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ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS DURING THE PROTESTS IN IRAN IN 2022

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The article analyzes the protests in the Islamic Republic of Iran that emerged after the death of the Kurdi Mahsa Amini while in custody after being detained by the Morality Police for alleged improper veiling. The text focuses specifically on the usage and role of social networks in the organization and coordination of protest activities. Even though the Iranian authorities relied heavily on Internet blockages, it turns out these blackouts became less affective as Iranians found different communication channels and end-to-end encryption services. The protests managed to encompass people from various groups and classes and are seen by researchers as the biggest challenge to the Iranian government since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The present article also includes a brief history of women’s rights in Iran and analysis of the mandatory dress code regulations in the country.

Keywords: Mahsa Amini, Iran, social networks, women’s rights, protests, hijab

*Цветелина Джамбазова. РОЛЯ НА СОЦИАЛНИТЕ МРЕЖИ ПО ВРЕМЕ
НА ПРОТЕСТИТЕ В ИРАН ПРЕЗ 2022 г.*

Абстракт: В статията се анализират протестите в Ислямска република Иран, започнали след смъртта на кюрдката Махса Амине, която е задържана от Моралната полиция по обвинения в неправилно носене на хиджаб. Текстът се фокусира конкретно върху използването и ролята на социалните мрежи при организирането и координирането на протестните дейности. Въпреки че иранските власти разчитат в голяма степен на блокирането на достъпа на населението до интернет, се оказва, че тези прекъсвания са станали значително по-неефективни, тъй като иранците успяват

да открият нови и различни канали за комуникация и криптиране на изпратените съобщения. Протестите успяват да обхванат хора от различни групи и класи и се разглеждат от изследователите като най-голямото предизвикателство за иранското правителство след Ислямската революция от 1979 г. Настоящата статия включва също така кратка история на проблема за правата на жените в Иран и анализ на законовите разпоредби за задължително облекло в страната.

Ключови думи: Иран, Махса Амини, права на жените, протести, социални мрежи, хиджаб

Introduction and methods

September 2022 marks the onset of new civil protests in the Islamic Republic of Iran. People are raising against the brutality of the so-called Morality police and the restrictions of the governing regime. Government regulations on women's behavior and the requirements for a particular dress code – in this case wearing a hijab – are in the roots of the civil unrest. The direct cause for the protests is the death of the Kurdi Mahsa Amini who was arrested for improper veiling and was beaten to death by the police while in custody. The wave of protests quickly encompassed the whole Iranian society while at the same time had become the biggest threat to the Islamist ruling party in the past decade. Key role in these protests is reserved for social networks which became the basic place for people to meet and show their insubordination with the existing norms and regulations in Iran (particularly when it comes to the rights of women).

The present article chooses to focus on the role of social networks in the Iranian protests of 2022 as a way to show the immense importance of this type of media for social movements in today's life. A particularly interesting aspect of the events in Iran in 2022 are the Internet blackouts used by the government as means to restrain the raging mobs. However, people managed to overcome these hindrances and continue to lead their fights online.

The article uses case study as a method to analyze the Iranian civil unrest which began in September 2022 and as of March 2023 is still ongoing. Due to time restrictions it needs to be clarified that the following text will focus on the events happening between September 2022 and the end of February 2023. The case study method is chosen because of its ability as an “intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a longer set of units”¹. Therefore it allows for conclusions to be made that could be applicable when conducting a more encompassing research on the role of women in the contemporary Islamic

¹ GERRING, John. What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good For? *The American Political Science Review*, 2004, vol. 98, no 2, p. 341.

Republic of Iran. It allows for the researchers to apply the valid results to the role of social networks in different social processes in the country (particularly when analyzing people's uprisings against the authorities).

Actually, it can be argued that the situation in Iran in 2022 is an appropriate way to show the ambiguity that surrounds social networks and their influence over the society. On the one hand, social networks help connecting people with similar ideas and views, they are a useful tool supporting the uprisings of groups of people against cases of social injustice. From this point of view, they are invaluable for the contemporary society – this is quite notable when it comes to countries with an authoritative government. There social networks are a way for the people to overcome the official authorities' different forms of censorship.

On the other hand, social networks could be used by the same those authorities to spread disinformation and disrupt the organization of groups. Then social networks become an instrument of the authoritative rule. All of these aspects of these communication and information channels are clearly shown by the situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini.

Women's rights in Iran

The case with the death of Mahsa Amini and the following protests has deep roots in the history of women's rights in Iran in the 20th and 21st century. Some key terminology and key elements of the Iranian history and legal system will be outlined in this part of the article. They will help the readers better to understand the current social roles of women in this Islamic society and explain why many Iranians don't agree with government's policies when it comes to women's rights.

The first key term that needs to be clarified is the term "hijab". In its modern usage this term generally refers to customary headcoverings worn by Muslim women. "While such headcoverings can come in many forms, hijab often specifically refers to a cloth wrapped around the head, neck and chest, covering the hair and neck but leaving the face visible."² The hijab needs to be distinguished from the chador which is an all-enveloping dress that is favoured by conservative Islamists. It is also important to be mentioned that many Muslims share the opinion that every Muslim woman, who has reached puberty, needs to wear headcoverings. Actually, the history of women's rights in Iran is closely linked to the question whether veiling should be compulsory or not and the often

² JUERGENSMEYER, Mark. Encyclopedia of Global Religion. Vol. 1. USA: Sage Publishing, 2011, p. 789.

clashing positions of the different Iranian governments polarize even more the public opinion on hijab.

