



Ruben Enikolopov, NES
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Social Media and Xenophobia

We study the causal effect of social media on hate crimes and xenophobic attitudes in Russia, using variation in social media penetration across cities. We find that higher penetration of social media leads to more ethnic hate crimes, but only in cities with a high baseline level of nationalist sentiment prior to the introduction of social media. Consistent with a mechanism for the coordination of crimes, the effects are stronger for crimes with multiple perpetrators. We show that social media penetration also had a persuasive effect on young and uneducated individuals, who became more likely to have xenophobic attitudes.



In recent years, the world has witnessed a large increase in expressions of hate, particularly of xenophobia. Candidates and platforms endorsing nationalism and views associated with intolerance toward specific groups have also gathered increased popular support both in the U.S. and across Europe. There is a lot of speculation about potential drivers of this increase in expression of hate. In our recent paper (Enikolopov et al, 2019) we study the role of social media in this process. This brief introduces the topic and offers a short outline of our findings.

Conceptually, social media could foster hate being expressed through different channels. First, social media reduces the cost of coordination. For example, there is evidence that it facilitates political protest (Enikolopov, Makarin, Petrova, 2018). Coordination facilitated through social media might be particularly relevant for illegal and stigmatized activities, such as hate crime: social media might make it easier to find like-minded people (through targeted communities and groups); it might also reduce the cost of asking or exposing oneself by providing a more anonymous forum for social interactions. Social media might also influence people's opinions: tolerant individuals might be more exposed to intolerant views, while intolerant individuals might end up in an "echo chamber" (Sunstein 2001, 2017, Settle 2018) that make their views even more extreme. In our paper, we study the causal effect of social media exposure on xenophobic crimes and xenophobic attitudes in Russia and provide evidence on the particular mechanisms behind these effects.

The challenge in identifying a causal effect of social media is that access and consumption of social media are not randomly assigned. To surmount this challenge, we follow the approach of Enikolopov et al. (2018) and exploit a feature of the introduction of the main Russian social media platform – VKontakte (VK). This social media, which is analogous to Facebook in functionality, was the first mover on the Russian market and secured its dominant position with a user share of

over 90% by 2011. VK was launched in October 2006 by Pavel Durov, its founder, who at that time was an undergraduate student at St Petersburg State University (SPbSU). Initially, users could only join the platform by invitation, through a student forum of the University, which was also created by Durov. As a result, the vast majority of the early users of VK were students of SPbSU. This, in turn, made their friends and relatives more likely to open an account. And since SPbSU attracted students from around the country, this sped up the development of VK in the cities, from which these students were coming from. Network externalities magnified these effects and, as a result, the idiosyncratic variation in the distribution of the home cities of Durov's classmates had a long-lasting effect on VK penetration. Following this logic, we use fluctuations in the distribution of student of SPbSU across cities as an instrument for the city-level penetration of VK. We then evaluate the effect of higher VK penetration on hate crimes and hate attitudes, combining data on hate crimes for the period between 2007 and 2015 collected by a reputable Russian NGO SOVA with a survey data on hate attitudes.

Previous findings indicate that whether information from media induces people to be involved in the active manifestation of xenophobic attitudes or not depends on predispositions of the population. For example, Adena et al (2015) demonstrates that radio propaganda by the Nazis in the 1930's was effective only in areas with historically high level of anti-Semitism. The role of the underlying level of nationalism is likely to be even stronger for social media, in which the content of the media itself directly reflects the attitudes of the population. This is particularly relevant for hate crimes committed by multiple perpetrators, in which social media can facilitate the coordination of such crimes.

Thus, we test whether the effect of social media depends on the pre-existing level of nationalism. To get at this underlying sentiment, we break cities by their level of support for the Rodina



(“Motherland”) party, which ran in the national 2003 elections (the last parliamentary elections before the creation of VK) on an explicit nationalistic, xenophobic platform.

We find that penetration of social media leads to more ethnic hate crimes, but only in cities with high baseline level of nationalist sentiment prior to the introduction of social media. For example, in cities with maximum level of support of Rodina an increase in the number of VK users by 10% lead to an increase in ethnic hate crimes by 20%, while it had no significant effect on hater crime in cities with minimal support of Rodina. There is also no evidence that future social media penetration is related to ethnic hate crimes before the creation of the social media, regardless of the level of pre-existing nationalistic attitudes.

