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CIRCULATION OF PATRIOTISM IN SOCIAL MEDIA
PLATFORMS OF TV STATIONS

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Abstract

This paper takes a look at the way patriotic discourses are expressed and circulated in social media accounts of mainstream television stations in Georgia and Russia. Patriotism has become a part of proclaimed state ideology in Russia, and in Georgia patriotic discourses prevail due to the unresolved conflicts around Abkhazia and South Ossetia. My research interest lies in the way patriotism is works both in the minds and everyday practices of television journalists and in the official social media channels of the television stations. In this paper I observe social media accounts (mostly Vkontakte and Facebook) of TV stations of the First Channel in Russia and Rustavi2 and PSB (Public Service Broadcaster) in Georgia during major patriotic events in 2018: 9th of May, 26th May (the one hundred year anniversary of first Georgian state) in Georgia) as well as the 10th anniversary of the five-day war in South Ossetia. I analyze both the way the television channels use their social media during these events and take a look at some of the comments by viewers. My research demonstrates that the social media accounts are used in order to reinforce the patriotic discourses of television stations, and the social media users mostly support those discourses. Those commentators that try to criticize the state-led patriotic events are often condemned by fellow users.

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Keywords: Television, social media, Vkontakte, patriotism, First Channel, Georgian TV.



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1. Introduction

In academic literature, most texts related to media and patriotism have to do with the role mainstream media has played in the situations of war and conflict. All governments everywhere try to justify military actions by selling them as something that serves the national interest. Consequently, patriotism and patriotic journalism could be something that the countries *need* in order to justify warfare. This often leads to government criticizing the role of the media, and one of the underlying assumptions is that the media is being unpatriotic. There is widespread academic consensus on the fact that media plays a role in all conflicts – today more than ever, thanks to the diminishing role of traditional media outlets as well as all the possibilities of modern techniques of manipulation. Existing studies have in fact suggested that media has served the military rather well in times of war (Carruthers, 2000; quoted by Goddard, Robinson, & Parry, 2008). Despite the long-lasting academic debates about war journalism, propaganda and nationalism, patriotism remains a vague term. Unlike in the case of another widely used term, nationalism, few scholars have spent years looking for an exact definition. For example, patriotism can be defined as “positive nationalism” or a general sentiment related to the love of motherland – and in most cases – warfare, either information war or a military affairs. It seems clear that the notions of patriotism are often bound to historical situations and schools of social or political thought (Nikonova, 2010, p. 356). Thus, despite the need of some kind of a clarification of the term there is a need to remind that in this particular work I look at patriotism in the context of a post-Soviet or, more generally, post-totalitarian state.

2. Problem Statement

Subsequently I aim at defining patriotism from the viewpoint of patriotic journalism, aiming at looking at what patriotism means for a journalist in his/her everyday work and self-understanding as a journalist.

So, is patriotism and patriotic journalism a necessary method for a journalism functioning in a society that potentially faces war or conflict or external threat? How is patriotism understood and created? (see Sanina, 2017).

In order to understand this, I intend to compare the ways the patriotism is constructed in (social) media texts in post-Soviet nation state context (Volkov & Goncharov, 2017).

3. Research Questions

Research questions have to do with the role of mainstream television stations in the patriotic discourses in the two countries. In my analysis of the social media accounts during major patriotic events, my questions were:

How is patriotism and state orientation reflected, circulated and re-circulated in the social media accounts of major TV stations in Russia and Georgia?

How do the users of social media of the TV stations react to and interpret patriotism? What are the prevailing discourses?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to contribute to our understanding of the way state-imposed patriotic narratives move and circulate in the social media accounts of mainstream television stations and to understand the way user-generated content contributes to this understanding (Morozov, 2017, p. 27).

5. Research Methods

My research was done by gathering (copying and saving) social media data from Vkontakte and Facebook accounts of the most popular mainstream television channels in Russia: First Channel and Rossiya 1 in Russia and Rustavi2 and PSB in Georgia. I saved the comments as a separate file, classified and analyzed them.

I took a look at both the writings by the channels themselves, the official approach taken by the TV stations, and to the reactions of the readers, to "user-generated content" that refers to the material product, not the tools or process of this product's creation (Mandiberg, 2012).

6. Findings

Despite the rapid transformation of media and its movement towards a "hybrid media system" (Chadwick, 2017), mainstream television remains the most important medium for vast audiences in both Russia and Georgia (Mikashavidze, 2014, pp. 123–126). This is why research on them remains important in the context of the research of the societies in transformation. What makes television a dream is the possibilities of control it provides, for instance, via the control of its frequencies. On the other hand, the appearance of direct translations made control difficult, if not impossible, now that hybrid media systems have created a 24/7 circulation of news and comments in multiple platforms simultaneously.

