Ten years after the beginning of the "Arab spring" that swept the Greater Middle East, Tunisia - the birthplace of that - yet again led a wave of protests caused by the same problems that remained unresolved by its "revolutionaries", primarily concerning the socioeconomic sphere and the fight against unemployment, which particularly affects young people.

For more than a week, large cities in Tunisia have been rocked by violent clashes between police and protesters. Riots also engulfed the city of Sidi Bou Said, which kicked off the so-called "Jasmine Revolution" in January 2011 and sparked anti-government protests following information disseminated via social media on the self-immolation of a young vegetable street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, as an act of protest against police corruption and brutality.

Just as occurred in 2011, in a similar vein, and once again spread through social media, once again Tunisian youth today have been stirred up by a video posted on social media showing how a police officer insults a shepherd for leading his flock of sheep in front of the municipal building in Siliana, a city located in 130 kilometers southwest of the capital. Participants in the new demonstrations burned tires and attacked police officers, and owing to that the police began to use tear gas against them - and in the first few days about 1,000 demonstrators were arrested, most of whom were under 25 years old. However, taking into consideration the lessons learned in the past, the local
authorities almost immediately entered into a dialogue with the public, trade unions for the region’s security services apologized to the shepherd, and the regional authorities promised to help him. But this did not provide salvation from the riots: youth continued to block roads, burned tires, threw stones and Molotov cocktails, shattered shop windows, and in some places robbed shops and banks. Barricades were erected on the streets. The current protests in Tunisia have been dubbed a revolution of the hungry.

According to observers, the country is indeed experiencing a sharp acceleration in destitution among the population, which has intensified significantly in 2020 as a result of the coronavirus lockdown: revenues from tourism, which is one of the main line items in the government’s income, fell by 65% - and about 10% of the companies in Tunisia have permanently shut down because of the crisis sparked by the pandemic. The unemployment rate has reached a nine-year high of 18% (about 36% of the young population). Tunisia’s economy contracted by about 8% in 2020, the largest decline since it gained independence in 1956, according to the rating agency Fitch. The country's public debt is growing, which, according to the World Bank, is 86.6% of its GDP, well above the benchmark of 70% for developing countries.

Against the backdrop of this economic crisis and massive unemployment, demonstrators are demanding the government’s resignation. In terms of stabilizing the social situation in the country, it did not help either that on January 16 the prime minister replaced 12 ministers all at once: those responsible for justice, internal affairs, government property, municipal affairs, healthcare, industry, energy, agriculture, culture, labor and the social economy, youth and athletics, and the environment. Over the ten years since the revolution, the country has changed nine governments, with the last one was sworn in just in September 2020.

After the outbreak of unrest in the capital, some of the residents in coastal cities (in particular, the city of Ash Shabbah) began to sail away en masse in boats towards Italy, but they were intercepted by Tunisian coast guard forces. Along with that, it is worth noting that in 2020 almost 13,000 Tunisians have already set new records for African countries in terms of the number of people that have illegally entered Italy via the Mediterranean Sea.

The surge in the protest wave that took place today in Tunisia is hardly surprising, since anti-government protests due to dissatisfaction with the Tunisian authorities’ socioeconomic policies only rose throughout 2020, and - according to the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), more than 8,000 incidents occurred in different parts of the country. They were provided another impetus by further tightening its lockdown due to the coronavirus, with desperate young people - who cannot see any prospects in life, and have been deprived of the opportunity to study and work - taking to the streets again.

Tunisia’s parliament speaker, Rashid al-Ghannushi, recently addressed the youth, and called for an end to the arson and destruction of property, emphasizing that the country’s salvation does not lie in inciting riots. According to him, “burning institutions, administration buildings, and shops will not give anyone jobs and a decent life. That is achieved through studying and working”. In this regard, Ghannushi, called on those whom he called “good leaders” to close ranks to save the country.

Ghannushi, who is the leader of the moderate Islamist party “Ennahda”, stated that despite the number of significant changes that have occurred Tunisia since the 2011 revolution, and even the ratification of its new constitution 6 years ago, the country continues to face the threat of eruptions of social unrest, and these political gains are in danger due to the way the country’s regions are unevenly developing. Among today's problems, the parliamentary speaker noted that what particularly worries Tunisians is the unemployment level, the low levels at which education, healthcare, and transportation services stand in many regions of the country, and the disproportion between the relatively prosperous situation for the population in resort regions in contrast to the country’s central regions. According to Ghannushi, “for the success of the democratization process in Tunisia, it is necessary to work out a development model that would guarantee access to a share in the country’s wealth for the most vulnerable social strata among the population”.

On the third day of unrest, Tunisian President Kais Saied took to the streets to call upon the protesters for peace, warning against political parties that try to use youth to inflict vandalism on the country.

Ten years ago, after the start of the "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia, there was a wave of protests in Egypt and Yemen, there was a war in Libya and the assassination of Gaddafi, a long-term war in Syria, an uprising in Bahrain, and large-scale protests in Algeria, Iraq, and a dozen other countries throughout Africa and the Middle East. Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged that, just like 10 years ago, proponents of "revolutionary sentiments" remain in the region. And specifically social stratification, corruption, unemployment, and socioeconomic problems. That is why today's events in Tunisia should be a warning bell for the authorities in many countries about the need to
quickly change the situation and root out the problems that have built up. Otherwise, the region may again flare up with unrest and other troubles, which not only will radical Islamists definitely try to take advantage of, but so will also other forces that are hostile to peaceful coexistence.

Vladimir Danilov, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".