Another key term for the present article is the “Morality Police” that is operating in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Komiteh or “committee” as is the literal translation of this term is a colloquial word referring to the morality police in the state. The Morality Police are responsible for policing the society to make sure people are conducting themselves in accordance with Islamic moral decrees – such as mandatory veiling, no heterosocializing before marriage, no alcohol or drug consumption, etc³. At the entrance of many public buildings such as universities and courts there is a unit with people who make sure that no one who is not dressed according to the government’s standards enters the building. There are even mobile vans in different parts of big cities, with people who check on the way women dress. They have the authority to seize the people with inappropriate dress, take them to their offices, and make them sign statements saying that they would observe proper hijab thereafter. Thus, those who do not observe proper hijab according to government’s standards are likely to be treated as someone who has committed a crime⁴.

Two important revolutions shape Iran as a country in its modern history: the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) and the Revolution of 1979. Women have essential roles in both social uprisings in the hope of achieving equal rights with men and better positions in this Islamic society. “However, neither of the revolutions brought women equal civil rights, and the Revolutions of 1979 actually deprived women of rights they gained since the Constitutional Revolution.”⁵

In the period between the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution and 1979 few positions remained closed for women. There were even women in the Iranian government. The statistics should not be easily ignored even though cynics may be tempted to attribute the appointment of women to high state posts as tokens of a regime intending to blindly imitate the Western norms. The legislation affecting women had also been changed so that the scope of opportunities present to this sex wasn’t the only change. Laws guaranteed them equality. The regime’s desire to appear progressive was no doubt one of the reasons behind the accelerated passage of those equality laws. It cannot be denied that it used these steps in propaganda efforts to win support among the middle class, which was closely following the reforms in Western societies⁶.

³ MAHDAVI, Pardis. “But What If Someone Sees Me?” Women, Risk, and the Aftershocks of Iran’s Sexual Revolution. *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 2009, vol. 5, no 2, p. 21.

⁴ GASHTILI, Paula. Is an “Islamic Feminism” Possible?: Gender Politics in the Contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran. *Philosophical Topics*, 2013, vol. 41, no 2, pp. 133-134.

⁵ BAKHSHIZADEH, Marziyeh. *Changing Gender Norms in Islam Between Reason and Revelation*. Germany: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2018, p. 61.

⁶ NASHAT, Guity. Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Iranian Studies*, 1980, vol. 13, no 1/4, p. 168.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran that happened between spring 1977 and February 1979 was a result of a protest against the monarchy for several reasons, including economic deprivations, political repressions and identification with Islam. The return of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 and the general election that was following it was also joined by women. However, their joy was short and quickly turned into disappointment because of the prospect that soon “the clocks would be turning back fourteen hundred years for women.”⁷ On March 7, 1979, the Ayatollah announced the need to impose the veil. Women responded by organizing a rally against the regulation on the International Women’s Day. Khomeini backed down with the response that the compulsory veiling was merely a recommendation. However, the reality was something else: the pressure on women for adhering to a strict dress code intensified in the following years⁸. As an evidence, in 1983, the Iranian Parliament passed the Islamic Punishment Law, which “stipulated seventy-four lashes for violating the Islamic dress code in public spaces. These rules were extended in 1993, when “a note to Article 139” of the Islamic Criminal Code reaffirmed the governmental penalty by mandating ten to sixty days of imprisonment for those who publicly resisted the “hijab”.⁹ The new regulations stripped women off of many rights they had achieved during the previous regime.

Since then, women had always been one of the most active social groups in the Iranian civil rights movement. That was particularly clear in the period between 1996 and 2000 when Iranian female university students, intellectuals, journalists and political activists had raised the standards of civil activism in this country¹⁰.

In present days, President Hasan Rouhai was elected in 2013 as a moderate candidate, who promised to advocate women’s rights and to reduce the government’s influence in everyday life. On the one hand, there had not yet been any legislation changing the discriminatory regulations against women. On the other hand, though, one could not see any significant progress in reforming the political climate, nor there was any particular activity from the civil society. “Women activists are still arrested and persecuted based on the laws passed under Ahmadinejad. The 2015 Annual Report of the United Nations for Human Rights demonstrates the systematic discrimination against women in Iran, which has

⁷ NASHAT, Guity. Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Iranian Studies*, 1980, vol. 13, no 1/4, p. 169.

⁸ NASHAT, Guity. Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Iranian Studies*, 1980, vol. 13, no 1/4, p. 169.

⁹ BAKHSHIZADEH, Marziyeh. *Changing Gender Norms in Islam Between Reason and Revelation*. Germany: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2018, p. 67.