The internet penetration in both countries has by now reached over half of the population¹. The amount of social media users is also very high in both of the countries. In Georgia, Facebook is the most popular social medium page and, for instance, Vkontakte reaches marginal populations. This is why my research concentrates on Facebook (Baran & Stock, 2015).

In Russia, the rise of internet-based communication meant that the political news environment could be influenced in a new, different way. For instance, during the August 1991 coup in the Soviet Union, the company Relkom sent some 46,000 items of information throughout the country and abroad via email at a time when all other forms of mass communication were controlled and closed (Zassoursky, 2004, p. 161). The new medium was also instrumental in the rise of so-called 'information wars' in the 1990s (Skillen, 2017, pp. 213 – 217). Political consultants working for different political forces used the Internet for anonymous publishing, afterwards citing these sources (Zassoursky, 2004, p. 169).

As freedom of speech in Russia deteriorated, Internet also became a place for journalists unwilling or unable to work for traditional media outlets (Simons, 2016, p. 4). This was largely due to the very low

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/567007/predicted-number-of-internet-users-in-russia/>;
<http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/georgia/>

printing and production costs of online publications compared to those of traditional media. Today online platforms are a natural and self-evident part of the work of the “traditional” outlets as well (Rollberg & Laruelle, 2018, p. 327).

First part of my analysis concentrated on Victory Day in Russian TV stations’ social media, namely, Vkontakte. May 9th, Victory Day, the day of the end of the second world war is a major holiday in Russia. It has been a public holiday in Russian Soviet Socialist Republic since 1965, after which it became a central symbol of identity for the Soviet people.

Prokazina & Starykh (2014) note in their study published in the eve of the 70th anniversary of the end of the war that “currently the ways that the memory of Great Patriotic War is being reproduced and preserved are undergoing a new phase” (p. 35). The authors note, that the main emotional tone is still characterized by the feelings of pride over the country; thankfulness to the participants of the war and the grief over the huge amount of victims.

I observed the social media accounts of First Channel and VGTRK on May 9th, 2018. I copied the status updates and most of the comments on a separate word file, which I analyzed later.

Due to the fact that some comments might have been removed or not copied very well, the amounts stated here are approximate.

It was clear that literally all the TV programmes of the day on Rossiya 1 (VGTRK) and First Channel would be devoted to the celebrations. Consequently, the social media updates concentrated on them: the parade, advertisements of upcoming programmes and other related things.

In the morning programme Rossiya 1 shows interviews with military specialists, war veterans and the participants of the war. There is also a calculator that counts ours to the beginning of the parade. The correspondent stands on Tverskyi talking to the soldiers driving the tanks, congratulating and encouraging them. The driver of II World war – model tank expresses that he is nervous about the responsible tasks related to the events.

Followed by this there is a programme that describes different religions, interviewed by a mufti, Orthodox priest and a Jewish leader. Representatives of civil society, such as the society of the survivors of the siege of Leningrad are interviewed.

6.1. 09.05 in Vkontakte

Vkontakte remains the most popular and used social media channel for Russian TV giants.

On May 9th, The channels kept on putting updates of the celebrations.

For instance, First Channel started as early as 9 am Moscow time by stating

“Main parade on the main TV channel of the country! Direct translation from the Red Square. Only on First Channel you will see the Parade devoted to the Victory Day in all its magnitude, beauty and diversity! Unique picture, amazing views and unusual perspectives”.

Further on in the morning the Channel advertised “films about war that everyone should see”. The Channel promised to show several classics, that are being called “Victory films”. This post gathered 554 likes. Some commentator states that “we will cry”; others suggest some other films that should be shown.

The main parade in Moscow was due to start at 10 am Moscow time, thus the Vkontakte posts of First Channel concentrated on advertising it. These posts, however, gathered quite a lot of criticism due to the perceived bad quality of the broadcast.

The next post was the interview of a veteran of II World War, Aleksander Nikolayevich Bodnar, who had during the war completed 300 flights, got hurt but continued until the end – even participating in the first Victory Day Parade in July 1945. Further on, the channel congratulates all the veterans.

After midday the channel posts about Vladimir Putin putting flowers on the graves of the unknown soldier; then more news about the parades in different cities with a separate story from Sevastopol, with references to Krim.

The Channel also paid quite a lot of attention to the Immortal Regiment. The regiment was organized for the fourth time and it was broadcast live on TV. The commentators took on to comment on their experiences, their relatives that took part in the parades and so on.

