

### “The Arab awakening from the Serbian Perspective”



#### подршка пријатељу

An innate interest for geopolitical affairs (as a consequence of the geographic location and accumulated historical experiences), as well as paying a considerably close attention to events on the global scale (being aware that they shape our lives far more than it might seem at first), resulted in the fact that the public opinion in Serbia very sophisticatedly differentiates amongst the finesses present on the world's political stage for which the equally-educated citizens of the western countries often don't know that they even exist. In our country, differences are easily observed between infiltrated Mujahedin groups, financed by Saudi Arabia and American global interests on their daily agenda (although they are mostly unconscious of the fact), which operated in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Kosovo, and which are these days causing troubles in the Middle East and in the Caucasus, from the self-determining and sovereign regimes whose only sin was mainly disobedience of the American and western political dictates, and which, by default, had the lowest concentration of terrorist groups on their territories, yet, in the international arena they were decried to be “terrorist harbors” (Iraq, Iran, Siria, Libya). At last, our public very clearly realizes all the fatal similarities between “classic” and “state terrorism”, conscious of the fact that killing innocent civilians in order to spread fear and hatred to force political changes doesn't get any more “humane,” more “distinguished,” or more “civilized”, just because someone spends billions of dollars on the newest instruments of murder, just because one's mouth is full of “democracy and human rights,” or because one has no heart or stomach to smear his own hands with blood.

Serbian endorsement of these “revolutions” mainly originates from the long-established sympathies for the oppressed, the poor and the downtrodden, “the wretched of the earth”, and from the grassroots folklore which possesses strikingly freedom-loving, and if one might say so, “anti-imperial” elements.

Nevertheless, the domestic public, which mostly knows “who’s who” on the world political scene, was rather confused by the series of protests, clashes and political upheavals across the countries of the Maghreb and the Middle East. To the confusion partially contributed the world media houses, whose reports, because their executives and reporters were taken aback by the development of events, were at first surprisingly objective and refrained, that is, until France, Great Britain, and USA officially proclaimed their official policies towards these happenings. On the other hand, it was impossible to resist the notion that, what transpired in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and other countries, was indeed a “movement of the people”, having in mind that these countries were notorious for high levels of corruption and the horrifying conditions in which their poorest populations still live. So, there was nothing particularly doubtful about their readiness to overthrow their cocooned and dynastical governments and seek sweeping political changes.

Serbian endorsement of these revolutions (if we exclude ideologized individuals who more or less equate “democratization” with the natural evolution) mainly originates from the long-established sympathies for the oppressed, the poor and the contemptible, “the wretched of the earth”. This didn’t come solely from the half-century long socialist indoctrination, but without a doubt from the grassroots folklore as well, the folklore which possesses a strikingly freedom-loving, and one might say so, “anti-imperial” elements. This traditional disinclination towards injustice and the national ideology based on the battle for independence from imperial powers and resistance towards various ways of (semi)colonial exploitation has lead to affinity of the Serbian public to the idea that the Arab nations could build a more just and humane social orders for themselves.

### **On the Extent of the “Twitter Revolutions”**

Things, however, seem to get more complicated after taking into account that the first means, that is, the “media”, for organizing the protestors at the initial phases of the “Awakening” was the Internet, primarily the social networks Twitter and Facbook. This question is of course going to open a lot of discussion in the expert circles of sociologists and political theorists in the coming years – since, for the last two years, the two networks have been basically advertised as a potential political means and a tool of civil revolutions (which is suspicious onto itself). Being a topic worthy of its own space, it is enough to emphasize two things here – firstly, there is nothing more natural than the idea that the most contemporary and the most wide-spread means of communication has served as the single convergent point for crystallization of the popular rebellions in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and other Arab countries. Having in mind the fact, put into the foreground countless times, that the Arab cultural space extends significantly beyond the boundaries imposed on it by the selfish and hoggish elites from specific countries, and that the capabilities of organizing massive actions via social networks are virtually limitless, it seems to be a very logical conclusion that the social networks represented the key asset of the protestors, to which the retrograde authorities paid too little attention, becoming, at the end,

the very cause of their downfall. This was enough to officially christen the protests as Twitter and “Facebook Revolutions,” despite the regime of Hosni Mubarak introducing, and all other countries adopting, the practice of crashing the internet as a means of control, which, obviously, did not disrupt further conduct of the protests at all.

