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NARRATIVE SHAPING POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A NEW TURN OF UKRAINIAN PUBLIC SPHERE WITH #EUROMAIDAN HASHTAG APPEARANCE

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Abstract: The whole organization and coordination of Euromaidan was exclusively conveyed through social networks and new media. Protests did not only form in the capitol but also in major and minor regions (Lviv, Ternopil, etc.), where local media centers were formed. Every minute they were informing people what was happening on Maidan, helping to coordinate and set an agenda for protesters. Constant updates went out even during the night. This way the virtual connection with Independence Square did not disappear for a moment, and like-minded citizens could follow events in real time using the hashtag #Euromaidan.

Public opinion was formed by opinion leaders. Famous singers, rectors, professors of universities, popular public figures, and opposition leaders turned to young people on Facebook and Twitter. Most of the meaningful ideas were written by these opinion leaders and then reposted and retweeted by thousands of followers. There were not only short messages and calls by unknown people under the hashtag #Euromaidan, but also meaningful appeals encouraging young people (and later seniors) to mass participation in the protest. There formed a new powerful narrative, which shaped the majority opinion and brought it to a common goal. This goal was no longer simply joining the EU, but the preservation of the Ukrainian identity and the overthrow of the Yanukovych regime. For this study was used the method of qualitative content analysis of posts in Facebook.

Keywords: social media, cyber protest, public sphere, #Euromaidan, opinion leaders, civic engagement

The deep apathy started in Ukraine with the establishment of the Yanukovych regime. It affected all aspects of life including the media and those who had something valuable to say during the Orange Revolution became silent. Pro-democratic journalists and bloggers started believing that the period of dictatorship, oppression, and humiliation of Ukrainians will never end. The President's latest wrong move turned the course of Ukrainian history 180 degrees; which instantly turned

into unrestrained outbreak of protests. To deepen our understanding of social media influence on political change during the last events in Ukraine we need to see the larger context of online activism formation in Ukraine. In this research the power of narrative shaping of social media and its direct connection with creating a new public sphere is debated.

The movement for integration with European Union provoked a new turn in the Ukrainian public sphere.

The public sphere according to Jürgen Habermas is considered a neutral social space for critical debate among private persons that gather to discuss issues of common concern in a free, rational, and in principle disinterested way [7]. Habermas discusses the ups and downs of the bourgeois public sphere, underlining the problematic effects of commercialization, capitalism, and the rise of mass media on rational-critical debate. Habermas' arguments were criticized, especially because he idealized the concept of the public sphere centers supposing the idea of universal access. Outlining the principle of public sphere we imply it as a synonym for the public opinion process in new media themselves.

According to Habermas' model of a public sphere there is universality across society, in which everyone has the right to have their voices heard and assist in important democratic issues. There are institutional preconditions for public sphere to exist: disregarding of status and common concern. The idea of public sphere is established on an objective form, independent from authority status or rank. The information (as well as cultural products) became common concern of private citizens and became a way of their deliberation [11].

Unlike mass media the internet became a force for radical democracy. It helps groups which are excluded from the mainstream public sphere to create their own discussion forums, connect, and produce new dominant ideas and practices. [Here the internet provides the space for communication inside marginalized discourse and helps them to develop an 'alternative' group which consists of a number of participants

who take part in debate, criticism, and develop oppositional discourses opposite to dominant mainstream public sphere. They create oppositional identities, social imaginaries, language, and interpretations. It helps in forming oppositional networks which leads to more powerful oppositional discourses. The internet supports both: online and offline oppositional contest with dominant discourses and creates the contestation of mainstream public sphere [7].

The communication through the internet helped give opinion makers a chance to use the persuasive power of strategic narratives which can mobilize audiences without financial, material or military resources [4], [8].

Narratives are used to achieve desired objectives: defining identities, explaining everyone's role in the world, defining allies and enemies, explaining in the context historical events and political decisions [2].

Narratives do not exist separately from those who produce them, they connect past and present. This way unrelated events turn into coherent plot [15, 245].