The update about immortal regiment gathers a lot of comments, most of them positive. People were using memes to commemorate the day. The only negative comments were related to the quality of the translation and some of the hosts; in addition to this some people were outspoken in saying that the war was devastating and very many people died in it.

Out of the 160 comments that I copied – this does not include moments, when people are only sending pictures and memes, and there were plenty of those, neither does this include all conversations that take place directly between people – 39 were either critical or otherwise negative. Some of them were people conflicting with each other and some where critical towards the celebrations. Vast majority of the commentators were simply congratulating each other and saying positive things of the parade. Those criticizing, for instance, the cost of the parade, were called “provocateurs” and disliked by their fellow commentators.

6.2. 09.05 in Rossiya 1

The social media channels of Rossiya 1 are less popular than those of the First Channel.

The general line in updating about the day was, however, very similar to that of the First Channel. The channel concentrated on updating the importance of May 9th to the country, and to the fact that the celebrations shall be followed suit by the channel

The Vkontakte – updates gathered very little likes and comments, much less than on First Channel, most of them were likes and memes that had to do with the holiday.

However, there was more criticism of the celebrations on Rossiya 1 than on First Channel. Some commentators, for instance, underlined that the war was won but situation in Russia is not good. Commentators found the parade expensive, reminding that pensions and salaries remain low in the country.

Most of the Vkontakte feed concerned the parade and the criticism has to do with the low quality of the translation.

By the evening Rossiya 1:s the most commented post on Vkontakte feed of Rossiya 1 was the news about the start of the parade and the post where the channel congratulates the viewers. The latter gathered 155 comments by the evening, most of them memes congratulating each other.

After this the posts gathered much less comments: from under ten to some 29. The most exciting for the viewers was apparently the parade. The broadcast of the parade was the same on all the channels.

The Vkontakte accounts of Rossiya 1 and First Channel on Victory Day show the pattern of the channels of just advertising their own programmes on Vkontakte, not taking part on discussions or provoking anything new.

The criticism has mostly to do with the quality of the translation of the programme. There is some, criticism of the cost of the parade. Observing the updates I could find one comment that criticized Putin under five comments that criticized the regime directly. In general the tone of the comments and discussion was almost religious. The Victory Day seems to remain a day that unites the country under the flag of patriotism.

The interesting fact is that there was more criticism and diversity in the discussion at Rossiya 1 than at First Channel.

Thankfulness to the heroes of the war is one of the dominating discourses. First and foremost, this means the veterans; however, the discourse reaches to other people that are being considered heroes. The Second World War, as the preceded first one in 1914-1918 was a total war in terms of the length, the setting and the amount of resources pulled into it. As written by Becker (2015), “for the first time in history, the whole world waged war – a war that devoured men, resources and energy: that split loyalties, reignited old fervors and generated new horrors” (p. 129).

Heroism, sacrifice and fight are very obvious in the way the discourses of World War II are constructed in modern Russia. The talk about the amount of human victims is very seldom there: the massive suffer of civilians is raised most often in the context of near-inhuman – sacrifice such as when memorizing the siege of Leningrad.

6.3. 100th anniversary of Georgia in social media of Rustavi2

On May 26th, 2018, Georgia celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. This was the first attempt to establish an independent republic of Georgia, approximately along the current state borders of Georgia². The celebrations were somewhat criticized and questioned beforehand due to the history: the first independence of the republic³ did not last longer than three years.

The celebrations, however, gathered six head of states and the descendants of remarkable figures from the beginning of Georgian independence, such as Noe Zhordania, Akaki Chkhenkeli, Noe Ramishvili, Noe Khomeriki, General Giorgi Kvinitadze and Mamia Berishvili. Year 2018 was also declared “the Year of Freedom” by the president Giorgi Margvelashvili; the idea of this campaign was to underline how the country is moving from “independence to freedom”.

I followed the social media accounts of Rustavi2 during the day.

Rustavi 2 is a famous and disputed channel in Georgia. It was said to be instrumental in the 2003 Rose Revolution that ousted Soviet-era president Eduard Shevardnadze. Its multiple ownership disputes have taken the channel all the way to the European Court of Human Rights⁴.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_Republic_of_Georgia

³ <https://www.georgianjournal.ge/society/34521-georgia-celebrates-100th-anniversary-of-establishment-of-first-democratic-republic-what-happened-on-may-26.html>, downloaded 20th August, 2018

⁴ <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-rustavi2-claims-temporary-victory-ownership-fight>

6.4. Rustavi2 on Facebook, May 26th

Rustavi2 Facebook is a very popular site on Georgian terms. It has over 580 000 likes and over 596 000 followers (August 2018), that can be compared to the 198 000 likes of Yle Uutiset (the main news programme of Finnish public broadcaster) or the 97 000 likes of Yle channel; or the 890 000 Facebook likes of First Channel in Russia – the latter, however, enjoying an audience at least tenfold compared to Rustavi 2.