On the other hand, as romantic as the idea of people succeeding via “tweeting” and “liking” in bringing down a few osseous, deeply militarized and political technology-wise extremely self-conscious regimes, the virtual space, as shown in these events, still has kept its status of “shadow reality” and a mere echo of the real world. This was proved by at least a few key facts. First and foremost, no matter how much the Western media tried to portray the demonstrators in the Maghreb as “young and educated middle class demanding democracy”, the main protagonist of the revolt were the hungry masses which neither use the social networks, nor would they know how to set a politically self-conscious “status” in perfect English, which was evidently the case with the protest organizers on the internet. This problem is particularly visible when having in mind the fact that the network Twitter is for the most part used and followed by Americans (excluding the fashion of “tweeting” imposed on the Russian politicians by Dmitry Medvedev), and has practically been integrated into their national information (that is, propaganda) systems along the lines of some “21<sup>st</sup> century CNN”. The fabrication of Twitter as a firmly controlled “incubator of revolutionary ideas” we saw two years ago, with the world-wide promotion of this network as a means of fighting against the regime in Iran – another series of protests with posters in English and an extremely “external” political orientation. (The demonstrators were obviously sending their messages to the West and not to their fellow citizens and compatriots.) Finally, Twitter has a whole range of editing, evaluating, and censoring instruments used for sorting out “everyday croaking” from the “relevant tweeting,” favoring the statements made by the officials from the American administration and reports “from the scene of events” sent by the renowned reporters from Western news agencies and media houses. On the other hand, if we are talking about the far more “popular” and “democratic” Facebook, it turned out that the key problem there was dispersion of information and the lack of focus. This has finally lead to a somewhat paradoxical situation in which Muammar Gaddafi reigns this network supremely thanks to the support from citizens of Serbia, who simultaneously – so far – had no success in organizing any serious protest in “the real world”.

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### Reporting of the “Classical” Media

Illusions dispelled long-ago about the “objectivity” of the Western and the global media and their relevancy as “sources of information”, as well as vivid memories of our own suffering under the boot of the same army now being active in Libya, have brought up, despite reserved sympathies towards the whole idea of “Arab Awakening”, a restraint of a large portion of the Serbian community facing the news that the “peaceful protests” against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya quickly turned into an armed uprising. At a glance, too many things in Libya were different from the developments in Tunisia and Egypt, which were carefully followed by our media, as well as from the later protests, conflicts and counter-measures of repression in Qatar, Bahrain and Saudia Arabia, and to a certain degree in Yemen (which has been for decades in a state of suspended civil war). Besides the obvious armed nature of the uprising, the pre-prepared iconographies and the involvement of the “traveling revolutionary circus” with so many times seen slogans and scenarios of escalating violence, the most indicative thing is precisely the behavior of the global “classical” media.

Since these propaganda systems are able to “report” only prepared-in-advance tirades about prepared-in-advance events, they were visibly perplexed and restrained during the early phases of the “Arab Awakening”, when they quite literally “didn’t know what to think”. However, when the rebellion in Libya started, and in particular when it was necessary to prepare the terrain for a new international intervention, it was obvious that the world media “consolidated their ranks” and took on the events with ready-to-use information scenarios and strategies for escalation. While the actions of the “rebels,” romantically wearing flags of the “good king Idris” (just as the Iranian emigration protesting in Europe gladly waves the “Shah’s flag”) are practically broadcasted live, news from Qatar and Bahrain are limited and censored news, while from Saudia Arabia practically nothing else except for the government statements can be obtained. Yet, the developments in those countries deserve maybe even more attention and they have deeper political roots than the dealings in Libya.