¹⁰ MOHAMMADI, Majid. Iranian Women and the Civil Rights Movement in Iran: Feminism Interacted. *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 2007, vol. 9, no 1, p. 1.

not been changed under Rouhani despite his calls for equal rights for women and men.”¹¹

Veiling in the Islamic Republic of Iran

The regulations on veiling – the so-called compulsory hijab – are closely linked to women’s rights and freedoms in the Islamic Republic of Iran. They have often become the reason behind citizens’ protests in this country – as in the case with the unrest after Mahsa Amini’s death. Hijab regulations and people’s attitude towards them could be described as a clash between traditions and modernity, a clash between secular and religious views on life, a clash between East and West, even as a clash between generations. Millennials and Generation Z representatives find it harder to keep up with the more traditionalist views of hijab as a way to keep women modest and tend to see the compulsory dress code more as a way to restrain women’s freedoms and as a sign of the unequal positions both sexes have in Iranian society.

“The philosophy of Islamic manner of dressing in our view has several reasons. Some are psychological, some concern the home and family, and others stem from the desire of the woman to elevate her positions. In Islam veiling arises from a more fundamental and general question, that is to say, Islam wants all pleasures, be they sexual, visual, sensual, or any other kind, to be limited within the family and the framework of legal marriage; and work and activity should belong to society [i.e. outside the home].”¹² Another argument of the importance of women wearing the hijab is that veiling is the most useful way for the woman to achieve her ultimate goal: finding a husband. According to that logic, a woman is much more alluring to a man not when she is completely accessible and visible to him, but when she merely gives him hints of the pleasures that will await him when he succeeds in having her as a spouse. The man’s desire will be heightened and his pursuit of the woman will be increased in its ardor when he sees her from behind a veil¹³.

It is important to note what the Quran has to say on veiling as the Iranian authorities base the reasoning of the compulsory dress code on the Islamic holy book. The Quran tells women that they must cover their breasts and hide their ornaments – and the only interpretation is that all except women’s face and hands were ornaments to be hidden. Researchers point out that “Other verses taken as

¹¹ BAKHSHIZADEH, Marziyeh. *Changing Gender Norms in Islam Between Reason and Revelation*. Germany: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2018, p. 76.

¹² NASHAT, Guity. *Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. *Iranian Studies*, 1980, vol. 13, no 1/4, p. 178.

¹³ NASHAT, Guity. *Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. *Iranian Studies*, 1980, vol. 13, no 1/4, pp. 180-181.

referring to veiling are similarly doubtful regarding their original meaning.”¹⁴ There’s a line of argument both in Iran and in other Muslim countries, which puts an emphasis on these parts of the Quran and on the traditions where men and women are treated like equals¹⁵. That is to say, even the Quran verses are most equivocal when it comes to men and women’s positions in society and to the restrictions poised on women. The emergence of more gender-egalitarian interpreters of the holy texts play a key role and may even be seen as one of the arguments in favor of the more liberal attitudes among some representatives of the Iranian society.

Hijab played a central role in the Revolution of 1979, it has become a prime symbol of Muslim womanhood. Hence people do not tolerate any reform of the Islamic Republic if this reform does not include some form of modesty in dressing. There are no serious discussions about veiling in reformist women’s literature. Even more, Islamic reformist women clarified from the onset of their writings that any critique of hijab is inconceivable¹⁶. Hijab was decreed mandatory by the Supreme Leader Khomeini on March 7, 1979. According to his decree women do not have to wear a full-body cover. They can freely choose any kind of attire to their taste as long as it covers them properly and includes a hijab¹⁷.

When talking about the regulations on veiling in Iran, one could not ignore the so-called cases of “bad hejabi”. This is a relatively new term which surfaced in the 90s when women tried to benefit from the somewhat more relaxed regime policies of President Ragsanjani. Women started using more brightly colored clothes, stockings and occasionally they even began to wear lipstick. They no longer had to fear imprisonment or flogging because of their behavior as was the case in the 80s. At most, women could fear a reprimand or a fine for violating the dress code (which was still mandatory according to Iranian legislation). The regime’s position on veiling may be more relaxed but harassment of women on the street became more and more prominent. E.g. “The summer of 1992 saw a wave of attacks upon women for bad hejabi (improver veiling) by zealots attempting to “uphold virtue and combat vice”.”¹⁸ This only shows that women in Iran never managed to fully achieve the freedom what to wear and the adherence to the strict

¹⁴ KEDDIE, Nikki R. Women in Iran since 1979. *Social Research*, 2000, vol. 67, no 2, pp. 414-415.

¹⁵ KEDDIE, Nikki R. Women in Iran since 1979. *Social Research*, 2000, vol. 67, no 2, pp. 414-415.

¹⁶ SHAHIDIAN, Hammed. Women in Iran. *Emerging Voices in the Women’s Movement*. New York: Praeger, 2002, p. 90.

¹⁷ The Stolen Revolution: Iranian Women of 1979. Canadian Broadcasting Company [online], 08.03.2019. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-stolen-revolution-iranian-women-of-1979-1.5048382>

¹⁸ RAMAZANI, Nasta. Women in Iran: The Revolutionary Ebb and Flow. *Middle East Journal*, 1993, vol. 47, no 3, p. 421.

dress code guarantees them more respect among the better part of this Muslim society.