Development of Cyber Protests

During the past decade we have seen the power of new media, especially social media, to change dictatorial regimes all over the world. Since 'color' revolutions in Ukraine, Iran, and the Arab world the protesters have been using online space for spreading information, fund raising, and mobilization [16]. Hot debates about the role of the internet had been divided during "Twitter rebellion" in Iran in 2009. The supporters of revolutions online were labeled 'cyber utopians'. At the same time, the preoccupation with the 'networks'

has appeared when discussing political organizations [13].

Now the internet is the alternative medium to propaganda models of state controlled media. It played a main role in mobilizing activists for spontaneous mass protests. It is used for public action even in such repressive countries like Egypt, China, Iran, and Russia. Social media is used for providing constant flow of information for mobilizing the social opposition.

Social and political movements have all chances not only to arise online as a reaction to external stimuli (such as a reaction to unfair elections), but also develop and mature to radical action, exerting influence on civic opinion and rhetoric in official media. Before Web 2.0 was invented there was no media that has been so interactive, person-centered, highly used, and open for public access. Probably for the first time, mankind is spontaneously moving towards a nonlinear, self-organizing democratic governance [10].

Social networks provide the communications platform for activists. The internet contributes to the developmental activities of opposition groups and ideological movements outside the mainstream. At present it enables civil society to participate in the political life of a country with no natural affiliation to a political party or organization. So there is the concept of 'cyber protest', which is defined as "a new field for social movement that reflects the role of alternative online media, online protests and online communication in society" [14].

For oppositional movements the internet is the most important source of objective alternative information, especially in educating and mobilizing pro-

testers. This role is embraced by progressive opinion leaders, professionals, trusted military representatives, and known activists.

Up to the last events in Ukraine many of the researchers stated that so far the internet didn't lead to any successful revolutions. Some say it can inform, provide a forum for debate, and mobilize, but it cannot provide leadership and organization to support political action and a strategy for taking state power [18].

Changes in Ukrainian Public Sphere

In Ukraine the internet created an alternative media sphere. The use of social media helped consolidate the people in no longer being indifferent to the fate of Ukraine. The President's refusal to sign an association agreement with the EU, raised a wave of indignation on Facebook marked with hashtag #Euromaidan. Due to this exhortation in social networks hundreds of thousands of angry citizens, who were ready to defend their own future, spilled out on to Independence Square in Kyiv. These citizens didn't leave after the Vilnius summit, but rather reinvigorated by the cruel beatings of peaceful activists at night on November 30, came to the square in even greater numbers.

Researching the changes in Ukrainian public sphere with #Euromaidan hashtag appearance we manage to discover three important aspects. The whole organization and coordination of Euromaidan was exclusively conveyed through social networks and new media. Protests did not only form in the capitol but also in major and minor regions (Lviv, Ternopil, etc.), where local media centers were formed. Every

minute they were informing people what was happening on Maidan, helping to coordinate and set an agenda for protesters and fundraising. Constant updates went out even during the night. This way the virtual connection with Independence Square did not disappear for a moment, and like-minded citizens could follow events in real time using the hashtag #Euromaidan. It was especially noticeable right after the violent beating of students on November 30th, when the main squares of Kyiv and other cities of Ukraine had gathered around a million people, following instructions they received from social media. These people came out in raging support after seeing the video of the police's violent suppression of a peaceful demonstration on Facebook and YouTube.

Not only was the official group of Euromaidan on Facebook operating during revolutionary action. There were established hundreds of other groups responsible for different needs of Euromaidan: logistics, security, medicine, transportation, and Party of Regions business boycott mode. It should be noted that in these groups, the hashtag #Euromaidan was used constantly. However, it quickly disappeared from the private update status of opinion leaders.

The third and crucial point is that public opinion was formed by opinion leaders who were truly leaders for the youth. Famous singers, rectors, professors of universities, popular public figures, and opposition leaders turned to young people on Facebook and Twitter. Most of the meaningful ideas were written by these opinion leaders and then reposted and retweeted by thousands of followers. There were not only short messages and calls by unknown people

under the hashtag #Euromaidan, but also meaningful appeals encouraging young people (and later seniors) to mass participation in the protest. There formed a new powerful narrative, which shaped the majority opinion and brought it to a common goal. This goal was no longer simply joining the EU, but the preservation of the Ukrainian identity and the overthrow of the Yanukovich regime.

