Analysis of the Cognitive Radicalization of Right-Wing Radicals: Using the Example of Content in Communities on the Social Network VK

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Abstract: The purpose of the study is to study the content of supporters of right-wing radical ideology in the communities of the VKontakte social network, which is the most popular in Russia. To do this, the content of the most popular posts in these communities was analyzed. The relevance of posts was determined in accordance with online message metrics (number of likes, reposts, comments). This allowed us to determine which topics are most in demand and cause the greatest response from supporters of right-wing radical ideology. The proposed analysis is based on the assumption that the most actively consumed content makes the greatest contribution to cognitive radicalization.

1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to examine the content of communities of supporters of right-wing radical ideology on VKontakte, the largest social network in Russia. This topic is of great interest due to the fact that media consumption is a significant factor in cognitive radicalization, which in turn is one of the stages on the path to radical behavior, the end point of which is participation in radical activities (terrorism, violence due to national, religious or racial hatred, etc.) (Holbrook, Taylor, 2017). Cognitive radicalization usually refers to the process when an individual shows commitment to an ideology in extreme manifestations (Moskalenko, McCauley, 2009). The process of cognitive radicalization has a complex and staged trajectory, which begins with studying radical content on the Internet and leads to reading extremist literature, which immediately precedes radical behavior (Wadhwa, Bhatia, 2015; Wolfowicz et al., 2019). Today, the influence of the Internet on the process of cognitive radicalization is actively studied using traditional methods of psychological testing (Frissen, 2021; Tomczyk et al., 2022), but indirect metrics are also increasingly used, such as the analysis of user reactions to radical content (views, likes, reposts, etc.) (Calvert, 2024), the analysis of online discussions (comments) (Phadke et al., 2022), etc. The second factor that determines the relevance of the research topic is the tightening of law enforcement practice of Russian legislation in relation to media products that are called "extremist materials" - texts, videos, signs and symbols that reflect, among other things, right-wing radical ideology. Increased control and regulation of the Internet by the state, increased punishment for extremist statements on social networks and the dissemination of extremist materials (for example, by reposting or saving images in one's account) lead to the fact that many communities of right-wing radicals use increasingly veiled and implicit forms of demonstrating information and representing their ideological sympathies to mobilize supporters (Myagkov et al., 2019). In this regard, it is of great interest to study those thematic blocks of content that supporters of these ideas turn to in order to maintain their presence in a media environment that is quite aggressive towards them. In previous works, we have already studied the communication strategies used by supporters of this ideology on social networks (Myagkov et al., 2020). In this article, we will focus

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on the study of the content topics that circulate in right-wing radical communities. To do this, we will analyze the content of the most popular posts in these communities. The demand for posts is determined by online message metrics (number of likes, reposts, comments). This will allow us to determine which topics are most in demand and evoke the greatest response from supporters of right-wing radical ideology. We start from the assumption that the most actively consumed content makes the greatest contribution to cognitive radicalization.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology included the consistent implementation of two stages. First, this is the search and selection of communities containing right-wing radical content. Second, this is the analysis of posts in the selected communities. In the process of searching and selecting communities, we were guided by the principles and methods that had been successfully tested earlier in our studies. We used community databases that we analyzed in our previous works. For the period 2016-2021. The authors conducted four different studies that analyzed different aspects of right-wing radical discourse. In this study, we used the communities that we had previously studied and also supplemented the database with several communities identified through manual search. The study covers the period from November 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024 and includes 21 communities identified as right-wing. Messages from the selected communities were downloaded using the Popsters service.

In the process of identifying right-wing radical communities, we adhered to the following criteria:

1) they should be sufficiently numerous in comparison with other ideologically close communities (at least 1000 participants);

2) they should be active (publish at least 6 posts during the study period (at least 1 post per month))

3) they should represent different directions and ideological positions in the right-wing radical movement;