A prominent Islamist feminist, Mir-Hosseini, points out that as a result of the compulsory hijab wearing more traditionalist families consider the public sphere safer for women and so these families are more willing to participate actively in that public sphere. However, in the works of Mir-Hosseini it is not explained why these traditionalist families that usually see the presence of men in the public sphere as threatening to women, change their attitude when there are compulsory dress code rules. After all, the rules restrain women in their behavior and not men who are problematic in the first place. The author Paria Gashtili could not agree with this point of view. “Firstly, if the way women dress can improve their safety in public, I am sure women from traditionalist families could dress modestly enough well before the revolution. Secondly, the experience of Iran’s revolutions attests to the fact that the more you cover women and separate them from men in public places, the more men become greedy and likely to make advances on them.”¹⁹ Gashtili actually shares the opinion that Iranian government’s actions such as the compulsory veiling makes the public space less safe for women. The reason is that these policies cause men and women to become more separated and men to consider the public sphere their natural territory hence causing them to feel justified when assaulting women: “... any woman who dares to enter their domain might as well be prepared for the “consequences”.”²⁰

It also needs to be mentioned that in the Islamic Republic of Iran exist various styles of clothing used by women. These styles may cover different body parts but they sometimes differ quite significantly from the government’s rules on proper dress code. Another feminist, Tahidi shares the opinion that women were able to undermine dress code rules by minimizing and diversifying the compulsory hijab into fashionable styles. Of course, this mustn’t shade the fact that Iranian women still must wear some sort of hijab, be it fashionable or not²¹.

The present analysis needs also to briefly explain the legal system in Iran, which comprises of several types of provisions. The most important provision is the Constitution as a framework of the political, social and legal systems in the state. It consists of statuses and laws dealing with civic and social relations

¹⁹ GASHTILI, Paula. Is an “Islamic Feminism” Possible?: Gender Politics in the Contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran. *Philosophical Topics*, 2013, vol. 41, no 2, pp. 133-134.

²⁰ GASHTILI, Paula. Is an “Islamic Feminism” Possible?: Gender Politics in the Contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran. *Philosophical Topics*, 2013, vol. 41, no 2, pp. 133-134.

²¹ GASHTILI, Paula. Is an “Islamic Feminism” Possible?: Gender Politics in the Contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran. *Philosophical Topics*, 2013, vol. 41, no 2, pp. 133-134.

between individuals and different aspects of their lives. The Penal Code covers all punishments and offenses defined in the laws²².

Book Five of the Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 678, has provisions on the compulsory dress code for women and the corresponding penalties for not observing the laws. Those rules apply both for Muslim and non-Muslim women: “Women who appear in public spaces and roads without wearing an Islamic hijab, shall be sentenced to between ten days to two months’ imprisonment or a fine of fifty thousand to five hundred Rials.”²³

In the 2010s and 2020s, women (especially young women) in Iran started to dress more freely than the legal prescriptions. So the Guidance Patrol initiated campaigns to verbally admonish or arrest women they consider to be wearing the hijab incorrectly²⁴. Actually, in the above mentioned period protests against mandatory hijab were quite frequent. Even when the civil unrest has other roots, women grab the occasion to state their dissatisfaction with the dress code. Of course, none of these protests have the scale and caught the international community’s attention the same way as was the case with the protests following Mahsa Amini’s death. This is what makes the situation in Iran in 2022 and 2023 so interesting for researchers – more so because of the huge role social networks play in these events.

Protests after the death of Mahsa Amini and the role of social networks in them

The Kurdi Mahsa Amini was arrested by the Morality Police on September 12, 2022. The police claimed that she has violated the mandatory hijab law by wearing the veil “improperly” while visiting the capital Tehran. Eyewitnesses testified they saw the woman being beaten by the Guidance Patrol when they were arresting her²⁵. Several days later, on September 16, 2022, the 22-years-old Amini died in a hospital in Tehran under suspicious circumstances. The official cause of death was listed as heart attack that the woman had at the

²² BAKHSHIZADEH, Marziyeh. *Changing Gender Norms in Islam Between Reason and Revelation*. Germany: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2018, p. 87.

²³ BAKHSHIZADEH, Marziyeh. *Changing Gender Norms in Islam Between Reason and Revelation*. Germany: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2018, p. 87.

²⁴ MAHSA Amini’s death sparks anger towards Iran’s morality police. Al Jazeera [online], 23.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/23/iran-morality-police-root-cause-iranian-protest-anger-explainer>

²⁵ STRZYNSKA, Weronika. Iranian woman dies ‘after being beaten by morality police’ over hijab law. The Guardian [online], 16.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/sep/16/iranian-woman-dies-after-being-beaten-by-morality-police-over-hijab-law>

police station. She fell into a coma before being transported to a hospital where she eventually died. Other women who were detained with Mahsa Amini however stated that the real cause of death was the severe beating the Kurdi woman suffered from the Morality Police²⁶. The government denied these accusations as false. The assertions of police brutality combined with leaked medical scans of Amini's head led some observers to believe that Amini suffered from head injuries causing a cerebral hemorrhage or stroke. Amini received the head injuries after being arrested²⁷.