Opinion Leaders and Interpretive Microcommunities

Communication in social networks is constructed in such a way that people listen to the opinions of those they know and trust. These can be friends, close relatives, work colleagues, or reputable people. There are many studies about „interpretive communities“ and „interpretive microcommunities“ [4], [5], [9], [12], [17], [19] that show that the determining factors of personal political decision making are preferences of friends and relatives, not political ads or speeches of politicians. Therefore, the decision to support the political party or participate in a protest often depends on what your friends think about it. That's why the role of social networks in critical social situations is crucial.

The appeal of Klitschko/Yatsenuk/Tiagnybok/Lutsenko does not have a greater effect on whether a person will come out to protest, but whether their friends or people whom they trusts are willing to do that. There are users who have a large audience of supporters. So when Mustafa Nayem, Roman Shrayk, Andriy Shevchenko, Lesya Orobets, and hundreds of other influential people have written that they are going to Maidan – thousands of people came out as well because they trust them.

Investigating this problem we assume that Euromaidan was not formed spontaneously, it emerged and existed thanks to the public opinion leaders who filled it up with ideological content during all three months of confrontation.

Methodology

In this study we will investigate how the information from the streets became a narrative of social networks, was then modified, changed, overlapped with other messages, and returned back on the Maidan for activists' approval. For that we have chosen three main periods of Euromaidan, all of them are connected with crucial dates of its existence (Peaceful protest and first Presidential violence 21–30.11.2013; official dictatorship establishment 16–22.01.2014; regime's overthrown 18–22.02.2014).

For the study we used a selection from Facebook status updates archive of public opinion leaders made during stated above periods. We are going to use quality analysis method for analyzing the Facebook status updates and publications of public opinion leaders. We will be grouping the Facebook statuses with categorization according to their radicalization.

We used survey data on Facebook under https://apps.facebook.com/maidan_leader/. Among them, we chose one leader from various fields of social and political life of the country, and whose thoughts were often reposted by Euromaidan official Facebook page, which currently has nearly 300,000 fans. Prerequisite for selection was the presence of the leader on Facebook.

Out of the three most popular Ukrainian users of Facebook, and the very active figures of Euromaidan, we took into account the first two: journalist

and activist Mustafa Nayem and human rights activist and MP Lesya Orobets. The third one according to Facebook is MP Anatolii Hrytsenko, but we have chosen only the second position for MP Representatives. Others are: a social activist, politician, and commandant of Maidan's self-defence units Andriy Parubiy, a representative of showbiz Ruslana Lyzhychko, a historian Volodymyr Viatrovych, clergyman and at the same time the university community representative Bishop Borys Gudziak. In the study we analysed around 30 updates of each opinion leader written during above stated period. The closest attention was paid to the ones written during 21–30.11.2013, 16–22.01.2014 and 18–22.02.2014. These people invoked masses to join the protest against the president's decision not to sign an association agreement with the European Union, and later to fight the dictatorship, the embodiment of which was the former president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich, till he was overthrown.

Peaceful Protest 21.11–30.11

Euromaidan began on November 21st, 2013 right after the announcement by the Ukrainian President the suspension of preparations for the signing of an association agreement with the EU. It started with an appeal which the most popular Ukrainian Facebook user Mustafa Nayem (over 100 thousand followers) (<http://watcher.com.ua/facebook-reiting/>) wrote on his Facebook page. He announced a meeting next to the Independence Monument. This entry was liked by 4.5 thousand people and shared by 3.3 thousand of them.

MP Andriy Parubiy (over 40 thousands followers) responded to the call saying: "I going to Maidan now! These

are days that define the future of the state. Today is the day. If we do not care how then we explain to our children that we have betrayed their future? See you there!” Another MP, and the second most popular Ukrainian Facebook user, Lesya Orobets (almost 70 thousand followers) also joined Maidan saying: “Either #Euromaidan or a suitcase. Each person chooses for oneself”. And later: “Thanks to those who came on the first day. It was incredible to see how Maidan started from a few dozens and just like that gather #Euromaidan of 2000 thousands of people. It was as if an actual living Facebook”.

