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Effects of Civil Confrontation in Social Media

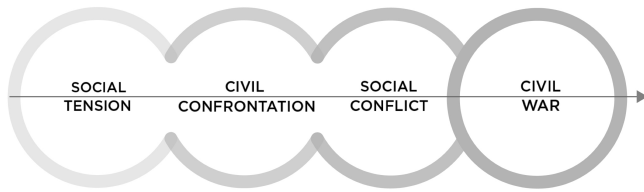
This paper describes the practices of civil confrontation which can be found in social media (analyzing the cases of the Ukrainian segment of Facebook). The research shows that such practices can be used by interest groups to deliberately affect target audiences in certain ways and thus exacerbate civil confrontation or to expand its scope. Psychological effects of such practices for the society include monotony, ambivalence, desensitization and alertness. These effects can be used either to distract the attention from a certain issue or to enhance social mobilization, to reduce protest potential or to push large groups into impulsive actions, to impose contradictory ideas or to stimulate society to rethink values.



Civil Confrontation in Ukraine

Considering the warfare going on in Ukraine and the consequent state of society, it is important to clearly define what is going on between large social groups.

Figure 1. Continuum of Conflicting Sociopolitical Processes



A useful way to structure our thinking about these processes may be to use an approach to sociopolitical conflict presented in Iarovyi (2019), which suggests that the continuum of conflicting sociopolitical processes has 4 stages, as illustrated by Figure 1. In what follows we concentrate on the second stage, which is civil confrontation. Civil confrontation is defined as a form of intra-group confrontation in the society marked by a crystallization of value conflicts between opposing sides. It has the potential to escalate into other forms of conflict interaction as indicated by Figure 1. Unlike social tension, which is the earliest stage, the confrontation has an articulated 'enemy' image and identity. However, it is not as deep as a social conflict which has systematic and deep roots and exists in the framework of problems connected with values. It is also far from being a civil war since it does not include a military component and does not assume a dehumanization of the opponent.

Nevertheless, differences between the stages are rather vague. Within Ukraine one can observe social tensions between certain groups (such as civil servants of the "old generation" and new employees), social confrontation (e.g., between supporters of certain presidential nominees) and social conflict (e.g., between the believers of Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox Churches). The aggravation within this continuum occurs as a gradual buildup of the counteraction and change

of the conflict gradient to a deeper one. For the society it might be beneficial to minimize the aggravation and identify the conflicts in their early stages. A simple way to identify conflicts is by studying communications in social media. In my dissertation, which is the basis for this policy brief, I perform this exercise.

Communication of Civil Confrontation

Sociopolitical conflicts are developing via communication, which is the linguistic representation of a conflict. The latter thrives via group polarization – transforming heterogeneous opinions of people into mutually exclusive opposing positions. To define the conflict of discourses in the Ukrainian segment of social media, it is necessary to consider both features of the modern Ukrainian political discourse in general and specific features of communication in social media.

Markers of Civil Confrontation in Ukraine

The overview of political conflicts in Ukraine allows me to define the general characteristics of Ukrainian political discourse which influence the growth of confrontation. They include (1) the exploitation of ethnic and civic identities; (2) the impact of the external (overseas) interest groups; (3) difficulties with defining the stage and type of the ongoing conflicts and (4) a lack of proactive work of the government on reducing the risks of conflict. These markers were taken into account during the research as the defining framework of the practices of civil confrontation, and they are attributed to a smaller or larger extent to the cases which were studied.

Characteristics of the Discourse in Social Media

In the context of competing discourses, communication in social media needs to be



pragmatic and focused on broadcasting the own agenda of writers, otherwise a user who is overwhelmed with information from different sources will be distracted. Moreover, this communication should be interactive and cooperate with the audience in real-time to improve its impact (Westcott, 2008).

Communication in social media is often much more intense than in the real life. While people do not normally enter discussions in social media to “wage wars” (Whiting and Williams, 2013), the environment of the Internet itself is characterized by a weaker level of censorship and self-censorship, the absence of limits that restrict participants, quick responsiveness, scattering attention, a lack of real contact, interruption of public communication of two people by third parties, anonymity etc. Thus, communication in social media is less restricted for negative reactions of participants, less productive and at the same time more aggressive.

Psychological Practices of Civil Confrontation on Facebook

The psychological practices of civil confrontation are defined as a set of established methods and techniques within the community which allow an individual to engage in interactions of social institutions and change one's own psychological states and processes. In the process of reproducing such practices in communication, the emotions, settings, stereotypes, and value orientations of the communicator are changed.

The research of such practices in Ukrainian social media used the critical discourse analysis (CDA) model by Norman Fairclough (1992), with the selection of 6 cases that differ in the intensity of verbal confrontation, the intensity of the discourses' struggle in the virtual environment and the spread of discourses outside the virtual environment.

The source of empirical material are Facebook accounts of users who take active role in political life and communication in Ukraine. We select Facebook firstly since this platform in Ukraine is highly politicized and represents various views of political communicators who are often absent on YouTube, Twitter etc., and secondly, it publishes large texts, sometimes with a strong visual component, which allows to utilize the CDA comprehensively.

Effects of the Civil Confrontation

Monotony

The effect of **monotony**, or the reduction of motivation to control the activities and participate in social life, is reproduced due to excessive exploitation of some discourses in society.