The lack of trustworthy information and the government's description of Mahsa Amini's death as an "accident" and their refusal for deeper research of the circumstances led to a huge amount of dissatisfaction and rage among the Iranian population. Protests began immediately after the death of Amini. These protests may not have been as deadly as the civil unrest in the country in 2019 but they spread quickly among various social groups and classes. Journalists and commentators called them the "biggest challenge" to Iranian government since the Islamic Revolution of 1979²⁸. Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei described the protests as mere "riots", which were caused above all by a "hybrid war" led from the Western states and dissidents living abroad²⁹. What sets these protests apart from other cases of civil unrest in this country is the active participation of women who openly demanded more rights for their sex and even the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. Previous protest movements have focused on election rights or economic problems³⁰. Government's reaction to people's dissatisfaction was highly criticized by the Iranians and most members of the international community.

A definitive characteristic of the 2022 Iranian protests beside the active participation of women, was that they were more widespread than those of 2009, 2017, and 2019. Both the middle classes and rural areas were actively showing their dissatisfaction with the mandatory dress code. Although, the more widely

²⁶ Ex-IRGC Officer Releases More Evidence About Mahsa Amini's Murder. Iran International [online], 29.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202209293255>

²⁷ BRASE, Jörg. Irans Opposition hat vor allem eine Schwäche. ZDF [online], 20.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/iran-protest-mahsa-amini-100.html>

²⁸ FRESH protests erupt in Iran's universities and Kurdish region. The Guardian [online], 06.11.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/06/iran-fresh-protests-universities-kurdish-region>

²⁹ MOTAMEDI, Maziac. Iran's Khamenei blames Israel, US in first comments on protests. Al Jazeera [online], 06.11.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2022/10/3/irans-khamenei-blames-israel-us-in-first-comments-on-protests>

³⁰ GEORGY, Michael. Cleric killed in restive Iranian city, protests rage on. Reuters [online], 03.11.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iranian-human-rights-lawyers-criticise-clerical-leaders-amid-unrest-2022-11-03>

the protests spread, the more wholesome change in Iran the people demanded. Activists openly rioted for the removal of the mandatory veiling, against the existence of the Morality Police, against the Supreme Leader himself³¹. A poll conducted by the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) in November 2022 showed that almost three-quarters of Iranians opposed mandatory veiling and of them 84% would prefer a secular Iranian government to the present theocracy³².

Highly condemned by commentators was the Iranian government's tactics of Internet blackouts as a counter measure against the spread of civil disobedience. (Internet blockages were common tactics used by the Iranian authorities in the past decades. These blockages vary in their severity and duration.) These blackouts began on 19 September 2022 and are quite frequently used by the authorities. They blocked the access to specific Internet services and shut down the Internet and cellphone networks partly or entirely in certain periods. The idea was to prevent the sharing of images or videos from the protests, this way preventing the nationwide spread of the unrest and the effective protest organization of people³³. According to NetBlocks, an Internet monitoring group, 2022 saw "the most severe Internet restrictions since the November 2019 massacre."³⁴ During the 2019-2020 protests in Iran the Internet was shut down for a week. In 2022 and in the beginning of 2023 net blockages were considerably shorter and less effective because people have learned to variate between services depending on the current working websites and social networks³⁵. The active involvement of the Iranian government is on itself a tell-tale sign of the importance of the death of Mahsa Amini. Even from the beginning of the civil unrest the authorities realized that they cannot "swipe under the carpet" the role of the Morality Police in this case of violence. Especially among the more and more vocal attitudes about a more liberal dress code (and guaranteed human rights) for the women in Iran.

³¹ YEE, Vivien et al. 'They Have Nothing to Lose': Why Young Iranians Are Rising Up Once Again. *The New York Times* [online], 24.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/24/world/middleeast/iran-protests-raisi-khamenei-hijab.html> [paywall]

³² YEE, Vivien et al. 'They Have Nothing to Lose': Why Young Iranians Are Rising Up Once Again. *The New York Times* [online], 24.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/24/world/middleeast/iran-protests-raisi-khamenei-hijab.html> [paywall]

³³ ZAD, Arash. When Will Iran's Internet Censorship Collapse? *Slate* [online], 29.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://slate.com/technology/2022/09/iran-protests-mahsa-amini-internet-censorship.html>

³⁴ THORBECKE, Catherine. Iran's sweeping internet blackouts are a serious cause for concern. *CNN* [online], 25.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/24/tech/iran-internet-blackout/index.html>

³⁵ PHILLIP, Rowan. Covering Iran's Protests from Afar: Q&A with Radio Zamaneh's Joris van Duijne. *Global Investigative Journalism Network* [online], 07.11.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://gijn.org/2022/11/07/covering-irans-protests-from-afar-qa-with-radio-zamanehs-joris-van-duijne>

In the end, the massive Internet blackouts proved to be quite ineffective as videos and images of people's dissatisfaction managed to be spread not only nationally but also to gain international audience. Group of activists both from Iran and abroad created the 1500tasvir Instagram account, which as of March 12, 2023 has 2 million followers. According to these activists, on typical days they received more than 1,000 videos and published circa dozens of them. The videos were posted not only to the Instagram page but also to the Twitter profiles of the activists. A member of the activist group described the impact of Internet blockages as "extraordinary" and negatively impacting the protests: "When you [can] ... see other people feel the same way, you get braver" but "When the Internet is cut off... you feel alone"³⁶.

