Big Data Analysis in the Study of Radical Salafi Ideology in Russian Social Networks

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Abstract: The article explores the ideological discourse of radical Salafi online communities on the Russian Internet based on the analysis of big data uploaded from VKontakte social network. Identified as radical Salafi communities are divided into three types - moderate, fringe and radical. The study examines the main current radical narratives and discursive strategies of Salafi groups, changes in ideological discourse in comparison with the results of monitoring in previous years.

1 INTRODUCTION

Despite the constant increase in censorship and blocking of extremist and terrorist materials on the Russian Internet since 2012, a high degree of dissemination of radical Salafi ideology remains in Russian social networks. Moreover, the radical Salafi discourse has successfully adapted to restrictions and acquired veiled forms of representation. Radical Salafi groups are still found on the largest Russian social network VKontakte, which unite dozens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of users. At the same time, as monitoring data over the past 5 years show, this online audience's average age ranges from 18 to 29 years (Myagkov et al., 2020a) (Myagkov et al., 2020b, 876).

Online radicalization and the ideological discourse of virtual Salafi communities are increasingly attracting the attention of researchers. At the same time, as a rule, mainly English–speaking groups are studied on particular platforms, such as Facebook (Bouko et al., 2020) (Saoudi, 2020), Twitter (X) (Klausen, 2015) (blocked and banned social networks in Russia). Some experts are trying to cover a whole range of popular social networks and present the analysis of a "digital Salafi ecosystem" (Ayad, 2021) (Guhl, 2021). However, Salafi groups on the Russian social network VKontakte rarely become the subject of research outside Russia (Müller et al., 2022). However, the Russian researchers who deal with this topic are few in number.

In our study, which continues earlier monitoring and research of the content of radical and extremist online communities, 19 Salafi online communities on VKontakte were selected as the object of discourse analysis (see table 1). The list of groups was based on previously discovered or identified new communities by key terms or using the snowball method. Monitoring of VKontakte (from November 2023 to March 2024) shows that the total online audience of radical Salafi communities consists of at least 887000 of users.

The aim of the study was to identify radical Salafi communities on VKontakte and identify the features of modification of Salafi discourse during 2023-2024 years.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

At the first stage of the study, the task was set to search for and identify communities spreading radical Salafi discourse or alleged sympathizers of extremist and terrorist organizations of Islamists (including jihadist ones). To solve this problem, the previously used list of Islamist communities (active in 2021-2022) was updated. During the audit, those communities that stopped publishing posts or stopped

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their activities for other reasons (blocking, etc.) were screened out. Only those communities that remained active during the monitoring period (November 2023 – March 2024) were left: they published at least a few posts per month. Further, this list has been significantly expanded by searching for additional communities. To do this, the 'snowball' method was used. Recommended links to related communities in already identified groups, network connections with other communities were considered. As a result, the list of virtual communities included 35 groups. After that, a secondary expert review of the communities was carried out (preliminary discourse analysis), after which only 19 communities were left on the list. The criteria for selecting communities were the following: the presence of stable Salafi narratives; active status during the monitoring period; sufficient content for analysis (at least 50 posts during the monitoring period); a sufficient number of subscribers (at least 500).

The second stage of the study involved uploading data and defining a content segment for a detailed analysis of the discourse disseminated by Salafi communities. Through the API service on VKontakte all posts dated by monitoring period were uploaded, as well as metric indicators of the popularity of posts (likes, views, comments, reposts). After that, the posts of each community were distributed by the number of likes (from the most popular to the least popular).

At the third stage, a segment of the most popular posts among the target audience was highlighted in the community content. To do this, the 10 most popular posts in each community were selected by three metrics (the largest number of likes, reposts and comments). As a result, a table with the 30 most popular posts was compiled for each community. In some cases, the number of posts were less than 30 due to the complete absence of comments (this potion is deactivated in some communities).

At the fourth stage of the study, the analysis of the features of the broadcast discourse was carried out and the key topics of radical Salafi discourse and changes in discursive strategies were highlighted (when comparing the results with previously conducted monitoring of Salafi communities in 2016-2017, 2019-2020, 2021-2022 years).

