service levels in cultural transformation tools framework (or self-esteem

level in Maslow pyramid). Though we do not argue that those values were important for those who came out in the street to protest, but we would like to mention that quite a few things are ignored in this list of values. In our opinion, the keywords missed are the following: taking responsibility, teamwork, making a difference by mutually beneficial alliances and future generations. Those values also belong to the levels of internal cohesion, making a difference and service, but are focused on collective values rather than an individual.

As for the second finding, it is worth mentioning that people who were behind Facebook and Twitter organization of social protesting in Arab spring are the ones *who are better off than most people in their country*. At least, they are able to buy devices one needs to connect to virtual social networks; and this is not common for Arab spring countries where a large share of population is poor. Henceforth we can see that those protests have occurred because some people had seen long-term perspective and because of those people's desire for dignity, making world a better place, and working together to provide sustainable future for coming generations, while their governments were focused on economic stability, traditions and bureaucracy. It is important to mention, that people had started to believe that overcoming poverty is something that can be done by an individual himself (or herself), while creation of worth-living environment for the children is something that has to be done together, and every single person is responsible for this. So in terms of Maslow pyramid their motivation focus in on self-actualization level rather than self-esteem, and in terms of Barrett's pyramid Arab spring values are focused on common good levels evenly.

It was even more interesting to take a look at people's motivation in Kazakhstan, Belarus and Russia where the quality of life is much higher than in Maghreb countries, and population in general is older (which means people have much more to lose). Those in favor of protesting were expressing the following opinions (quotations from YouTube, Facebook and VKontakte). "Free Belarus, no Lukashenko", "We are not cattle and do not need a shepherd"; "It's not the question of desire to join European Union, we just want to live in a normal country with normal president" (Belarus, December 2010).

"When I have seen Dubai, I've been crying so hard that my husband wanted to call ambulance. They have been producing oil for just 20 years, and we here – for 40! Our money was used to build Astana...and I have

nowhere to go out with my children, they have to spend all the time at home”; “We’ve said (to police) – you have no right to beat us”; “We were peaceful, we could not believe police would be shooting”; “One should not be ashamed of fear, it is shame not to overcome it one day”; “I hope they (rebels) would succeed, since we did not had the guts to start it ourselves” (Kazakhstan, December 2011).

According to those citations we can prove the above thesis, that people taking part in social protest in relatively prosperous countries and prosperous regions (oil industry workers in Kazakhstan are considered to be ones who are most well-paid, while in Russia and Belarus the protests burst out in relatively wealthy capital cities) are driven by sense of responsibility, desire to make their countries a better place for their children, provide the rule of law – and do it all by means of teamwork (which can be indirectly proven by the fact that people were fleeing into the streets only in case of joint actions but not for certain politicians). Again, their main motivation is self-esteem and self-actualization, and values belong to the levels of common good. Approximate structure of main values of those involved in studied social protests, developed on the basis of content and semantic analysis can be seen of Figure 1.

As it can be seen from the figure, all range of values in terms of Barrett’s model is present with a visualized focus on common good and internal cohesion. It is also

worth mentioning the presented distribution is quite balanced. At the same time those people feel that their values are different from the ones promoted by the governments who are focused on survival and relationship values (rarely – at self-esteem level). Moreover, in a few cases this category of citizens was insulted by the suggestion that all people need is redistribution of a bit of government money.

On the opposite, it is also interesting to analyze the reasoning of the opponents of civil protesting (some quotations come from social networks can be found below). “Those who protest are being paid by Aliev *et al.* in order to overthrow our stability”; “Rebels are swelling with obesity! They do not work hard in oil industry. I have worked my whole life and I am satisfied with everything”; “I do not understand those brainless gits who sold our Motherland for a small sum of money and disturbed our rest!!” (Kazakhstan, December 2011). “Common Belarusians stand for Lukashenko. A couple of hundreds of renegades on the Independence square are not common people”; “Those who were paid by NATO and EU and go out in the streets should rot in prison!”; “Those who are against Lukashenko are against common people. These are the ones who want to keep stealing, speculating and at the same time skip tax-paying” (Belarus, December 2010). “Those who are in favor of changes just do not want to work. Russian conditions for business are much better than American”; “People have sold their Motherland for foreign money”; “Don’t provoke God’s wrath, Russia