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Even then it is easy to see the “crackling” of the global media machinery which has been for quite a while far away from that unstoppable and ever-present “Matrix” from the nineties. The reason for this is not only their rocky creditability, after their scandalous manipulations regarding FR Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, have been made public. It is neither because of their integrity being broken up by successful media counter-actions, for example, by China in Tibet, and by Russia in Ossetia. The reason is, first and foremost, because they have largely sunken themselves irreversibly into the virtuality of their own lies, illusions, and self-deceptions, losing so even the slightest foundation in reality. Hence, more and more often it happens that the events on the “terrain” simply “can’t follow up” on their self-fulfilling prophecies (rebels can get nowhere close to the very cities they “liberated,” newly-formed democratic institutions threaten foreign missions that come to give them support, and the “liberation army”, besides the customary plundering and destruction, kills their reporters), while NATO and the UN Security Council are degraded having to provide military and political logistics to people, who are not only unable to exploit it (which wouldn’t be the first time), but, as it appears, have no political agenda whatsoever.

### “Support for a Friend” – Libya in Serbian Hearts

Not counting *New Serbian Political Thought*, which has been following up on the entire Libyan crisis in detail and systematically from the beginning, Serbian public was getting news from Libya mainly through two sources – the global media distinctly unfriendly to Gaddafi, and the far more balanced (and often openly pro-Gaddafi) reports of eye witnesses evacuated from Libya, amongst whom the celebrated Serbian war reporter, Miroslav Lazanski, holds the last word. This chimericalness of the Serbian media scene was firstly noticed on the internet portals of the media houses, where the readers’ comments (excluding the extremely pro-western media) in a large majority and very emotionally were giving support to Gaddafi (“Play it Gaddafi!”, “Stomp the gang colonel!”, “Endure, our friend!”), although the articles themselves were unanimously portraying Gaddafi as a dictator who turned against his own people. It shouldn’t be forgotten that a large number of those sites are strictly censored in terms of comments, so it is obvious that the editors, apart from their own sympathies for the government in Libya, were this way more the efficiently contributing to the objectivity of the individual news.

The support, which rumbled through the Serbian media, exploded after the first announcement about the beginning of military campaign by France, Britain, the USA, and their allies from NATO against the regular army in Libya, like after the scandalous resolution of the UN Security Council, which gave them, along the tacit support from Russia and China, untied hands to operate in Libya as they please. Although this more than problematic resolution (not only because of the obvious permission of use of “excessive power” in Libya to just about anybody

who finds an interest in doing so, but also because of using media reports as evidence of the conditions in the country), formally separates the Libyan intervention (pathetically named “Odyssey’s Dawn”) from the illegal wars of the North-Atlantic Alliance in FR Yugoslavia and the American “Coalition of the Willing” in Iraq, for the majority of citizens in Serbia there wasn’t a trace of doubt that it was just one more international military aggression of the powerful and rich against a country which is neither better nor worse than other countries. And the sole reasons for are those very same imperial, colonial and crypto-racist interests which were, not so long ago, keeping entire Africa under the European boot.

On top of that was added a sentimental recollection of a multi-decade tradition of outstanding bilateral relationships, which was started by Tito’s essentially far-sighted and civilizationally progressive “nonalignment policies” and the consistent Yugoslav anti-colonialism, which culminated during the nineties, when Gaddafi personally showed an enviable political and moral integrity by supporting the Serbian side in the Yugoslav wars, and refused up to this day (as did the majority of the “nonaligned” countries) to recognize the self-proclaimed state of the Kosovo Albanians. Even though he could, by supporting the “Muslim brothers” in Bosnia and in Kosovo, earn a lot of “cheap political points” (about which some far more “serious countries” than the Socialist Arab Jamahiriya were not squeamish at all), Gaddafi acted, on one hand as an ally and a friend to a people with whom “he was good, come good times”. On the other hand, he showed commitment to the principles of sovereignty and equality of small and poor nations, as well as to the international relations based on law and justice. In the end, to his popularity in Serbia, whether intentionally or not, contributed the actual Serbian government, which lately not only reactivated ties with nonaligned friends, but in those contacts, the friendship with Libya had a special place. (Don’t let it slip from our minds that two years ago president Boris Tadić chose to attend the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gaddafi’s “Glorious Revolution of September the First” because of which he missed the not at all insignificant marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of World War II. And lets not forget that the Serbian defense minister, Dragan Šutanovac, more than once emphasized the agreement on military cooperation with Libya, worth more than half a billion dollars, as his greatest achievement at that position).