In a way, the failure of the net blockages in Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini could be seen as a warning sign for the authoritative government that those tactics are no longer effective in such a technologically advanced and highly digitalized world. The access to information is unprecedented in the contemporary society and people are no longer content with waiting to be allowed access to the Internet. That is to say, the world wide web is practically an imminent part of the daily life of the individuals. Any restriction to it wouldn't be accepted by the people who demand to exercise their basic human rights of access to information. The social networks' role in this historical change of people's attitude should not be underestimated. They, too, are now an integral part of society's everyday life.

The huge role of social networks is shown also through the immense amount of trust that people put in the information shared via those channels – quite clearly seen when it comes to the younger generations of Iranians.

The situation with the Internet access in Iran was not good even before the onset of mass public's dissatisfaction. NetBlocks describes the network situation in the country as "filtnet" as the access to the Internet was restricted. Websites and domains were actually blocked from the public. The restrictions were especially heavy on social networks. Facebook, Telegram, TikTok, and Twitter often were blocked after the 2009 post-election protests³⁷. However, social networks like Twitter and Telegram remain popular among the Iranians, who continue to use them for communication. At the beginning of the 2022, Instagram and WhatsApp were only regionally blocked (mainly in the Kurdish region) but in the end they were also nationally blocked showing the importance of these communication channels. According to Iranian state media "national security" concerns were the

³⁶ BURGESS, Matt. Iran's Internet Shutdown Hides a Deadly Crackdown. Wired [online], 25.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.wired.com/story/iran-protests-2022-internet-shutdown-whatsapp>

³⁷ ZAD, Arash. When Will Iran's Internet Censorship Collapse? Slate [online], 29.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://slate.com/technology/2022/09/iran-protests-mahsa-amini-internet-censorship.html>

reason behind the blockages of these channels³⁸. The blockage of WhatsApp was even more effective than the one of Instagram as Instagram remained frequently used by Iranians³⁹.

Text messages were also restricted by Iranian authorities so that conversations mentioning Mahsa Amini's name were blocked and could not reach the end recipient. People's response was the usage of end-to-end encrypted messaging clients⁴⁰.

The hashtag #MahsaAmini (in Persian) became the first in the history of Twitter to gain more than 250 million Tweets⁴¹. On the one hand, this shows the importance of social networks in the Iranian protests. On the other hand, this is a sign of the ineffectiveness of the Internet blockages by the Iranian government.

Social networks as communication channels were tracked so much by the public because the official Iranian media are heavily influenced by the official government's policies and positions: so much influenced that they tend to present a biased version of the events for the mass public⁴². Social networks platforms are also an essential instrument for the organization of the protests and for coordination of activities. Telegram, Instagram, and Twitter were the most frequently used apps for coordination of protest activities. Of course, communication was hindered by the Internet restrictions. "To address this issue, hackers have developed tools such as VPNs and Tor services to bypass Internet blocks and allow protestors to continue communicating. This strategy has been used since the uprising in 2019, however, this time they have been much more effective and been able to keep

³⁸ BURGESS, Matt. Iran's Internet Shutdown Hides a Deadly Crackdown. *Wired* [online], 25.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.wired.com/story/iran-protests-2022-internet-shutdown-whatsapp>

³⁹ PHILLIP, Rowan. Covering Iran's Protests from Afar: Q&A with Radio Zamaneh's Joris van Duijne. *Global Investigative Journalism Network* [online], 07.11.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://gijn.org/2022/11/07/covering-irans-protests-from-afar-qa-with-radio-zamanehs-joris-van-duijne>

⁴⁰ BURGESS, Matt. Iran's Internet Shutdown Hides a Deadly Crackdown. *Wired* [online], 25.09.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.wired.com/story/iran-protests-2022-internet-shutdown-whatsapp>

⁴¹ LANA, Ana Deborah; NIETO, Berenice Fernandez; RODRIGUES, Núbia; ORTIZ, Sara. From the Killing of Mahsa Amini to a Social Media Revolution: An Account of the Protests in Iran. *Data-Pop Alliance* [online], 23.01.2023. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://datapopalliance.org/lwl-42-a-social-media-revolution-the-killing-of-mahsa-amini>

⁴² LANA, Ana Deborah; NIETO, Berenice Fernandez; RODRIGUES, Núbia; ORTIZ, Sara. From the Killing of Mahsa Amini to a Social Media Revolution: An Account of the Protests in Iran. *Data-Pop Alliance* [online], 23.01.2023. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://datapopalliance.org/lwl-42-a-social-media-revolution-the-killing-of-mahsa-amini>

protestors' lines of communication open."⁴³ Simply put, this is another important characteristic of social networks: the huge amount of trust that people put in everything shared through them. It could be argued that some trust and value the information obtained through social networks more than the information gained through the traditional media. Freedom of speech and freedom of expression that could not be exercised by professional journalists are an aspect that makes social networks that more attractive to the general masses (especially among the younger Iranians).