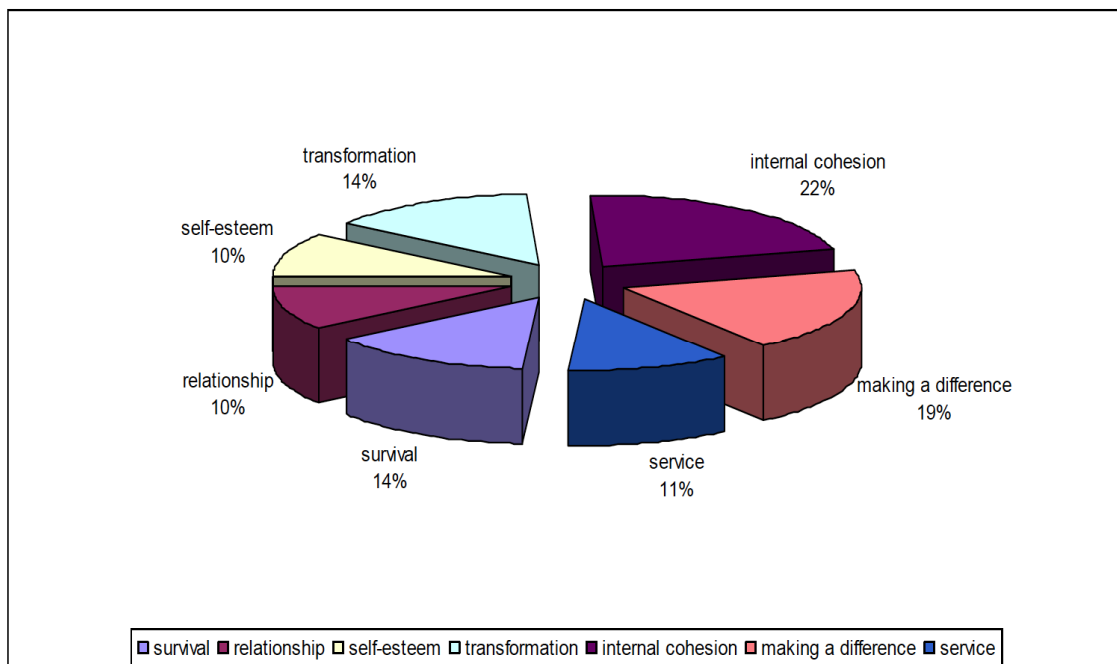


Figure 1: Distribution of values considered important by participants of 2011 social protesting wave.