### **“Gaddafi’s Hackers” against the “Libyan Youth”**

As a focal point of the existing support to Gaddafi in Serbia emerged a Facebook group called: [Support for Muammar al Gaddafi from the people of Serbia](#) (“Подршка пријатељу“, „Support for a Friend“), which in the first two days of existence collected over 40 thousand members, and in the next seven days the number of members grew to 65 thousand (and still growing). By comparison, the president Tadić’s Facebook page, with his entire party nomenclature available for him, in over 3 years of existence has gathered about 44 thousand members, whereas the most famous Serbs in the world, Novak Djoković and Emir Kusturica, as personalities who are loved and recognized world-wide, have support from 133

thousand and 214 thousand members respectively. Gathering 65 thousand members in a group which is not international and whose language is only Serbian, represents a real feat, by how much bigger, by so much is known that political organizing of Serbs on Facebook so far has not produced any serious results. However, the numbers do not end here. The Serbian support group for Gaddafi and Libya is convincingly the most numerous internet community considering the Libyan war overall – not only that there are nowhere close so many people supporting Gaddafi elsewhere in the world, but neither the opponents of his regime on the global level can nearly be pleased about such a support. The English language page of the “Libyan Youth Movement” (LYM), a sort of match to the west-sponsored Serbian anti-Milošević “resistance” movement “Otpor” (though it is obvious that the members of the LYM, like those of the Iranian “opposition”, mostly live abroad), gathered 13 thousand members from all over the world (including the Serbs who are, for the umpteenth time, scandalized by the historical decisions of their own people and use that page as one more proving ground for its disparagement and slander), whereas the Libyan official page has approximately the same number of members – except that even there about 30% of text is in Serbian language.

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The LYM quickly denounced the Serbian group on Facebook as a manipulation for, it is “impossible” that in such a small country “so many” people support Gaddafi. (To make it clear, the number of FB users in Serbia is about 2.7 million – 37% of the total population and 66% of the internet population of the country.) And the increasingly frequent invasions by the Serbs on the Facebook pages of NATO, France, USA, and even on the LYM’s page, have caused them to seek help in the fight against “Gaddafi’s hackers”, who in some inexplicable way just misuse the good name of the residents of Serbia. Yet, no fraud exists there. The “Support for Muammar al Gaddafi from the people of Serbia” represents one of the liveliest sites of the Serbian internet – where there are exchanges of news, clips, posters of support or taunt at the expense of Sarkozy, Obama, and Clinton, and the frequency in shifting of news and information is astronomical. The language of correspondence is Serbian, and after the page became famous internationally, in addition, one can find there English, Russian, French, and even Arabian language (primarily in the form of slogans which Serbian activists convey in who-knows-what-kind of Arabic via Google Translate).

### Facebook as the New Serbian Public Community

What undeniably, however, amazes the most with regard to this page is its outstanding politicality in a deep sense, seemingly been completely forgotten in contemporary Serbia which appeared to have been irreversibly and completely drowned in a stagnating sludge of petty-politics. The “Support for Muammar al Gaddafi from the people of Serbia” gathered people from all sides of the Serbian political spectrum, and even though the global agencies (like the BBC and the Voice of America) are outdoing each other in qualifying this movement as a “rightwing” and “ultra-nationalistic” one, its members equally represent the active left and right, nationalists and internationalists, conservatives and socialists. If, in that torrent of textual and multimedia contents, there could be noticed a common “tone,” then it would have certainly been articulated very self-consciously as a sort of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and anti-globalism, with a very strong folkloric, national, Yugo-nostalgic, and before all, pacifistic themes. (This very natural attitude for the Serbs, at the very beginning of the intervention in Libya, was firstly championed by Djordje Vukadinović in his article, “[Odyssey’s Dawn and Civilizational Twilight](#)”, where the later development of the events very much proved him right). Administrators and members of the “Support for Muammar al Gaddafi from the people of Serbia” Facebook page have shown an outstanding political self-consciousness, and they didn’t massively fall for a single attempt of manipulation – regardless whether those provocations were foreign “infiltrators” who were trying to provoke enough “hate speech” and so force Facebook to close down the page, or whether it was a case like the movement “Nashi 1389” which, as did a whole range of other organizations, tried to benefit from the massiveness of support for their own political and other agendas. Members of the group were unanimously responding that the only goal of the group is to support the Libyan people and its legitimate state government, along with requests from the state government of Serbia to condemn openly the operations in Libya and to use all available means in order to help, first of all the suffering Libyan people, but also the “sworn friend Gaddafi”, who himself “never hesitated to send us help when we needed it most”.