4) they contain messages that clearly indicate the approval of the authors of the ideology of the right. In classifying right-wing radical groups, we tried to be guided by generally accepted assessment criteria (glorification of the leaders of the Third Reich, demonstration of symbols of National Socialism, humiliation and calls for physical violence against representatives of “non-white” races – blacks, migrants from Central Asia, natives of the Caucasus, praise of criminals convicted of crimes motivated by racial hatred, justification and active approval of racism, Nazism and xenophobia). To determine the level of radicalism of the content contained in the online community, we used the “Extremist Media Index” methodology proposed by D. Holbrook for the analysis of media materials of Islamists and right-wing radicals (Holbrook, 2015). This methodology includes the distribution of the selected communities into three levels depending on the level of “radicalism” of the content: “moderate”, “fringe” and “extreme” content. The moderate level was assigned to those groups that contain materials on general religious, philosophical, historical, etc. topics that do not explicitly express approval of violence motivated by hatred. This content expresses a moderate attitude towards extremist ideas - they can be called "expressing silent discontent." The fringe level was assigned to those groups that contain politically radical statements, but without calls for violence at the moment. Hostility and anger can be expressed in this case simply in the form of discontent, without humiliating human dignity and justifying violence against one's enemies (for example, migrants). And, finally, the extreme level was assigned to those groups that justify or glorify violence against certain groups of people based on race, nation, faith, origin, etc. Over the past period - about six years, the discourse of right-wing radicals has significantly transformed. For example, the level of extreme content in relatively numerous VK communities (with more than 1,000 subscribers) has become significantly lower. In the 2017 study, out of 42 right-wing radical communities, 13 were classified as extreme, while in this study (Table 1), only 1 community can be classified as fringe (Væringjavegr ᛝ Fennoskandia). Moreover, the administrator of the Væringjavegr ᛝ Fennoskandia community himself states that he is recognized as a foreign agent, so it can be assumed that this community will also soon cease its activities.

Table 1: List of right-wing radical communities (as of 01.11.2023).

Name, number of members	Radicality level
Right	Weak
Clear Conscience	Weak
Væringjavegr ᛝ Fennoskandia	Fringe
Migrants in Russia - everything as it is	Moderate
Right. Spare	Weak
Russian Regions	Weak
Migrants - everything as it is	Moderate
Right memes	Moderate
H8Core	Weak
Alt-Right	Moderate

Stop the genocide of Rus and Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation	Weak
Pravachka	Moderate
KASS 2.0 - Coalition of Anti-Soviet Communities	Weak
✠AD KKK✠	Moderate
RIGHT BLOC	Weak
Party RIGHT RUSSIA	Moderate
RUSSIAN MARCH	Weak
Russian Vologda	Weak
Right Philosophical Platform - PFP | White Field	Weak
Anti-Communism	Weak

Table 1 introduces another level of radicalism – “weak”. The author decided to introduce an additional level in order to mark communities that demonstrate their radicalism in a very veiled form. For example, the community ✠AD KKK✠ publishes content mainly dedicated to the skinhead subculture, but in a historically retrospective key – these are musical recordings of English-language groups, most often from the last century, they offer for sale clothes and accessories related to this subculture, etc. In general, this is a fairly typical right-wing radical community that ridicules migrants, but anti-migrant posts do not have pronounced aggression, and do not use derogatory terms to describe migrants and Muslims. Such content is filled with hints and references rather than outright statements. Statements regarding the Soviet era are much harsher, which is apparently explained by the lack of censorship restrictions on defamation of the Soviet period of our history. However, once a week, on Fridays, the administrator of this community publishes a post addressed to "punks and skins", in which he voices his opinion in a very peculiar sarcastic and mocking form regarding certain current events in public life.

At the same time, there is no doubt that in these so-called "ideological" posts, a negative assessment is given to the Russian authorities and Russian reality. Another example confirming the stated assumption is a post in the Alt-Right community, which collected the largest number of likes during the research period (168 likes). The photo depicts the death mask of I.V. Stalin and contains the inscription "he died, this one will die too". Through a simple set of cultural symbols, which are supported, among other things, by the official ideology of the Russian authorities, one can understand that, apparently, this post refers to the figure of the President of the Russian Federation.

Then, we analyzed the most popular messages in each community and determined the topic of these messages. We took 10 messages in each community that had received a number of likes, reposts and comments. Online activity is an important characteristic of the relevance of the message topic for social network users, since it essentially allows us to assess the audience's interest in this topic. The number of likes, reposts and comments is a metric that shows the "involvement" of users in the message topic. Accordingly, the more different forms of online activity a message receives, the higher the audience's interest in this topic, the higher its relevance for users. Next, using discourse analysis, we identified the message topics. When coding, we focused on identifying topics that are given a positive and negative assessment. Thus, we sought to identify those topics that evoke the greatest positive and negative emotions among community members.

3 RESULTS

As for the popular topics of messages that are broadcast in the studied communities, the thematic block, which presents certain enemies of the right, primarily "external enemies", quite predictably prevails here. Depending on the ideological orientation of the community, these may be migrants, natives of Central Asia, the Caucasus, blacks, modern supporters of leftist ideology, the history of the USSR, communists, Russian officials of various levels, representatives of LGBT, feminists, Russian journalists, patriotic bloggers, etc. Within the limited space of the article, we do not have the opportunity to give a detailed description of each community, so we will limit ourselves to general comments. The main attention is focused on the "crimes" and "punishments" of external enemies - migrants, Bolsheviks, officials whose actions contribute to the growth of migration, etc. For example, the right-wingers were very interested in posts about the verdict of former senator Boris Shpigel, whom they call the author of Article 282 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (dedicated to inciting hatred or enmity). We also singled out a separate topic of "internal enemies", where we included messages that criticize or make accusations against their own supporters. An example would be posts that a particular right-wing musician supported the Israeli government's actions in the Gaza Strip.