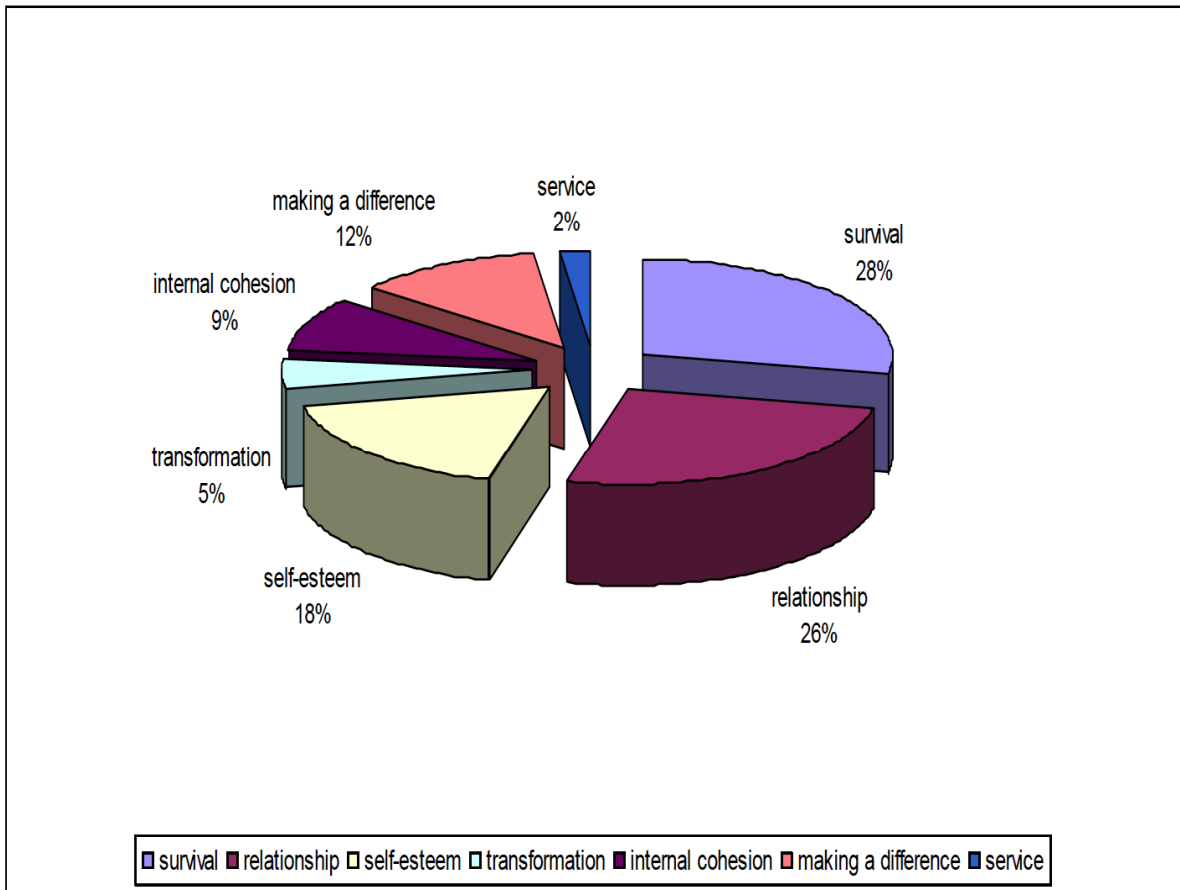


Figure 2: Distribution of values considered important by opponents of 2011 social protesting wave participants.

has everything!” (Russia, December, 2011). The balance between values expressed by those who are against social protesting is shown on Figure 2.

From those quotations one can figure out that reasoning for avoiding social protests lies in the lower levels of Maslow pyramid, or on levels of survival and relationship of Barrett’s model, and for some reasoning those values are opposed to the values of self-actualization, transformation and common good. This fact, in our opinion, is the consequence of prejudice flourishing in countries with high growth rate of informal economy: it is considered there that the only way to gain wealth is to redistribute existing wealth inside the country while it is impossible to increase existing amount of wealth (which can be illustrated by means of comparison of the data shown on figures 1 and 2). One can see that the greatest fear of those who are against civil protesting is that they would be unable to access even those bits of well-being which they had finally gained access to. We think that this prejudicial contradiction is the main reason why social protest had occurred only in 2011, and this fact is related to information accessibility in the sample countries in case

of limited informational access this prejudice concerning wealth is flourishing.

At this point we can state that the second proposition made in this paper is also confirmed by the results of qualitative analysis.

THE ROLE OF INFORMATION ACCESSABILITY IN SOCIAL PROTESTING

In this study we consider information accessibility to the one of the main factors of increased social protesting wave, but we believe this is not an independent factor but an auxiliary factor which affects people’s motivation profile and dominating values. By full information accessibility in this paper we mean that it is possible for any adult person to gain access to any type of information via mass media, Internet sources or social networks; the question of trust and validity of information received by a person is his or her own responsibility (we consider, that in case different sources of information are available people would be able to decide whether information is trustworthy or not if they really want to do it). In order to test this hypothesis we have investigated interdependence

between the level of social unease and accessibility of information within the country and between informal economy dynamics and the level of information accessibility. Both tests had shown weak negative association: for dependence between level of social unease and accessibility of information within the country Pearson coefficient for sample countries is equal -0.5759 , and for interdependence between informal economy dynamics and the level of information accessibility it is equal -0.48 for the same sample. This proves that there is some relation between accessibility of information and the level of social unease.