On 26th May, Rustavi2 started celebrating the independence in the morning. It updated its Facebook several times an hour starting from the morning, in order to cover the festivities extensively.

The channel devoted time and effort to the speeches of foreign presidents, to parades in different cities, the oath ceremony of newly recruited soldiers and other related events such as the opening of the new independence hall.

Rustavi 2, as all the observed TV stations, uses social media in order to remind of and advertise its programmes. So also, May 26th most of the Facebook posts had to do with the programming. However, very first in the morning the channel did remind its viewers about the coming anniversary of Georgia. Further on the channel advertised its serials such as “My Wife’s Daughter” and posted pieces of news: about a journalist of the Public Service Television that got caught of possessing drugs; about a murder investigation and other things.

In the evening, at 20.47 pm the channel posted a larger amount of text about the festivities. It mentioned the above-mentioned descendants of early Georgian politicians. Otar Zurabishvili, representative of the Georgian diaspora in Paris, was quoted saying that the “price for freedom for all generations has been paid”. She also regretted that there is no monument for political migration in Georgia.

During the evening news there are also news about Georgia’s Nato aspirations, and the celebrations of “European Georgia”. Interestingly, even though Rustavi2 remains “independent”, the official discourses of “Europeanness”; “heroic past”, solidarity of nations” and “freedom and liberty” could be found in the updates of Rustavi2 during celebrations.

6.5. 10th Anniversary of Five-Day War in Russian and Georgian TV Channels’ Social Media Networks

The 10th anniversary of Russo-Georgian war could be expected to be a day that would demonstrate a certain outburst of patriotism in both countries.

I observed the following social media accounts:

Facebook-pages of

of Public Service Broadcaster (both Russian and Georgian) and Rustavi2

Vkontakte-page of 1st Channel and Rossiya 1

Facebook-pages of 1st channel and Rossiya 2.

I copied the updates and comment threads concerning the 08080 during the day. I used Google translate in order to follow the discussions in Georgian.

6.6. 08.08.18 on Rustavi 2

Rustavi 2 concentrated on updating about the amounts of victims of August war: 170 military personnel, 14 policemen and 300 civilians. The channel reminded that over one hundred thousand Georgians became internally displaced after the war.

The reaction of people on this is rather emotional and it sparks also discussions between Georgians about whether it was Georgia that launched the war or not.

Further Rustavi2 puts out a piece, where the dwellers of Gori memorize the war', about a Georgian cross being put by the village of Adzvi near occupation line and about the way the memorial day is celebrated in different parts of Georgia.

Later during the day, the channel posted news peace about the comments of the aspiring Presidential candidate Salome Zourabishvili, that was outspoken about the beginning of the war.

During the day the channel posts some memories of the war, but the dominating update is the blame put by Salome Zourabishvili on the previous leadership about the beginning of the war. This inspires over 1000 comments.

6.7. 08.08.18 on PSB

Georgian Public Service broadcaster, GPB, has two Facebook accounts: one in Georgian and another in Russian. The channel's Facebook is clearly less popular than that of Rustavi 2 with a bit over 223 000 likes and 231 400 followers (August 2018) in Georgian and only some 600 – 700 in Russian.

1 st channel posted a lot of news about 0808 on its Georgian version, but they sparked hardly any discussion. In the evening the channel put out a documentary, "Unknown soldiers" about the August war. The channel also covered the war in photographs and posts the memorial events organized in other cities such as Zugdidi and Poti, and a separate programme about the village of Ergenti near the occupation line is being broadcast.

The channel also posted about the reactions of other countries about the anniversary of the war.

Again, the only posts that sparked a lively discussion were those related to Georgian politicians' views on the war. Presidential candidate Salome Zourabishvili's criticism about the big amount of victims as well as the role of Georgia in the war sparked a lot of criticism; so did a quote from Nino Burjanadze, former speaker of Parliament and an active member of the United National Movement – party. Burjanadze was is quoted by PSB as calling for dialogue with Abkhaz and Ossetians, which made some commentators state that she should be expelled from the country and "sent to Putin".

PSB also has a Russian-language Facebook site. On 0808 it consisted on the same news that were on the Georgian web site, translated onto Russian, including the pictures of the war; comments of Sergei Ivanov about the plans Russia had; the comments of Salome Zourabishvili about the victims of war and the comments by President Margvelashvili saying that "neither our faith nor our moral has been shattered by this war."