Table 1: List of Salafi online communities on VKontakte.

Name, number of members	Radicality level
assalamu ale'kum, 242K	Moderate
Bloknot Edinobozhnika (Notepad of Monotheist), 111K	Fringe
Sady Mudrosti (Garden of wisdom), 110K	Moderate
3:19 Inna d-dina inda Allah al-Islam (3:19 The Religion of Allah is Islam), 65K	Fringe
K Edonobozhiyu (To Monotheism), 45K	Moderate
Hanifiya, 38K	Moderate
Etika trebovaniya znaniy (Ethics of knowledge demand), 36K	Moderate
Konspekty dlya ischuschikh znanuya (Notes for knowledge seekers), 43K	Fringe
Ahlu Sunnah Wal' Jama'a Fatwa Online, 29K	Fringe
TAUHID, 26K	Fringe
Zuhd (Asceticism), 18K	Fringe
istseleniya serdets (healing of the hearts), 15K	Fringe
Al Qamar, 12K	Radical
«ASH-SHAMS», 11K	Radical
Guraba, 10K	Radical
FAWA'ID, 8K	Fringe
Haim (The Stranger), 6K	Radical
Vabil, 6K	Fringe
"INTISOAR", 512	Radical

The methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis has become a guideline in the study of the features of ideological discourse broadcast by Salafi communities on VKontakte. The goal of the critical approach to discourse analysis is "to make visible through analysis, and to criticize, connections between properties of texts and social processes and relations (ideologies, power relations) which are generally not obvious to people who produce and interpret those texts…" (Fairclough, 1995, 97). Among the three levels of discourse analysis that stand out in critical discourse analysis and related approaches, we will first be interested in two levels - the definition of the leading topic and discursive strategies for the representation of radical content (Abdulmajid, 2023, 57).

The online communities identified as Salafi were divided into several categories according to their degree of radicalism. At the same time, we relied on the criteria for identifying and classifying the radicality of media content, which were developed by D. Holbrook [Holbrook, 2015]. A 'moderate' level means 'silent discontent', without explicit approval of hate-motivated violence. The 'fringe' level is equivalent to the explicit isolationist attitudes of the group, the manifestation of hatred and hostility towards specific groups without degrading human dignity and calls for violence. And the 'extreme' level

means justification or direct calls for violence against the ‘enemy’, defined by racial, confessional and other characteristics (Holbrook, 2015, 67). Instead of the latter concept, the author prefer to use the term ‘radical’, since there are no direct extremist calls for violent actions in the considered groups of radicals on VKontakte.

During the discourse analysis, the content of communities was divided into several segments. In addition to the ‘most popular’ content (see above), the following levels of popularity of posts were highlighted according to the number of likes – ‘low’ (up to 49 likes), ‘medium’ (from 50 to 399) and ‘high’ (from 400 likes and above) levels of popularity.

3 RESULTS

The list of radical Salafist communities included groups that were divided into three categories according to the degree of radicality of the broadcast discourse: moderate, fringe and radical.

4 groups were assigned to the first category. They are distinguished by a wider audience (the audience of three groups is 110000, 242000 and 36000 of subscribers; only the fourth group is rather small, i.e. 1900 of subscribers) and a more moderate Salafi discourse. The decrease in the radicality of the discourse may be due to ideological attitudes: belonging to more moderate Salafi trend – the so-called Madhalism (followers of the Saudi ideologue Rabia al-Madhali). By indirect signs, the largest community is supposedly identified as followers of Madhalism. The community with a smaller audience (36 thousand subscribers) is focused on the ideology of the famous Salafist preacher Salim Abu Umar al-Gazzi (born in Palestine) known in the post-Soviet countries.

12 communities were identified as radical (63% of the total list of communities). They are distinguished by the special radicality of the transmitted ideological discourse, sometimes close to extremist attitudes.

The leading narratives of radical discourse are the theme of ‘innovators’ in religion. This vague category includes followers of traditional Islam (theological schools – Asharism, Maturidism; Sufi Islam). The degree of radicalism of communities varies in attitudes towards ‘innovators’ – from condemnation and restriction of contacts with them to the obligation to show hatred and hostility towards them.