The other reason for existence of relation between information accessibility and social unease scale can be received from qualitative analysis of Ukrainian and Georgian experience of successful social protesting: the Orange and Rose revolutions. The result of both was increased access to information; the opposite results where that in Georgia people had witnessed economic growth and that had proved to a certain amount of population that country can earn surplus wealth which is distributed within the country, while in Ukraine economic path had gone back to redistribution of wealth, and henceforth the idea of impossibility of efficient reforms on the basis of civil protests was proven. At the same time in Georgia the share of informal economy after Rose revolution had decreased dramatically, while in Ukraine it was increasing.

Those facts had led us to test the following hypothesis: we suggested that informational accessibility is influencing not social unease itself, but values and motivation of people. This can be proved by semantic analysis of main ideas expressed by participants who were pointing out that they are treated without any respect, being told they need to be guided since people themselves are unable to solve problems – and at the same time those participants had witnessed a high level of inefficiency in everything government was doing, and mentioned they were able to do it because they'd finally gained access to different sources of information. It was also proven by means of semantic analysis that informational restrictions had directly caused arising of the sense of citizenship, responsibility, desire for rule obedience and efficiency. In case of information access is free the process of developing those values is natural and runs smoothly and evenly, while in case of restricted access to information people tend to seek all kind of sources providing data, and the process of developing values in question becomes spasmodic (uneven). On the next

step of the process people suddenly become aware that they are not the only ones seeking information for analysis, and they are restricted to do so. This, in turn, provides a shift in motivation profile of potential protests participants towards self-esteem and self-actualization; at the same time understanding of need for common good values together with a feeling there is a team of people thinking along those lines becomes the starting point for social protesting wave – and on this stage society only awaits some catalyst to start protests. But the platform of the protesting is opposition of people's motivation and general trend of countries' disrespect for certain values. At the same time this process is uneven in case information access is restricted, henceforth fewer people than there could be are involved in social protesting.

In order to test the last thesis we have introduced information accessibility as a raising factor. The idea that information accessibility can become a factor of economic changes was proven for the situation of Indian women development which was associated with TV wide-spreading within the country (Levitt&Dubner, 2010; Verick 2005). In this study we have adopted a similar idea. In case the country had no restrictions on information accessibility (in developed economies) multiplying coefficient was taken equal to 1, which meant the scale of social protesting as estimated at the first step was maximum. In case there are economic restrictions (for example, some people in the country are unable to gain Internet access due to insufficient income) multiplying coefficient was introduced between 1.1-1.3. In case of Internet surveillance multiplying coefficient between 1.3-1.5 was introduced and it was increased if there were both surveillance and economic barriers present in informational environment of the country. Finally, maximum multiplying coefficient equal to 2 was introduced for so-called "enemies of the Internet" which were observed in this study – China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Uzbekistan and Vietnam, where one can find official restrictions imposed on information access. We have also taken into consideration the fact that in case regular mass media are censored in the country, information accessibility is dependent on the availability of independent sources of information, first of all on Internet-based resources, which means that mainly relatively prosperous citizens have maximum access to information in order to analyze current situation.

CONCLUSION

Research results indicate the interrelation between the growth of informal economy, main values of those

involved in the protests and the information accessibility level: the main reason for 2011 social protesting was their pursuit for the clear “rules of the game” which would be the same for every citizen, and are willing to take responsibility for creation of such society; and keywords for their behavior are desire to leave informal sector, taking responsibility and future generations concern. Such an approach explains why 2011 social protesting movements were driven by relatively prosperous people and do not have distinct leaders; the main idea of those movements was to create environment where nation’s well-being.

Within future research it would also be meaningful to investigate the idea of interrelation between dynamics of informal economy and social unease, increasing the dataset by incorporating the data based upon local social unease that occurred after massive riots in 2011-2012.

Finally in order to prove the truthfulness of proposition 2, we have checked correlation between the share of informal economy and social protests movement (which could have been another reason for social unease). This test was, as we felt, necessary, since the two countries which were part of Arab spring but witnessed decrease of informal economy share (Burkina Faso and Lebanon) had the share of informal economy over 30% which is considered dangerous for country’s economic development. Pearson correlation between the share of informal economy and level of social unrest appeared to be equal to +0.1575 which means there is no association between the two. Henceforth we can definitely state that it is informal economy dynamics that matters, but not its share in the economy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University

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