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Social media as a tool of political communication in post-Soviet countries. A comparative research of political actors from Ukraine and Belarus

Abstract

Political communication has changed dramatically since the introduction of the Internet. Traditional media indeed remain important tools, but they are no longer central to the process. There are numerous factors that force political actors to expand their communication activities to social media. Currently, staying competitive requires having a strong online presence.

Although Americans are often regarded as pioneers of digital trends, the state of events in the post-Soviet region has its unique direction. Among other things, Ukrainian and Belarusian political actors have demonstrated notable experience in using social media. This communication tool serves as a modifier of political and media systems there. The former country has a transitional or hybrid regime, where the majority of traditional media operate under oligarchic control. Its authorities also imposed military censorship in 2022. The latter country has a consolidated authoritarian regime, where all political and media processes are subordinate to Alexander Lukashenko. Despite all this, social media played a certain role in the victory of Ukrainian comedian Volodymyr Zelenskyy during the 2019 presidential election, while Telegram posts bypassed traditional censorship and led to the biggest protests in Belarusian history.

The PhD dissertation describes general patterns of political communication via social media in Ukraine and Belarus. It should be considered as the opening attempt to this scientific problem. The first objective is to explore the political and media systems of Ukraine and Belarus, which justify the choice of social media. The second objective is to reveal the elements of social media strategies from the perspective of various political actors in Ukraine and Belarus, and to compare them. Since there is a political actor-citizen axis, the third objective is to investigate the possible correlations between the consumption of information about political actors, on the one hand, and online participation, offline participation, political knowledge, on the other hand, among Ukrainians and Belarusians.

Quantitative and qualitative methodology will be applied in this analysis. Triangulation of methods will be employed, incorporating content analysis, survey, and comparative techniques. Facebook in Ukraine and Telegram in Belarus are chosen as the main social media platforms. The research sample encompasses 13 political actors from Ukraine and 13 political actors from Belarus. There are 5 research periods, covering the beginning of the election period, the development of the election period, the post-election period, the routine period, and the war period. This is the most comprehensive study on the topic to date.