Further evidence is consistent with social media playing a coordination role in hate crimes. The effect of social media is stronger for crimes perpetrated by multiple individuals (as opposed to crimes committed by a single person), where coordination is more important. These heterogeneous effects are also not consistent with results being simply driven by a higher likelihood of hate crime in places with higher social media penetration, unless this effect were present precisely in cities with higher support for Rodina and for crimes with multiple perpetrators, for example - which we find unlikely.

Having found evidence of a causal effect of social media on ethnic hate crimes, consistent with a mechanism of coordination, we turn next to the impact of social media on xenophobic attitudes. We designed and organized an online survey, and launched it in the summer of 2018, reaching 4,327 respondents from 64 cities. To measure xenophobic attitudes, we examined answers to the question “Do you feel irritation of dislike for individuals from some other ethnicities?” Note that, unlike the coordination of hate crimes, the persuasive effects of social media are not necessarily expected to be strongest in cities with higher baseline nationalistic sentiment since individuals on social media can get as easily

connected to people outside their city. In fact, it is conceptually possible that the persuasion would be stronger in cities with lower baseline nationalistic sentiment: individuals might have previously been less aware of and less exposed to these types of views before the introduction of social media.

Since there might be stigma in reporting xenophobic attitudes even in anonymous surveys, we use a “list experiment” to approximate “truly-held” xenophobic attitudes. In particular, the list experiment works as follows: first, respondents are randomly assigned either into a control group or a treatment group. Respondents in all groups are asked to indicate the number of policy positions they support from a list of positions on several issues. Support for any particular policy position is never indicated, only the total number of positions articulated on the list that a respondent supports. In the control group, the list includes a set of contentious, but not stigmatized, opinions. In the treatment group, the list includes all the contentious opinions from the control list, but also adds the opinion of interest, which is potentially stigmatized. The degree of support for the stigmatized opinion can be assessed by comparing the average number of issues supported in the treatment and control groups. The question of interest, randomly added to half of the questionnaires, was “Do you feel irritation of dislike for individuals from some other ethnicities?”.

The results indicate that the average share of people who agree with the statement is 37%. While there is no significant effect of social media penetration on xenophobic attitudes for the whole sample, there is a significant effect for important subsamples, which are at a higher risk of being involved in hate crime, such as respondents with lower levels of education or young respondents. Of course, the individuals that became more likely to engage in hate crime are not necessarily the same that have been persuaded to have more xenophobic attitudes (especially given the question used to assess attitudes) – though it is



possible that some individuals who would have been close to committing crimes in the absence of social media might have been persuaded enough to switch their behavior in the presence of social media.

At the same time, we do not find that social media leads to an increase in xenophobic attitudes when measured with a direct question. The results are confirmed if we use a much larger, nationally representative survey of more than 30,000 respondents conducted by one of the biggest Russian survey companies FOM in 2011. In principle, it is possible that social media not only changed real attitudes, but also the perception of the social acceptability of expressing these attitudes. However, we do not find any evidence that social media reduces the stigma of admitting xenophobic attitudes. The fact that we find the effect of social media on actual attitudes, but not on the expressed ones suggests, that if anything the stigma increased, at least for the respondents who acquired xenophobic attitudes as a result of social media influence. This highlights the importance of using a survey method that reduces concerns with social acceptability, such as list experiments.

Overall, our results indicate that social media lead to an increase in both ethnic hate crimes and xenophobic attitudes in Russia. However, the effect on hate crime is observed only in cities in which there was already a high level of nationalism. Additional evidence indicates that this effect is driven both by facilitating coordination of nationalists and by persuading people to become more xenophobic. These findings contribute to a growing body of evidence that social media is a complex phenomenon that has both positive and negative effects on the welfare of people (see also Allcott et al, 2019), which has to be taken into account in discussing policy implications of the recent changes in media technologies.

References

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Ruben Enikolopov

New Economic School (NES)

REnikolopov@nes.ru

www.nes.ru

Ruben Enikolopov is the Rector and Professor of Economics at the New Economic School in Moscow, ICREA Research Professor at Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), and Researcher at Barcelona Institute for Political Economy and Governance (IPEG). He is also a Research Fellow for the Centre for Economic Policy Research and a Research Affiliate at the International Growth Centre.

With a PhD in Economics from Harvard University, his research mainly focusses on empirical analysis related to Political Economy, Economics of Mass Media, Development Economics and Corporate Finance. He has published various papers in the best academic journals including the American Economic Review, the Quarterly Journal of Economics, and the Review of Economic Studies.

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