COUNTERING ANTI-WESTERN DISCOURSES IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Monthly report (February 28-March 31, 2019)

This report describes Georgian-language far right page activities between February 28, 2019 and March 31, 2019. In what follows analysis of how pages and their audience behave on a daily basis is provided. Through topic modeling, key themes the pages discussed throughout the month are identified. Finally, using sentiment analysis, topics the far right pages discussed related to foreign policy are contextualized.

Key characteristics of the pages' day-to-day activities

Overall, only 42 of 70 pages used in previous analysis were active throughout the observation period. Facebook banned a number of influential, far-right groups' Facebook pages in March 2019, including Georgian Idea, Edelweiss, National Legion, Alpha Dominant, and Antiliberal Channel. In March 2019, Georgian-language far-right pages published 3,427 posts, a 30% decrease from the previous month. The expulsion of pages explains the dramatic decrease in the pages' activities relative to February. Given the banning, it is not surprising that interactions with the audience declined as well. Users liked content from the pages 140,955 times, and shared content 140,343 times, a 20% decrease relative to February 2019. The number of comments dropped by a relatively small proportion compared with the previous month (9%).

The largest number of posts (153) were shared on March 18 and 31. In the first case, several pages repeatedly re-posted a video clip from the conservative online TV station Salte. The video clip showed Zviad Tomaradze, a conservative activist who was criticizing Georgia's immigration policy. Tomaradze also presented a list of demands to the Georgian government, including abolishing visa-free travel with Asian countries and punishing businesses "illegally" employing immigrants.

The second peak of activities fell on March 31. On this date, the pages shared posts to celebrate the birthday of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a leader of Georgia's independence movement and the country's first president. Gamsakhurdia, known for his nationalist and religious political views, is venerated as a forefather by Georgia's far-right groups.

Posts on March 3, 2019 earned the peak number of likes. As often happens, the most popular post featured a viral video. The second and third most liked posts showed video clips of Mikheil Saakashvili meeting his supporters in Italy.

There are two peaks in terms of the number of comments on posts far-right pages shared. The first peak falls on March 28, 2019 when the posts earned 4,635

GEORGIAN-LANGUAGE FAR-RIGHT PAGES SAW A 20% DECREASE IN ACTIVITIES, ALTHOUGH USERS WERE ONLY SLIGHTLY LESS ENGAGED WITH THE CONTENT

PAGES HAVE EARNED THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF INTERACTIONS WHEN THEY SHARED XENOPHOBIC CONTENT

PAGES ACTIVELY DISCUSSED THE NOMINATION OF GEORGIAN TEACHER LADO APKHAZAVA FOR GLOBAL TEACHER PRIZE, THE INCIDENT RELATED TO THE IRANIAN RAP ARTIST AMIR TATALOO'S PERFORMANCE, AND THE THE DRAFT LAW ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS
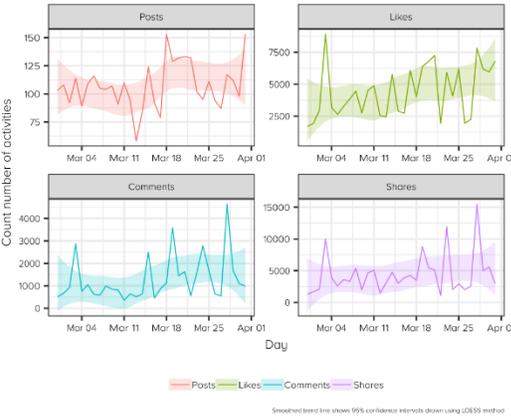
Figure 1. Dynamics of far-right page activities on Facebook during March 2019

comments. The most popular posts on this date discussed Iranian hip-hop artist Amir Tataloo's show in Tbilisi. Pages presented an incorrectly translated excerpt from Tataloo's performance in which the artist had supposedly insulted Georgians. Another popular post shared the same day by Welcome to Georgia referred to the Tataloo incident. The post which was later shared 10,349 times called for scraping visa-free travel for Iranian cit izens. The second peak number of comments fell on March 19, 2019. On this day, the most popular post shared an excerpt from an interview with Georgia's president Salome Zourabichvili and popular TV host Inga Grigolia. The excerpt featured heated discussion between the journalist and the president regarding the refusal of Zourabichvili to be interviewed in places other than the presidential palace.