Another line of radical discourse is the criticism of secular holidays. The secular New Year holiday, widely celebrated in Russia, is in the first place among the objects of criticism. Among the secular holidays that are rejected as the holidays of the ‘infidels’, March 8 is sometimes mentioned. In one of the communities with radical content, the March 8 holiday is associated with the propaganda campaign of the Soviet government, which started on this day in 1927 in Uzbekistan (the public liberation of women from wearing the burqa). The author of the post extremely negatively assesses the results of this campaign, claiming that ‘on this day, tens of thousands of women lost their honor and betrayed their religion’.

Another component of the radical Salafi discourse is the narrative of Islam's ‘alienness’ to modern society. Linguistically and in the form of visual images, this theme is intertwined with the motif of the existential loneliness of a believer (a follower of Salafism).

In moderate communities, the main content consists of moral and religious instructions of a general nature. At the same time, the image of the enemy (both external to the Muslim community and internal in the form of ‘innovators’) is presented in abstract terms. Radical components of discourse may present, but in the form of the most general and veiled judgments.

In moderate Salafi online communities, religious and political attitudes are often presented implicitly. In one of the communities that represents discourse in the most careful manner (‘Sady Mudrosti’), it is even difficult to identify the ideologists that this community focuses on as authoritative "scholars" (because it publish only quotations of hadiths and classic works of medieval theologians).

In this type of community, the number of posts with a negative semantic and emotional tonality among the most popular posts does not exceed 31%. A distinctive feature of such communities is the criticism and rejection of extreme currents of Islamism (terrorist organizations ISIS, Al-Qaeda, etc.), which are called ‘Kharijites’ (extremists).

A discourse analysis of the content of fringe communities shows that the proportion of negative content in the most popular posts ranges from 15 to 60%. In rare cases, this proportion is higher. In the ‘assalamu al'kum’ community, such content accounts for two thirds of the most popular posts. Content with a negative tonality affects the widest possible range of topics. The main part is the topic of refuting ideological opponents and showing hostility towards them. For example, followers of Sufi Islam refer to ‘kafirs’ or ‘infidels’, hatred of Shiites, secular Muslims (especially the Turkey citizens) is manifested. For example, in the ‘Zuhd’ community

the main ‘enemies of Islam’ are portrayed as followers of Sufism and Asharism (one of the traditional theological schools of Sunnism), as well as Shiites. In the ‘Fawa'id’ group, even in the most popular posts, Asharites and Sufis are openly declared ‘kafirs’, and ‘innovators’ (which means non-Salafi Muslims) are called enemies worse than ‘enemies from among the infidels’. Among the external ‘enemies of Islam’, ‘Jews’ come out on top, which is associated with the escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Israeli military operation in Gaza (after the terrorist attack by Hamas in October 2023).

In less popular segments of content, veiled calls for the rejection of the secular state and legislation and propaganda of the doctrine of ‘loyalty and disavowal’ (al-wala wa-l-bara), which provoke xenophobic and isolationist attitudes towards representatives of ‘alien’ social groups.

Radical communities tend to have a higher level of content with a negative semantic and emotional tonality. It occupies a proportion of at least 40% in the segment of the most popular content. However, some of the communities are more careful and skillfully hide their radical orientations by publishing posts with a negative tonality in a smaller quantity (for example, the ‘TAUHID’ community presumably sympathizing with ISIS ideology).

Posts with a negative tonality cover the maximum portion of the most popular content in pro-Hamas online communities (‘Al Qamar’ – 80% and ‘Guraba’ – 86%). The main theme of these communities is the Palestinian resistance in the context of Israel's military operation in Gaza. This discourse takes the form of moral support for the Palestinians, sympathy for the suffering of the civilian population, and a plea to God to punish the Jews. This set of topics is complemented by a number of narratives aimed at discrediting the enemy (Israel) and dehumanizing his image.