Without a doubt, this is a direct result of the long-term policy of the Iranian official to filter and hinder the access to different web pages. People are tired of this constant form of censorship and at the same time more people nowadays are technologically competent and capable of bypassing those restrictions. The contemporary world is indeed a global one, it is radically different even from the one from 10-15 years ago (when social networks were new communication channels and people were just beginning to use them). People could not imagine their daily life without the constant flow of information and their "appetite" could not be satisfied with the selected pieces of news disseminated by the government. On itself, this is a problem, which authoritative officials around the world would face even more often nowadays. It would become more difficult for governments to control the flow of information coming from and disseminated in their societies.

People nowadays believe more in the news shared or told by other people through stories and posts in social networks. Despite the positive aspects of this change to the ways through which the society absorbs and shares information, there is one problem that continues to be present: the power of disinformation. Truly, social networks are not immune to the share (and creation) of fake news.

Marc Owen Jones, who specializes in digital disinformation, told the CNN that a huge number of new social networks accounts emerged after the onset of public's dissatisfaction after the death of Mahsa Amini. Of the 108,000 accounts in a sample using the hashtag #OpIran, a hashtag associated with the Mahsa Amini protests, he found that circa 13,000 accounts were created in September 2022. The average number of accounts created per month in the sample was only 500. A huge part of those September accounts was created in around 10 days following Amini's death. "It's quite rare to see this amount of new online mobilization of accounts that then subsequent and continuously engage in tweet activity", said Jones, adding that while this indicates manipulation, it is not a

⁴³ LANA, Ana Deborah; NIETO, Berenice Fernandez; RODRIGUES, Nbia; ORTIZ, Sara. From the Killing of Mahsa Amini to a Social Media Revolution: An Account of the Protests in Iran. Data-Pop Alliance [online], 23.01.2023. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://datapopalliance.org/lwl-42-a-social-media-revolution-the-killing-of-mahsa-amini>

conclusive evidence of it⁴⁴. Jones also suggests that the large Iranian diaspora may have been mobilized to keep Mahsa Amini's story alive through Twitter. However, other interests at play should and must not be overlooked. "We also know there are a number of people with stakes in trying to see regime change in Iran, from right-wing hawks in US and Israel, to the MoK", he said, referring to Mujahideen-e-Khalq, an Albania-based Iranian dissident group. "The MoK certainly have been active in social networks manipulation prior to the [death of] Mahsa Amini⁴⁵. There are also suggestions that the Iranian authorities themselves may be behind some of the anti-regime tweets as a way to track activists who support the movement⁴⁶.

All of this leads to the ambivalent role of social networks – in this case in the uprisings after the death of Mahsa Amini. At the same time social networks are the key channels through which the activists are communicating with each other and through which they try to withstand the censorship of the information imposed by the official authorities. The ineffectiveness of the net blockages are a sign of the success of social networks as trusted sources of information.

Yet, at the same time, social networks could not entirely be trusted as they are also a key instrument for the spread of fake news and disinformation. This is what makes the Mahsa Amini case so universal and so interesting for the researchers: the conclusions from the analysis of this case could be applied for the study and explanation of other modern social movements, which have started online. Yes, the Internet blockage by the Iranian authorities may give an unique aspect of the situation in this country, but all other aspects of the key role of social networks in major social problems could be applied to similar situations of citizens' disobedience and dissatisfaction with the official government policy even in Western countries. Social networks everywhere are simultaneously a guarantor of the free flow of information and an instrument for the overcoming of censorship and the carrier of the huge threat that is the dissemination of disinformation.

What remains to be seen is whether the Mahsa Amini protests could transform into a revolution. Different opinions exist, some of them state those actions already presented a revolution while other voices are still skeptical or

⁴⁴ AL LAWATI, Abbas; EBRAHIM, Nadeen. The battle of narratives on Iran is being fought on social media. *CNN* [online], 05.10.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/05/middleeast/social-media-disinformation-mime-intl/index.html>

⁴⁵ AL LAWATI, Abbas; EBRAHIM, Nadeen. The battle of narratives on Iran is being fought on social media. *CNN* [online], 05.10.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/05/middleeast/social-media-disinformation-mime-intl/index.html>

⁴⁶ AL LAWATI, Abbas; EBRAHIM, Nadeen. The battle of narratives on Iran is being fought on social media. *CNN* [online], 05.10.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/05/middleeast/social-media-disinformation-mime-intl/index.html>

believe time is essential when describing an event with such grand terms and the civil unrest in Iran is only in its beginning.

