Struggle for Identity and Transformation of Social Media as Space of Interaction between State and Society

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The article is devoted to the struggle for identity which has been intensified in the Russian social media in 2014 both on interpretation of the historical past and on the up-to-date situation, especially, Crimea events. Authors suppose that as a result social media become a means of manipulation more than independent space with rizhoma nature. In 2011-2012 social media were the space of struggle between authority and political opposition. Today space of social media is looking polarized regarding polarization of society in respect of political order and Putin political course.

Keywords: social media, political identity, interaction between state and society, struggle for identity

The Identity Impact on Legitimizing the Social Order

The demand for identity issues increased dramatically in various spheres of Russian society. It is apparent that the identity plays a key role in legitimizing the social order and the forming of a society, but every social order is based on the power hierarchy, which gives rise to numerous conflicts in which alternative identities are generated and actualized. Consequently, the struggle of different subjects and actors for identity could be the driving force of political and social changes.

The most relevant semantic components of the Russian political identity are still understanding of Russia through its past and future, evaluation of current Russian politics, and Russia’s place in the context of modern world. Identity policy, targeted to the definition and clarification of the Russian identity (national, civic etc.) is realized by different political actors in public and media context.

Social Media as Kind of a New Institutions of Communications

Social media as kind of a new institutions of communications acts as a selection instrument of new social differences and associated meanings. Real political segmentation to “friends and foes” started and destroyed a line of demarcation between “Internet” and all the rest. Political accentuation of the split, in this case related to the new communications environment, is launching the political processes that have its own logic and expediency. Recent political events (Crimea problem, Ukrainian crisis) are reflected in the new media environment influencing its rapid transformation.

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Castells (2009) supposed that social media should reduced the threat of manipulation because information there is spread by witness. So any user of social media becomes a subject of communication. Communication scheme is like rhizome. And so political authority cannot control the information. Evaluation of social media as less politicized, more independent, like a rhizome, self-organized etc. (Castells, 2009; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) seems to be re-interpreted. Since 2000s information and communication technologies branch has been developing intensively and almost the most life spheres have appeared to get under its influence. The significant part of information stream transferred into the net space accumulating itself there and being translated from one user to another. In this connection social net areas have acquired the status of one of the most crucial news and communicational fields in politics. Morphology and poly-functional nature of social media have being perceived by the society as the resource containing the newest, freshest, and the most accurate information from the “first person”. But it is apt to have been illusion. Since the moment of social media emergence “disinformation agents” produce false data including fakes. In the most general sense a “fake” is the falsification or distortion of data, the deliberate confusion of notions. The problem is the use of fakes in political struggle as a new tool influenced on political process. The impact of this tool is more crucial: If before the period of politicized social media there were relatively limited numbers of political informational channels, now the number of them is increasing. It is an effect of “saraphannoye radio” (word of mouth) when people are very prone to trust some other people who know themselves or who know those who really saw and knew the truth. They are “real witnesses” of events and processes. The ordinary person is included in this infinite and constantly reproducible process of transmission, distribution, and circulation of political information. It is especially strong tool during crisis periods, time of political system transformations and revolutions. The events in Moldova, Libya, and Egypt may serve as the examples.

Social Media as a Space of Struggle between Different Actors on Identity Problems

Social media become the space of struggle between different actors and identity problems (Who are we? What is Russia? What is Russian speaking World? etc.) make a main line of demarcation. For post-Soviet period different political identities were represented in media and reflected in public opinion. Three basic identities were debated: “Russia as a great power with pride for Soviet heritage” ; “Russia as a normal country which should follow Western democratic traditions”, “Russia as a country with specific, Russian way”. In 2000s main contradiction was between opposition supported Western democracy as purpose of Russia and authority. Opposition used social media as a space of political struggle and identification.

At the same time social networking sites became more and more the example par excellence of banal nationalism. Images are posted, shared, liked as users scan through news-feeds glancing on images and messages that are posted. One image will not create a nation, but dozens and hundreds of posts shared widely across social networks will nonetheless define iconic images of the nation and will serve to define or redefine the boundaries of the nation, at times encouraging special social and political action in the name of the nation.