During the day, most of the status updates in Russian had to do with the war: mostly the comments by foreign countries often calling for Russia to respect the ceasefire agreement. There were quite a lot of quotes from the representatives of different countries, supporting Georgia and reminding about the territorial integrity of the country.

However, these materials did not lead to any discussion in particular.

6.8. 08.08.18 on First Channel and VGTRK

Vkontakte, as explained earlier, is the most popular social media platform in Russia.

First Channel linked its news programmes in its Vkontakte, site, starting by a piece of news about people in South Ossetia carrying flowers to the memorials of people that suffered from the five-day war that appears online at 11.03 am. This piece gathered some comments, including a screen shot from twitter where writer Armen Gazparyan refers to the interview of editor-in-chief of Echo Moskvy, Aleksei Venediktov, saying that "Abkhazia and South Ossetia had no connection to Georgia before 1917" and that until 1931 Abkhazia was a separate republic within the USSR, calling this the "short lessons in history".

Interestingly enough, after a few hours this and some other comments have disappeared from Vkontakte.

The most intense social media discussions on 080808 took place, however on the Facebook site of First Channel. First Channel sent the very same post as it did on Vkontakte about South Ossetians remembering the war. On Facebook there were nearly 400 likes and 349 comments and the news gets shared over 130 times (in two weeks' time). These comments were almost exclusively fights between Georgians and Russians about who started the war. There are some comments calling for peaceful discussions.

The next post by First Channel was about the memorial sites that are in South Ossetia. This post was also popular; shared 269 times by the evening of August 8th. The discussions under the post were very similar to those under the previous post; concentrating on finding the guilty ones for the war. The similar posts "I am Georgian" with the flag were being repeated on this site too, so were many references to history, such as "You should read the history, to the 3rd century and further, in order to know the truth... Georgians were reading the Bible when Russians were still climbing in trees".

There are also some commentators that aim at a more peaceful tone in discussion, and these people often refer to the fact that both Georgians and Russians are Orthodox Christians.

VGTRK had a picture of Tskhinvali⁵, the capital of South Ossetia, featured in its Vkontakte page.

There were a few comments under the picture, such as "Eternal memory to the dead.. Burn in hell Misha" (referring to the former president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili).

Both Russian channels seem to put the very same materials to Facebook and Vkontakte. The "080808" -picture by VGTRK provokes on Facebook three comments, one of which states that "there is no South Ossetia historically" and another says simply "Honor to Georgia."

7. Conclusion

In the hybrid media system of Russian and Georgian TV station's social media web sites it is clear that the social media sites of the stations exist in order to strengthen and re-circulate the content that is coming out on television. During important events such as 9th of May or the anniversary of August 2008 war, the social media platforms are rather there to give the viewers a common space for mourning; for anger and, especially in case of Georgia, also for political debates.

⁵ In this work I write the names of Tskhinvali and Sukhumi demonstrating both the Georgian and Ossetian / Abkhazian way of writing them.

The official patriotic approaches to the Victory Day: pride of the motherland, grief for the dead and thankfulness to the heroes of the war are all vividly expressed in social media, also in the comments of the viewers. There seems to be a uniform, even ritualistic way of celebrating and mourning the day that is also reflected in the comments in social media.

The power is exercised and reproduced in discursive rituals that are –voluntarily and willingly – repeated in the social media comments. This reminds of the Bourdieuan thoughts of the ‘construction of the object’: in this case, again followed by Bourdieu, of a citizen. Here the discursive practices of social media commenting provide a context-specific meaning of citizenship. Fairclough (2010) uses the concept of ‘banal citizenship’, following Michael Billig’s concept of ‘banal nationalism’ in describing “a pervasive but unremarked set of discourses, practices and materialities that in different ways serve as ‘signifiers’ of citizenship – as indexes of citizenship identity, status or values” (p. 415).

Following this line of thought, the way Victory Day and August 8th are presented in social media, and the way the commentators follow the pre-determined discourses shows us a discursive relationship between governing and governed. The comments of the events in both countries demonstrate an expected model of citizenship: of someone who understands the correct way the important patriotic events must be celebrated and commented. The banalizing comments that are sent to those that try to slip from the discursive line, often referring to the (lack) of mental health of these commentators, demonstrate the “correct” way of celebrating the day. Following Fairclough: the multiple discourses and practices of governance make available to people a range of resources out of which specific instances of ‘citizenship’ can be assembled. And the assumed ‘citizen’ of Victory day is loyal, happy and ready to remember the heroes, thank the veterans and to mourn the dead.

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