As with comments, the highest number of content shares took place on March 28, 2019. Similarly, popular posts discussed the Tataloo incident and petitioned for the introduction of visas for Iranian nationals. Xenophobic posts were among the most popular on the second peak day of March 23. Pages shared video clips depicting a conflict between Georgian and Indian students in Mtatsminda park. Captions and comments accompanying videos alleged that Indian students verbally abused Georgians.
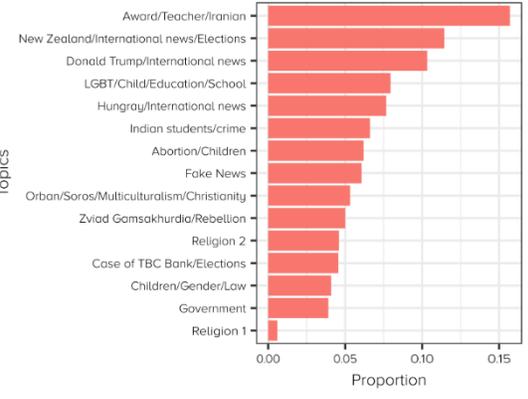
Topics discussed by the pages

Figure 2. Main topics Georgian-language far-right groups discussed during March 2019

Pages discussed a variety of topics[1] during March 2019 (figure 2). About 15% of posts discussed news related to the nomination of Chibati village school teacher Lado Apkhazava for the Global Teacher Prize. While overall Apkhazava is mentioned in a neutral context, several pages (Inews, Beka Vardosanidze) accuse him of being a "liberal stooge" and a "propagator of homosexuality". Posts classified under the same general topic also mentioned the Tataloo incident. International news and election news were the second most popular topic on the right-wing pages, closely tied with international news featuring U.S. President Donald J. Trump. In total, about 10% of posts were classified under either of these topics.

Georgian-language far-right groups often speak about Hungary and the country's prime minister Viktor Orbán. The proportion of posts classified under either of the two topics tally up to 13% of all posts the groups shared in March. Hungary is usually discussed in the context of international news. The pages mention Orbán together with George Soros and multiculturalism seemingly praising the former's crusade against Soros.

Fewer posts (~7% of total posts) referred to topics related to school education and LGBT issues. Together with another related topic featuring the words

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[1] Topics were identified through topic modelling approach. Optimal number of topics was calculated through specialized algorithms (Griffits 2004, Cao et al 2009, Arun 2010). Overall, 15 topics were identified.

"Children", "Gender", and "Law", these subjects amount to about 11% of all posts. These topics likely relate to the new draft law on children's rights which caused an uproar among Georgia's conservative groups. The draft bill introduced to committee hearing in early March has faced intense opposition from conservative activists and the clergy. These groups including far-right Georgian Idea even organized protest rallies accusing the law of "propaganda of homosexuality". According to protesters, the new law was intended to destroy family values among Georgians.

Topics related to "Award", "Teacher", and "Iranian" peak in mid-March, coinciding with the Global Teacher Prize award ceremony. Another peak falls at the end of March thus coinciding with the Tataloo incident. Discussions related to Donald Trump and international news peak twice: in early and mid-March. This is related to the far-right's protests at the UN in Tbilisi and the New Zealand Mosque shootings. The "New Zealand/International news/Elections" topic also peaks in early March. Pages also discussed the guest appearance of right-wing candidate for MP Koba Davitashvili on a popular TV show. Finally, topics discussing children' rights and Hungary recurrently show up in discussions.
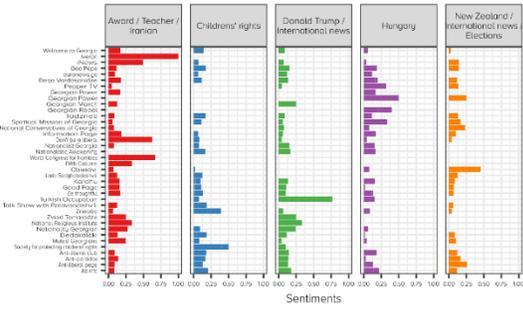