The next ten days, until the night of November 30th 2013, armed with batons, stun grenades, and tear gas, Berkut special police units attacked and dispersed all protesters from Maidan Nezalezhnosti. During this time there was an active Facebook campaign to join the peaceful protest, in order to affect the President’s decision and thereby persuade him to sign an association agreement with the EU. These days, Mustafa Nayem urged to join Maidan appealing to the human senses, and stressing that they - the leaders, also will be there: “I know that the weather is ugly, cold and wet. Just do it. Get out of the apartments and offices, take an umbrella, smiles, friends, relatives, thermos of tea, coffee, wear rubber boots and come. We all will be here”. Meanwhile Orobets announced the information about the measures taken for Maidan logistics and also encouraged its spread, giving people ideas what they can do: “competently and massive word-of-mouth dissemination of information that everyone should come to #Euromaidan”.

Parubiy had written short messages using language motivators relevant

to the target audience by asking rhetorical questions: “Progressive citizens are already on Maidan! What about you?”, “Ukraine – is Europe! That’s what protesters shouting and waiting for you!”. He constantly emphasized that on Maidan youth dance and sing the songs of famous bands, trying to convey the atmosphere of «the excited, but the fighting spirit» as he wrote in many status updates. Even the ones like: «And here are served huge pizzas. Everywhere around here is lots of fun. Get involved!»

Meanwhile most rectors of universities went on strike and announced the decision to join the protest. Bishop Borys Gudziak (a president of Ukrainian Catholic University) wrote on his Facebook page: «For the sake of our youth we urge academia community not to be indifferent and publicly express their civic position defending the European future of Ukraine». A similar statement was also made by Sergey Kvit (a president of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy). On November 24th more than 100 000 people came to Maidan in Kyiv, and over 20 000 in Lviv. Also protests were held in most major cities of Ukraine. From 21st to 28th November #Euromaidan hashtag was the most popular in Ukraine. The intensity of the publication using it reached 1500–3000 messages per hour. (<http://watcher.com.ua/2013/11/29/yevromaydan-ukrayinska-tsyfrova-revolutsiya-ta-ostanniy-shans-analohovym-politykam-staty-tsyfrovymy/>).

After the Crackdown

The initial phase of Euromaidan passed basically without political slogans and symbols. It was a grassroots movement of mainly students, a younger generation that wants to live in Ukraine and supports Ukrainian in-

tegration into the European community. This was to begin a new historical turn in Ukrainian public sphere. For Ukrainians this means the implementation and enforcement of civil liberties, especially freedom of speech, freedom of gatherings, and freedom of civic engagement. This in turn is a new coming public foundation of political democracy. Namely, the first who came out on Maidan were active social-media savvy users, youth who have no complexes and frustrations of previous generations, and people who believe in the right to have a better life in their country.

The protests had all chances to decrease right after the Vilnius summit. On Maidan the night after there was almost no protesters left, just a few hundred protesters, mostly students. The authorities ordered to “clean up” Maidan of people for installing the gigantic Christmas tree. For that purpose Berkut violently assaulted protesters in the middle of the night and took many of them to jail. Others managed to run away and hide in the church nearby. This was supposed to suppress peoples’ opposition and frighten them from taking part in protests. However since all violent beatings were caught on cameras and spread throughout social media and some pro-Ukrainian media outlets, the next day even more people came out onto the streets. The prerequisite to that were the words of some leaders, because they were reposted and retweeted by followers, as well as official #Euromaidan group.

Ruslana Lyzhychko said it aloud that the President launched a war against his own people and asked students to accept the challenge. She announced that the main weapon nowadays is information which was going to

destroy the enemy because no one can hide from it. “I encourage all to spread information about overclocking and beating, so it would be immediately in all possible ways the Internet and social networks. Videos, photos, testimonies, stories - all deadly weapons to criminal authorities.”

Meanwhile Mustafa Nayem wrote on his Facebook: “Last night I made my choice. I do not want to live in suppressed country. I am disgusted with any fear, especially the fear of violence enforced by batons and animal power. I do not care if someone calls this protest ‘political, and those who encourages it – ‘politicians’. Today it does not matter who struggle for freedom, it is important – to win. So tomorrow at 12:00 I will come to the monument to Taras Shevchenko in Kyiv. I will come primarily as a journalist and as a citizen”. This post collected over 4000 likes and was reposted over 3500 times.