Author Maral Karimi shares the opinion that the protests “definitely [had] the potential” to become a revolution, but that “theoretically, we can never say if it’s a revolution until it’s concluded.”⁴⁷ Karim Sadjapour finds it impossible to predict whether there would be sufficient “divisions at the top” for the protests to transform into a “full-scale” revolution. According to Janice Stein, “where revolutions succeeded” would be whether security forces would be willing to fire on citizens⁴⁸. Dina Nayeri claims that “Iranian women aren’t looking for hijab reform or concessions on gender laws. They’re leading a revolution. The people of Iran don’t want to live under Sharia or any other religious law.”⁴⁹

By the beginning of November 2022, protest activities were described by The Guardian journalists as the greatest challenge to the Iranian government since the Islamic Revolution in 1979⁵⁰. Unlike the unrest in 2019 and 2020, the Mahsa Amini protests spread nationwide, across social groups and classes, universities, streets and schools⁵¹. Suffice it to mention the enormous international echo those protests managed to gain. Support for the Iranian activists was closely shown by movements in different countries around the world. Bulgaria was one of those countries: there were several rallies of Iranians living in the state accompanied by

⁴⁷ MORAN, Pdraig. Could protests in Iran grow into revolution? Experts say it’s hard to predict. *CBS* [online], 05.10.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/iran-protests-revolution-1.6607150>

⁴⁸ MORAN, Pdraig. Could protests in Iran grow into revolution? Experts say it’s hard to predict. *CBS* [online], 05.10.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/iran-protests-revolution-1.6607150>

⁴⁹ NAYERI, Dina. Why Is Iran’s Secular Shift So Hard to Believe? How two researchers got to the heart of a polling problem: the skewing effect of fear. *New York* [online], 22.10.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/iran-secular-shift-gamaan.html>

⁵⁰ Fresh protests erupt in Iran’s universities and Kurdish region. *The Guardian* [online], 06.11.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/06/iran-fresh-protests-universities-kurdish-region>

⁵¹ Fresh protests erupt in Iran’s universities and Kurdish region. *The Guardian* [online], 06.11.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/06/iran-fresh-protests-universities-kurdish-region>

women rights supporters⁵². French actresses cut strands of their hair as a sign of support to Iranian women (again, in videos shared on social networks)⁵³.

Conclusions

Civil unrest after the death of Mahsa Amini in the Islamic Republic of Iran is in its beginning but even now it poses a significant threat to the theocratic authorities. Six months after the death of Amini people continue to show signs of dissatisfaction with the mandatory dress code for women and the restrictions on women's rights in general. The government's tries to restrain the protest activities shows clearly that people's riots should not be underestimated. Internet shutdowns and the blocked access to social networks platforms are the preferred strategy by the authorities as counter measures against the civil disobedience. This presents how important social networks have become as a place for free speech and organization of events against government's rules. On the other hand, people now have a lot more experience with those blackouts and have created various ways to continue using the Internet as a gathering point of ideas.

Of course, the intensive usage of social networks brings also some dangers. Disinformation is one of them and a frequent companion to online movements. These channels of communication could be used only by activists but also by government supporters trying to undermine people's will for change. Fake accounts and bot accounts are a problem that should not be overlooked especially after there are already evidences of such suspicious online activity in the Mahsa Amini protests. Social networks' role in such huge social movements should be handled with care.

Actually, the huge role of the events in Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini is a perfect example of the ambiguity that surrounds the existence and usage of social networks today. Social networks are both the carrier of change that supports the civil dissatisfaction with the authoritative forms of ruling and the tool of the official governments' tactics of disrupting any dangers to their rule.

⁵² ROUSHKOVA, Bistra. Citizens in Sofia Protest in Support of Human Rights, Women in Iran. Bulgarian News Agency [online], 12.11.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/359257>; DEMOCRATIC Bulgaria Adopts Declaration of Support for Iranian Women. Bulgarian News Agency [online], 11.11.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/358519-democratic-bulgaria-adopts-declaration-of-support-for-iranian-women>

⁵³ WILLSHER, Kim. 'For freedom': French actors cut their hair in support of Iranian women. The Guardian [online], 05.10.2022. [viewed 26.03.2023] Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/05/french-women-cut-their-hair-in-support-of-iran-protests-juliette-binoche-marion-cotillard#:~:text=Juliette%20Binoche%2C%20Marion%20Cotillard%2C%20and,of%20Mahsa%20Amini%20in%20Iran>

The world wide web as a whole and social networks in particular are the new forms for the gathering of groups with similar ideas or positions on problematic spheres of society's life. People no longer need to be physically present in a particular place to start a riot. Therefore, it can be argued that social networks are a more effective way for the citizens to join their efforts and withstand the hindrances to the achievement of their goals. It is also more difficult for the authorities to prevent the online forms of civil disobedience.

At the same time, social networks are a powerful weapon in the arsenal of the governments, which can effectively use these platforms to spread disinformation and in this way to undermine the actions of social movements. This is the ambivalent position and function of social networks nowadays. One thing is certain though: people could no longer imagine their daily life without the presence of social networks in it. This is the new phenomenon of social activities and politics done online with of their positive and negative aspects.

The events in the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2022 though are a proof that the net blockages tactics of the authoritative governments are highly likely to become less and less effective in the future. The younger generations are less likely to comply with the different forms of censorship and the official rules that restrict their freedom even in the smallest possible ways. Today, people are technologically advanced enough to bypass any restrictions and hindrances to the free flow and access to information. The high level of digitalization of contemporary societies is also a key factor for the less effective net blockages. The Iranians' efforts to overcome the government's censorship of the Internet is also an aspect that surely would be interesting for the researchers to observe and analyze in the following years.

The net blockages in Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 were noticeably less effective than the blockages during the 2019 country-wide protests.

It remains to be seen whether protests in Iran would continue and whether it would bring any changes to the position of women in Iranian society.

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