The first case in which this effect is present is the story of Ukrainian boxer Oleksandr Usik who took part in a fight in Moscow, the capital of the aggressor state according to Ukrainian legislation. Some parts of the Ukrainian community met this event with strong condemnation. Sports and culture are traditionally considered the elements of "soft power". Thus they are often used (or believed to be used) for political purposes. However, citizens who are less politically motivated often tend to doubt the political ideologies and put their personal sympathies to a certain person in the first place. The social media communication regarding this case was characterized by a segregation of community members depending on their belief in the statement “**sport/art is outside of politics**”, and caused numerous arguments between communicators. At the time, this very situation made more and more people voice their tiredness of the war (which is subconsciously perceived as the reason for the argument). It leads to the gradual implantation of the idea that “**the war is the case of the politicians, and the peoples of Ukraine and Russia are friendly**”, and could



strengthen the position of pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine. The implantation of this idea is beneficial for Russia, as it lowers the loyalty of Ukrainians to their own state and discredits the authorities.

The second case relates to public protests of the Ukrainian opposition in 2017-2018 which never caused a really strong reaction of the ordinary citizens. Discursive instruments used to involve more people into protests (the famous phrase "**Kyiv, get up!**" which was used during Euromaidan in 2014) did not work since the society was tired of regular protests in 2016-2017 on every slightest occasion, each of them labelled "**a Third Maidan**" by the organizers. The monotony "filled" the public discourse with unnecessary information, people became tired of protests and manipulations, and the protests became marginalized. Thus, the **monotony** effect could be used for the diversion of attention, the reduction of the protest potential or the formation of the social "fatigue" (sharp decline of the ability and motivation to perform the social roles and functions or stand for the position). Getting out of this state is possible if the rhythm of the information supply changes and its foci are shifted, which will lead to new reactions and roll the discourse out, making it topical once again.

Ambivalence

The **ambivalence**, or the duality of the attitude of the same person to the same object/phenomenon, instead of monotony, leads to the production of public anxiety and nervousness. It was identified on the case of "derusification", when one prominent Ukrainian official labelled Soviet and pre-Soviet poets and writers (V. Vysotskiy, V. Tsoi, M. Bulgakov) as the "**tentacles of the Russian World**" (i.e. Pax Russia).

The discussions over this case not only intensified contradictions among participants, they also led to the expansion of civil confrontation. While in the previous case with the boxer, the incitement of the hostility on the everyday level failed as the issues are rather unimportant, in case of famous poets

and singers the incitement affects deeply rooted notions and nostalgia of the communicators and is much more efficient. With the growing hostility between communicators of opposing sides, it leads to disorganization of thoughts of hesitant people (e.g. **those who have warm feelings about the Soviet culture and sub-culture despite supporting Ukraine in its war with Russia**). As a result, communicators tend to be more nervous when making decisions and taking actions (physical actions or discursive). Thus the **ambivalence** effect could be used to push people to commit impulsive actions and diminish their rational thinking. Reducing its negative effects is possible via engaging the society into a dialogue, promoting compromise proposals and sticking to the principles of mutual respect in the process of communication.

Desensitization

The effect of **desensitization**, or diminishing the emotional responsiveness of the society to violent actions, arises from the practices of discourse discreditation and determining the boundaries of what is permitted, and is connected primarily with the loss of sensuality by the communicators. It was identified in the case of attacks on Roma people in Ukraine **which were widely criticized on the official level but considered quite normal by a large amount of "ordinary people" in social media**. The justification of the violence and lack of mass condemnation of the aggressive actions raise the threshold of sensuality in the society which leads to tolerating violence against certain groups (in this case - ethnic groups).

The toleration of violence could be further extended to other groups (such as political opponents). If this effect is implemented gradually, the negative consequences may not be visible until it is too late. Minimization of the negative impact is possible via disclosure of information about such practices, drawing attention to them and articulating the importance of preserving the universal human values.



Alertness

The effect of **alertness**, or the state of being highly aware and ready to face confrontation, arises as a result of communicators' reaction to actions of their opponents. It was traced in the cases of "Euro-plates" (massive importation into Ukraine of not-cleared cars with European license plates) and "Night on Bankova" [the street where the Presidential Office is located] (demands of civic activists for investigation of the allegedly political murder). The first case demonstrates a self-organized non-political platform of owners of such cars, which without the support of any recognizable politician managed to effectively protect their economic interests through communication of their idea to the masses. The second case suggests that due to the use of moderate and non-violent methods of communication and action by civil activists, as well as the high authority and recognizability of communicators, their ideas are attractive: the public accepts them and the authorities demonstrate readiness for the dialogue. It works much better than pushing people to radical actions, as in the case of monotony of street protests. In both cases described above in the context of alertness, a minority conversion takes place, where the **discursive impact of the self-organized group is being spread to a broader public**. Due to reassessment of the values this effect can potentially be used by interest groups to achieve their political goals and mobilize groups of supporters.

Conclusion

The above described effects can be used to distract public attention, to change (increase or decrease) the level of protest potential, to push people towards impulsive actions, to impose contradictory ideas or to stimulate the society to rethink values - both in a positive or negative way. These effects can be utilized by interest groups to

draft the agenda and establish domination of their own discourse in the public sphere.

Thus, the actions to be taken by governmental decision makers who want to deal with negative consequences of such effects are: (1) engaging in the dialogue with the society, (2) responding to the mobilization of large groups of people with policy actions, (3) drawing attention to the importance of human rights (and actually pursuing this policy on the state level instead of only declaring it). One of the major activities here is monitoring aimed at a timely detection of dangerous trends and handling communication in a proper way.

Further research in this direction could be focused on assessing the impact of psychological effects on various target groups in the society in the short- and long-term perspective.

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