The discourse related to moral support for the Palestinians in the context of the military operation in Gaza has also been characteristic of many other Salafi communities since the fall of 2023, which can be considered one of the top topics. Radical communities are distinguished by their veiled support for violence against ‘enemies of Islam’. Some small communities like ‘INTISOAR’ in posts with low popularity call for the rejection of secular legislation (in veiled formulation).

4 DISCUSSION

The results of the study show a tendency to reduce the degree of radicalism of broadcast discourse in Salafi online communities. Compared with the monitoring results of previous years (2017, 2021) (Myagkov et al., 2020a; 2020b) (Baryshev et al., 2022), the number of fringe communities has decreased, the discourse of radical communities has become more veiled. More or less open sympathizers of the ISIS ideology are no longer found among the communities. Supporters of ideologues officially accused of involvement in extremist activities or terrorism, such as Abu Umar Sasitlinsky and Abdullah Kosteksky, have actually left VKontakte: now their resources function only on platforms poorly or not at all controlled by the Russian authorities (YouTube, Telegram, etc.).

Among the audience of Salafi communities, the following themes took the first place in popularity: ‘the ideal of a Muslim’ and ‘ethics of family life’ in segment of content with a positive semantic and emotional tonality and ‘the external enemy’ in segment of negative tonality. The first two topics are devoted to formation of a normative image of a ‘true believer’. Due to historical circumstances, the topic of the ‘external enemy’ is almost entirely reduced to general moral support for Palestine and criticism of Israel's military actions in Gaza. Accordingly, the main external ‘enemy of Muslims’ is defined as the ethno-confessional category of ‘Jews’. This topic has become a major one for almost all types of Salafi communities.

The average level of interest is aroused by the neutral topic of ‘cult and religious law’, which is devoted to general instructions related mainly to prayer, fasting, etc. Several topics with negative semantic content belong to the same level – ‘internal enemies’ (these include Sufis, Shiites, traditionalist Muslims, Islamists of competing movements); disbelief and excommunication from religion; human sins and vices.

In fringe communities, the images of enemies remain somewhat vague, although the degree of hostility towards them increases. To this is added a stable narrative about ‘innovators’ in religion, which clearly provokes hostility between Salafists and followers of traditional trends of Islam. This discourse acquires a high degree of radicalism in radical communities, especially those explicitly focused on information support for Hamas. At the same time, the mobilization messages of the audience are expressed in a veiled form of prayer, which may contain requests for ‘punishment’ and ‘destruction’ of the ‘enemies of Islam’. It should be noted that in

previous monitoring, online communities focused on Hamas and other extremist Palestinian movements were not detected.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Radical Salafist communities still maintain their presence on VKontakte, Russia's largest social network. At the same time, according to the degree of radicality of ideological discourse, they are divided into moderate, fringe and radical.

Despite the fact that moderate communities directly reject terrorism and mainly broadcast moderate Salafi views, a more detailed discourse analysis reveals carefully camouflaged components of radical discourse in their content. Also, the discourse analysis shows that the dominant type of semantic and emotional tonality in the content of communities is not an indicator of their radicality. There are communities that skillfully mask their radical positions, constantly publishing posts mainly with a neutral or positive tone.

The moderate and part of the radical communities are characterized by a discursive strategy of weak concretization and deliberately blurred semantics of those categories and concepts that can be assessed as expressing radical ideological attitudes. In the case of radical communities, ideological discourse intensifies to the point of veiled legitimization of violence. Uncompromising criticism of ideological opponents (primarily followers of traditional Islam) sometimes develops into a manifestation of hostility and hatred towards them.

At the same time, the general and main thematic line in the discourse of online communities during the monitoring period was support for Palestine in the context of the escalated Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the military operation in Gaza. Also, regardless of the degree of radicalism of the communities, the theme of existential loneliness and the ‘alienness’ of Islam, aimed at forming an isolationist attitude among followers of Salafi ideology, acts as a cross-cutting one. As for the ideological orientation of the Salafi online communities on VKontakte, almost all of them have a common ideological base of Saudi Salafism (Wahhabism), and the difference lies only in the preference of specific ‘scholars’ and ideological trends. Only communities that focus on Hamas and provide information support to this movement do not rely on these sources or even reject them.

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