Figure 3. Distribution of key discussion topics in March 2019 by page

Pages differed in terms of topics they discussed in March 2019 (figure 3). Pages Iveron, Do not be a Liberal, World Congress of Families almost solely focused on issues similar to "Award", "Teacher", and "Iranian". International news dominated the agenda of the page Turkish Occupation. Themes related to Hungary were prevalent for radical nationalist pages Georgian Power and Georgian Rebel. Finally, news on elections and international affairs prevailed on Obiektivi TV.

How do pages talk foreign policy?

Figure 4. Sums of positive and negative sentiments by page

Georgian far-right pages spoke negatively both about the West and Russia in March (figure 4). The sum of sentiments for each page is negative, with the exceptions of Tadzrieli, Information Page, and Dedakalaki which had net positive sentiments when speaking about the west. There were no pages which had net positive sentiments in posts mentioning Russia.
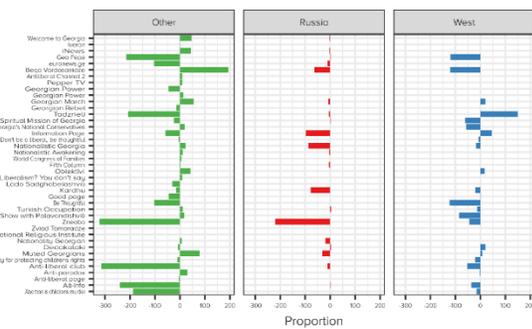
The pages analyzed often mention world leaders. Trump was mentioned in 61 posts shared in March. Trump was followed by Viktor Orbán (28 posts), Angela Merkel (15 posts), and Matteo Salvini (13 posts). Sentiment analysis shows that overall, sentiment is positive when pages mention Trump and Salvini, while it is negative for Orbán and Merkel. Closer examination of posts related to Viktor Orbán shows that posts with net negative sentiments usually discuss the migration crisis, a word associated with contexts that are of negative connotation on the whole.

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Conclusion

In March 2019, Georgian-language far-right pages saw a 20% decrease in activities, as Facebook blocked a number of popular pages. Notwithstanding the ban, users were only slightly less engaged with the content the far-right groups shared. In days where the highest number of posts were shared, popular messages re-posted anti-migrant activist videos and commemorated Georgia's first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Pages have earned the highest number of comments, shares, and likes in days when they shared xenophobic content such as petitions for introducing a visa regime with Iranian nationals and video clips of fights between Georgian and Indian students in Mtatsminda.

Content-wise, pages actively discussed issues related to the nomination of Georgian teacher Lado Apkhazava for Global Teacher Prize and the incident related to the Iranian rap artist Amir Tataloo's performance. Another theme the pages discussed was the draft law on children's rights, legislation Georgia's conservative groups fiercely oppose.

In March 2019, pages actively shared content related to international news. When speaking about Russia and the west, negative sentiments prevailed in both cases although posts mentioning Russia were on average more negative than those discussing the west. Few posts mentioned foreign leaders such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orban, and Matteo Salvini of Italy.

Methodological note

The above analysis is based on 3,427 posts shared by 42 Georgian-language far-right pages between February 28 and March 31, 2019. Data was collected using Netvizz software. Georgia's National Linguistic Corpus (http://clarino.uib.no/gnc/) was used to extract lemmas from texts. Topic modeling was used with Latent Dirichlet Allocation to identify key themes in posts. Sentiment analysis was used (AFINN library, http://www2.imm.dtu.dk/pubdb/views/publication_details.php?id=6010) to contextualize the collected corpora.