The second thematic block can be conditionally characterized as "ours", here we included all messages describing the image and behavior of a supporter of the right-wing ideology "correct right-wingers"), as well as those expressing approval of the actions of certain individuals who do not belong to this subculture. Thus, memorial messages dedicated to the memory of individuals or historical events significant for the right-wingers are quite popular. For example, a message in memory of the pogroms of the

Russian population in Tajikistan in 1990 received a great response. We classified posts containing an abstract description of the positive qualities that people and social communities should have from the point of view of the right-wingers as ideological messages. This emphasizes the importance of overcoming one's fears, the value of family and friendship, etc.

We classified posts with specific examples of behavior approved by the right-wingers, such as, for example, victory over representatives of non-Russian ethnic groups in sports competitions or in a fight, etc., as the thematic block "image of the correct right-winger". The category "approved politicians" included messages about the actions of various politicians that, from the point of view of the right, are correct. First of all, these are messages about the governor of a particular region banning the use of migrant labor in certain sectors of the economy. We included posts in the category "allies" that give a positive assessment of the statements or actions of certain individuals, for example, a selection of statements by the actor I. Okhlobystin. The emergence of such a category as "approved behavior of non-Russian ethnic groups" was very interesting. There were only two such messages, however, this is an interesting fact that allows us to outline the path to reducing the radicalization of the right. Thus, one of the messages talks about a migrant who became a voluntary participant in the SVO. The category "actions" and "events" included messages about illegal actions of the right (for example, messages about vandalism against monuments of political figures of the Soviet era) and about legal events (festivals, concerts, etc.). Information messages included posts with information about various events (political, economic, social). We classified the “other” topic as messages that are not relevant to this study (for example, a message with the text “are you sleeping?”).

4 DISCUSSION

The results obtained quite clearly indicate that the level of "straightforward" radicalism, typical of right-wing radicals earlier, with direct calls for violence, has noticeably decreased in the VK social network. Does this mean that right-wing radicals are isolated in the information space and thus their opportunities for cognitive radicalization are limited? Of course not. Indeed, due to stricter regulation of the Internet space by the state, formal manifestations of right-wing radicalism have become much less noticeable, but at the same time, the administrators of such communities, promoting right-wing radical discourse, increasingly use a kind of "Aesopian" language in order to convey their ideological messages to the audience in a veiled form.

Another trend that was recorded back in 2017 and has only intensified since then is the search by right-wing radicals for a space that is not controlled by the state and, accordingly, free from censorship, as VKontakte was in the early to mid-2010s. Most often, the Telegram messenger acts as such an alternative. Many of the communities presented in Table 1 have their own Telegram channel, and often directly state that they are curtailing their activities in VK and moving entirely to Telegram. Many extremely radical communities successfully exist in Telegram, which were closed in VK several years ago.

We analyzed some Telegram channels of the selected communities and found that they contain truly radical content. For example, the Fennoskandia ᛝ Væringjavegr community Telegram channel actively covers the actions of Finnish mercenaries participating in a special military operation on the side of the Ukrainian armed forces, regularly collects funds to support the Ukrainian army, expresses open support for Ukrainian nationalist organizations banned in Russia, contains calls to violate the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, etc. It is interesting to note that the representatives of this community adhere to extreme eclecticism in terms of content - declaring themselves adherents of Karelian-Finnish nationalism, they regularly publish posts about Scandinavian mythology, apparently identifying themselves with the traditions of German-Scandinavian nationalism.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Thus, our results show a general decrease in the level of radical content in right-wing radical communities on the VK social network, which remains the largest in Russia, compared to previous studies. Radical content that could stimulate cognitive radicalization is posted by supporters of these ideologies on platforms that are more independent of government regulation, such as Telegram. For most of them, being on VKontakte is a way to engage supporters who can then be redirected to other platforms for further radicalization. In this regard, the problem of regulating these platforms or forming a truly sovereign information space that will not allow radicalization to be fueled from external sources arises. As for the thematic repertoire in right-wing communities, we see a concentration on the image of the enemy, no matter what guise it takes.

The novelty of the presented study lies in the fact that the most popular thematic blocks in the communities of right-wing radicals were identified, which allows for a deeper understanding of the process of cognitive radicalization. The practical significance of the study lies in the fact that the obtained materials can be used to develop a comprehensive program to counteract cognitive radicalization. The main directions of further research in this area are related to the study of new platforms where supporters of right-wing radical ideology feel free, such as Telegram. Foreign authors are already studying this platform, but there are no such studies in domestic sociology.

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