The group supporting Gaddafi, for a number of reasons, represents a first rate political event in the Serbian public sphere. It has shown that there are political issues on which there exists a clear national consensus (in this case – public request for supporting Libya and condemning the military aggression, to which the Serbian officials, although inarticulately and timidly, partially responded), and the public itself is more than capable of articulating them outside existing party and political infrastructure, exclusively using the new technological potentials provided by the contemporary means of communication. This is the first time that this kind of political protest, clearly focused in entirety on a concrete political goal, is being organized in our community without any support from the “classical” political institutions, such as the parties. On the other hand, results from this protest echoed globally, and so the Serbian internet community, besides having “saved the face of the nation” in a situation in which the global public opinion to an extreme extent lethargically and uninterestingly looked upon the opening of a new battlefield in the Mediterranean basin. It has also shown the reach of the direct “Facebook democracy”,



which, this time, unlike the “Twitter Revolutions” that just represented echoes of “tweets” of the Washington officials, made known that one small nation in the environment of new communications can draw public attention to positions diametrically opposite from those favored by the world media machinery. Even if this supporting group (so far) hasn’t brought about any organizing of serious antiwar gatherings in Belgrade and other Serbian cities, it certainly has enabled for the principle Serbian position to be heard. It has thus honored the people and citizens of Serbia, and dishonored all those who are closing their eyes in the face of the international arrogance in Libya.

The Serbian group of support for Gaddafi and Libya is convincingly the most numerous internet community considering the Libyan war overall – not only that there are nowhere close so many people supporting Gaddafi elsewhere in the world, but neither the opponents of his regime on the global level can nearly be pleased about such a support.

There cannot be any doubt that this is an event which reminds Serbia of those heroic times – when Belgrade shook because of the war in Spain, because of the occupation of Czechoslovakia, or because of assassination of Salvador Allende. During these lethargic times, closely followed by a general disappointment with all the internal political ideals, which are made meaningless by a hypertrophy of pragmatism and toadying of politicians, the citizens of Serbia have recognized in an “old friendship” with Libya that pinch of honesty, integrity and national dignity, so necessary on the international stage. They have insisted on the forgotten principles of law and justice in the name of all of our historical victims, and in accordance with all of our historical choices. Refusing to stay silent in the face of injustice being done to others, Facebook users from Serbia more than clearly articulated their position on an array of national questions, which have not been officially raised so far. Their categoricalness and bravery today represents, for the umpteenth time in our history, a pledge for the future, thanks to which our children won’t have to blush when someone asks them: “Do you remember Libya?”. “Support for Muammar al Gaddafi from the people of Serbia,” precisely because it’s unselfishly and exclusively dedicated to nurturing of the genuine Serbian-Libyan friendship and to a rare world politician, who was in his time ready to bring down the network of lies which almost made Serbs into nothing less than “Nazis after Nazis,” is in fact an event far more important than a support for a friendly regime. The group is a proof that in today’s Serbia, with its oppressive media, disconnected from people like never before, there still exists a political consciousness and a moral autonomy which enables its citizens, not only to be the tomorrow’s protagonists of true democratic processes, but also to come onto the world’s historical scene as worthy subjects, making decisions which might earn them powerful enemies, yet which are in a perfect accordance with their centuries long tradition, somewhat forgotten social values, and testimonial

## Libyan Odyssey and the Dawn of a New Serbian Public Opinion

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justice and truth.