After 2011-12 waves of political protest, the Russian authorities started to use more actively social media as a tool of political mobilization. The first big event which was used for the activation of positive Russian political identity was Olympiad Sochi-2014. If Livejournal, Twitter, Facebook, and VKontakte comments regarding Olympiad Sochi-2014 before and during the event were looked, choice of Olympiad Sochi-2014 symbols was possibilely made a conclusion on a rapid change of public opinion and emotional atmosphere of social media users after the beginning of Olympiad Sochi-2014. People changed their critical attitudes to the
very enthusiastic and positive remarks. Olympiad Sochi-2014 as identity policy’ event, represented in mass media and social media, which made a success no less than the sportive victories and results. People were proud of success of Russia.

Crimea Events Reflection in the Russian Social Media

Ukrainian and, especially, Crimea events divided Russian society and its reflection in social media more strongly than any political events after Perestroika. The 1st point of view is defined that “Crimea was connected with Russian lands”; “Crimea just came back to the Motherland”; “It is not annexing but the return of own property”; “Crimea is a part of the Great and Indivisible Russia”; “It is the 1st Great Victory of Russia after Soviet Union collapse”. Close position is declared as anti-fascist policy of Russia: “Russia started struggle against fascism”, “We saved people from Bandera followers”.

Opposite point of view is declared that “annexing of Crimea is opened war against Ukrainian people”; “It is a despicable occupation of neighbor state”; “It is the raider seizure”. Analysis of Facebook discussions and comments on the electronic resources of “Izvestia”, “Vzglyad”, “Novaya Gazeta”, “Inosmi” shows the differentiation and even polarization of authors’ comments regarding Crimea, Putin, patriotism. Social media uses widely emotional pressure, disinformation and fakes interpreting the situation. Slogan of Great and Strong Russia is widespread among supporters of Crimea connection against critics of Crimea annexation.

Social Media as a Means of Political Mobilization

If in 2011-2012 the main struggle in social media was the struggle between authority and society, it was transformed into struggle for and against identity inside of the society (public) after Crimea. But authority uses intensively variety of political mobilization methods both offline and online. They follow certain rules how to represent political identity. If “The Other” is defined very clear, identification with “We” is very wide: slogan of Navalnyi “United Russia as Party of Crooks and Swindlers” united different political forces. If “We” are very certain, “The Other” becomes wider. “Creative class” was estimated by Putin as “Network hamsters”, “Office plankton”, hirelings and hungers of the West, anti-patriots, Banderlogs. Oppositional creative class as a minority of Russians was set against the majority of workpeople.

“Nation and Flag” rhetoric was spread after Crimea in social media not only by authorities but by the various groups of people. Authorities are using social media as tools for political mobilization and they are continuing to do it now very masterfully (Политическаяидентичностьиполитикаидентичности, 2012). Authorities are acting not always directly but by persons and individuals both famous and ordinary. Such communicative technology manipulates crucial cleavage. “Great Russia”, anti-fascist rhetoric, Russian speaking World etc. constructed basement of Russian political identity and new diversification—84% against 16%. Mass media widely spread information that 84% of the Russian citizens support Putin and his policy against 16% who criticize them. It is not certain about the accuracy of these sociological data, but they are reproduced again and again establishing new cleavages. If we are not sure about these data we can fix that evaluation of “Russia as a country with specific, Russian way” becomes dominating in the Russian public opinion under another interpretation of Russian identity. This position is based on banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) which is reproduced by social media.
Conclusion

Some years ago social media were evaluated by researchers as a new media more independent and less hierarchical than traditional institutions of communication. Social media gave the impression of true information and unbiased estimates. Political opposition used social media for the critics of the government and personally Vladimir Putin. In 2011-2012 social media were used by opposition for political mobilization of protest movement. Authority learned such lesson and followed the example of opposition intensifying the use of social media in political mobilization purpose. Crimea events split the Russian society for the majority of supporters (Crimea is ours) and minority of dissenters. As a result social media became a space of struggle between them, not only between authority and opposition. Up-to-date identity markers are constructed based on Great Russia slogans and emphasis on Russia as a country with specific way of development.

References