After that night A. Parubiy took responsibility for the defence of Maidan: “#Euromaidan. There are still thousands of people there. The self-defense units are formed. They are standing on the outer perimeter with building and ski helmets on, lined up in ranks. Shoulder to shoulder. We won’t permits to beat our girls, – they say. This nigh ‘animals’ won’t catch us by surprise”.

Since that time every Sunday in Kyiv gathered a meeting, each a size of several hundred thousand people. Every meeting was beforehand announced by informal leaders in social media and reposted by their followers. In addition activists began to build barricades on Maidan that with each Berkut attack became higher and stronger. About this constantly were announcing and analyzing in oppositional media

and Maidan informal opinion leaders in their appeals on the personal pages in social networks. Despite the fact that the Berkut kept attacking the activists and police carried out arrests during the riots and injured activists, journalists, and doctors, more and more people joined the protest.

After one month on Maidan Mustafa Nayem wrote that the biggest victory is that people came out on protest “despite the disappointment, apathy, and mistrust”. He wished Ukrainians to be patient, do not wait for quick wins and not to restrict #Euromaidan with Kyiv, but take more active part in other cities as well.

During holiday season when there was less people on Maidan Parubiy and others kept giving updates on Maidan life, writing: “Join up! Maidan needs you”.

Bishop Gudziak wrote on his Facebook that one priest said during the Advent fast (‘post’ in Ukrainian) ‘one has to post a lot of truth in social media’.

The Official Dictatorship Establishment 16–22.01.2014

On January 16, 2014 in the Parliament of Ukraine in violation of established voting procedure there were adopted 10 laws aimed at narrowing the constitutional rights and freedoms, namely: restrictions on freedom of peaceful gatherings; restrictions on freedom of expression in offline and online media; register as “foreign agents” organizations receiving assistance from foreign organizations and individuals, the introduction of tax mechanisms limiting financial support for civic engagement; prohibition of gathering information about the financial position of judges, law enforcement officers and

their families; adoption of laws on extremism.

After the swift passage of laws aimed solely at tearing down civil liberties, mass repressions began immediately. Berkut intensified attacks aimed at activists in the center of Maidan, and the other mercenaries “titushky” caught people on the perimeter of Maidan or outside the square and beat many to death.

Three days later Lesya Orobets announced that the war officially had started. She said that law didn’t apply in Ukraine any more. She made live reportages from Independence Square, proving that Berkut was using real grenades. She was beaten up as well as her assistants. Orobets affirmed that from that moment the Ministry of Internal Affairs was going to use all methods to protect the dictatorship. Five days later Nayem wrote about the kidnap of another well know oppositional activist and opinion maker Ihor Lutsenko. He asked everyone to do what depends on them, saying that “If we obey, tomorrow on his place could be anyone”.

After clashes during January 19th to 22nd there was approximately 5 killed and dozens of injured. The President gave protesters almost a one month deadline to get out of Maidan, free Hrushevskoho str., and leave all administrative buildings.

Ruslana Lyzhychko was still leading opposition from the stage and on his Facebook page. She over and over again was writing Facebook statuses saying that we need to stand your ground and demand the resignation of Yanukovych. In her mind it was the only way we could prevent bloodshed. She had been encouraging people to believe in their power and come to Maidan as much as

possible. Especially for the 'night shifts' when most people are home asleep. She said "I appeal to all: we need to maximum mobilization!".

During the short armistice Parubiy shared the positive sides of Maidan with his Facebook readers saying that people who stay there are just wonderful and Maidan itself is a prototype of the ideal state with free medicine, with the army everyone loves and respects, with mutual support and self-organization.

Also he was encouraging educated and thinking men to join up the opposition movement. One of the stories was about Commissioner Füle who started talking to men from Maidan there about geopolitics in English. With helmets on, armored with shields and sticks there were scientists, writers, successful entrepreneurs, students of prestigious universities - educated intelligent people. "They left their offices, research papers, business, and suits at home. And now look more like Vikings or medieval knights. Everyone knows that here on the Maidan the fate of Ukraine is decided". Another observation was made by Canadian journalist who told Parubiy that foreign journalists have a popular joke: "If you come across samooborona ('self-defence') activist on the Maidan in a mask - he definitely has at least two higher education degrees and speaks fluent English".

These Facebook posts were liked and shared over 10 thousand times.

At the same time Volodymyr Viatrovych wrote more radical updates saying that Yanukovych was going to lose. First the control of the majority in parliament, just as he lost it in relation to the opposition. He had never been able to take over Maidan.

Regime is Overthrown 18-22.02.2014

The final escalation of the President's war against Ukrainians started on February 18. Battles lasted for 4 days, and by the end of it almost 100 people killed and around 1000 wounded. Lesya Orobets was turning to people on Facebook again telling them about situation: "Around the fire, explosions, smoke, pools of blood, moaning wounded, church bells, ice water, gunshots and explosions, the stench of gasoline breaks and spirit, conquering the smell of burnt rubber. I can not believe I'm on Maidan, the main square of the city where I lived all my life" and asking Ukrainians to arise, saying: "Life without dignity is not worth living". This statement was liked and shared over 4.5 thousand times.

Protesters were crying out loud to passive Ukrainians that what is happening here is not acceptable, and everyone should come and at least support. This began the open accusations that the President is responsible for the deaths of the protestors. On February 19th Nayem said that "accusing protestors in armed resistance and holding them responsible for the deaths of dozens, Viktor Yanukovych appears as a rapist complaining about his disobedient victim". This statement was shared 4.5 thousand times.

Lesya Orobets summarized the presidential actions for Ukrainians and the world saying that the actions of the police and the government-hired thugs ('titushky') have been extremely violent. Berkut and Interior troops have been shooting protestors with real ammunition. Berkut forces have been shooting from the rooftops and throwing grenades into the crowd. Dozens of people are severely injured, lots of eye injuries

and headshots, many have been killed. Yanukovych and his allies have organised a deliberate provocation and a trap for protesters. Orobets was stating that Yanukovych has never intended to make any concessions from the very beginning. All muddling around the political process, behind the scenes negotiations on amendments to the Constitution. Lesya Orobets promised that the President's scenario was to settle fear into hearts of Ukrainians, completely pulling out any thought of defending their rights would not succeed. This post was made on February 20th and had over 7 thousands shares in Ukrainian and English. In the next post she urged people to rise up against any truce with Yanukovych, it was supported with 2 thousands likes and 4 thousands shares.

On February 21st, the day after almost 100 people were killed Andriy Parubiy wrote on his Facebook: "Just had a conversation with Lieutenant General Konoplianyk. Kyiv garrison of internal troops declared willingness to fully comply with the decisions of Maidan."

When it became clear that despite the losses and casualties, Maidan managed to overthrow the regime and the dictator fled the capital, the Maidan leaders were first to set the tone to the masses. Bishop Gudziak quoted the bible "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15 : 13) encouraged everyone, especially journalists, to create the live stories of these martyrs who gave their lives for our dignity and freedom. This comment was shared over 7 thousand times.

Lesya Orobets shared the realization that a new country had been born. And Mustafa Nayem, the activist who basically started the revolution wrote on his Facebook: "It's over. Now we have to build

something new". It was the summary of all three months of revolution escalation, violence, hope and victory, which received over 12 thousands likes. Ruslana Lyzhychko, who was writing rather emotional appeals to people, said that she is begging Ukrainians not to forget what the murdered ones were fighting for.

Conclusions

This qualitative analysis of opinion leaders' status updates on Facebook under hashtag #Euromaidan during Ukrainian 2013 – 2014 winter revolution shows that they were changing from mild and rather peaceful towards radicalization, which in turn was reflecting the situation on the streets of Kyiv and the whole Ukraine. As the conflict had escalated in Ukraine the appeals to active civic position became more open and calls to come and join Maidan became more forthright. The opinion makers statuses in social media contained not only appeals to gather on Maidan, eyewitness information and facts about the protests, but also guidelines how to behave in the situation of conflict, where's the help of activists needed, how to stay warm when it's – 20° C outside and even how to stay alive during Berkut and riot police's bloody attacks. In the narrative of opinion leaders was expressed all the civic discontent with the political situation in Ukraine and given direct options to actions to follow. They were changing together with events toward radicalization and intolerance to state power. When great numbers of their readers comprehended the opinion leaders narrative, passed the information forward, and started joining the revolution we could observe the formation of a new public sphere in Ukraine in both online and offline space.