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## Visual aspects of online political communication in Belarus during the political crisis of 2020

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**Abstract.** An empirical study of the visual political communication via Telegram channels during the political crisis in Belarus in 2020 is introduced. The method of qualitative and quantitative content analysis was applied to 625 images and videos retrieved from competing Belarusian Telegram channels during two weeks before and after the election day of August 9, 2020. The results revealed both the general characteristics of the visual political communication in Belarusian Telegram sector and the way opposing political forces used visual content in the period under analysis. The pro-government channels maintained a value-oriented approach, engaging visuals to broadcast Belarusian values and state power symbols. Their visual content involved prominent public and political figures. The opposition channels applied visuals to denounce the authorities and their supporters, as well as to mobilize the opposition-minded Telegram users. They employed a greater variety of visual forms, relying mostly on user-generated content, e.g., live reports from protest sites. Visuals with protesting crowds, casualties, and opposition symbols were aimed at evoking a sense of involvement: they were meant to become triggers for transiting from online activism to actual offline protests.

**Keywords:** visual communication, visual activism, Telegram channels, content analysis

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Визуальные аспекты сетевой политической коммуникации Беларуси в период политического кризиса 2020 г.

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**Аннотация.** Представлено эмпирическое исследование визуальной политической коммуникации в Telegram-каналах во время политического кризиса в Беларуси в 2020 г. Метод качественного и количественного контент-анализа применялся к 625 изображениям и видео, полученным из конкурирующих белорусских Telegram-каналов в течение двух недель до и после дня выборов 9 августа 2020 г. Определены общие характеристики визуальной политической коммуникации в белорусском секторе Telegram. Установлено, как противоборствующие политические силы использовали визуальный контент в анализируемый период. Проправительственные каналы придерживались ценностно ориентированного подхода, привлекая визуальные средства для трансляции белорусских ценностей и символов государственной власти. В их визуальном контенте задействовались известные общественные и политические деятели. Визуальный контент оппозиционных каналов служил обличению власти и ее сторонников, а также мобилизации оппозиционно настроенных пользователей Telegram. Они использовали большее разнообразие визуальных форм, опираясь в основном на пользовательский контент, например прямые репортажи с мест протестов. Визуальные образы с протестующими толпами, жертвами и символами оппозиции нацеливались на то, чтобы вызвать чувство причастности: они должны были стать триггерами для перехода от онлайн-активизма к реальным офлайн-протестам.

**Ключевые слова:** визуальная коммуникация, визуальный активизм, Telegram-каналы, контент-анализ

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### Introduction

Today, social media are an important constituent of political communication worldwide. However, most scientific publications concentrate on their potential to affect and direct civic activism (Jost et al., 2018; Barbera et al., 2019; Boulianne et al., 2020; Howard, Parks, 2012; Bronnikov, 2020; Volodenkov, Artamonova, 2020). As a rule, it is verbal communication that comes to the scientific focus (Bennett,

Segerberg, 2013; Doerr et al., 2013) while the influencing potential of visual forms remains largely understudied. Those publications that do dwell upon the visual potential of social media in political communication still put too much emphasis on the verbal aspect (Highfield, Leaver, 2016; Rossi et al., 2016). In social media, such artifacts of engagement as photographs, videos, memes, posters, etc., become effective manipulation and personalization tools that shape the public attitudes and perception of political reality. According to Roland Barthes, visual devices have many advantages over the verbal ones in that they impose the intended meaning in its totality, without breaking it up, and the resulting impact is almost immediate (Barthes, 1994, pp. 76–78). In this study, we made an attempt to reconsider visual forms of political communication as an important strategy that political opponents employ to win the minds of Internet users.

In the recent period of social unrest, Telegram became a key communication means in Belarus<sup>1</sup>. Our goal was to determine how political Telegram channels used the visual potential of social media to represent current events and build certain media images. In our attempt to reveal a collective identity of Belarusian protesters, we also tried to evaluate the role of visual communication in digital activism and the way user-generated content was exploited by opposing channels.

### Theory and methods

This research falls in the concept of *digitally-enabled social activism*, which uses Internet technologies to mobilize and involve citizens in the political process, thereby forming a new digital repertoire of actions (Earl, Kimport, 2011). *Visual activism* is just a special case of this civic activity. Originally, the term described the way various activists employed visual arts to draw public attention to social and political issues. One of the first academic works in this area featured the *action art* of the Fierce Pussy, a US lesbian art group that handled the problems of various minorities, AIDS, etc. (Cvetkovich, 2001). *Artivism* and *artistic activism* are alternative terms for visual activism (Pyrma, 2021, p. 144), which are associated with political protests. For instance, the Arab Spring triggered surge of political graffiti in Cairo (Khatib, 2013). The Ballerina and the Bull poster published by The Adbusters encouraged citizens to join the Occupy Wall Street movement (McKee, 2016). A penguin in a gas mask became a graffiti symbol of the Turkish Gezi Park protests in 2013 (Jenzen et al., 2021).

As the role of Internet technologies in political communication continue to grow, visual activism gains a much broader meaning. These days, visual activism studies cover user-generated visual content, i.e., photos, videos, posters, demotivators, memes, maps, etc., which also inform protestants about offline events and coordinate their actions (Grijdanus et al., 2020; Poell, Van Dijck, 2018). In addition, they serve as a tool for expressing political attitudes and protest identities (Gerbaudo, Treré, 2015, p. 868).

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<sup>1</sup> Herasimenka, A., Lokot, T., Onuch, O., & Wijermars, M. (2020, September 11). There's more to Belarus's 'Telegram Revolution' than a cellphone app. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved January 13, 2023, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/11/theres-more-belaruss-telegram-revolution-than-cellphone-app/>

In this article, we also strive to decode the symbolic meaning behind some images involved in political actions (Mattoni, Doerr, 2007; Ziemann, 2008). In a way, visual activism is a cooperation of pixels and actions that can change the world (Mirzoeff, 2019, p. 321).

The method of qualitative and quantitative content analysis made it possible to identify the frequency profile of visual communication, as well as the engagement strategies employed by competing political Telegram channels. When developing the codes, we relied on the classification that Jenzen et al. developed to analyze visual communication in Twitter during political protests in Türkiye (Jenzen et al., 2021). We adapted and expanded it for the specific Telegram content. We selected the following categories of analysis to cover both structural and semantic components of the visual content: static image format, video format, key actors, and content composition.

The Telegram channels were selected using the *Tgstat.ru* analytics service, which compiles thematic ratings. The sampling involved such factors as follower count, originality, and availability of content for July 27 – August 23, 2020, i.e., two weeks before the election day of August 9 (Period I) and two weeks after (Period II), which saw the main wave of protests. As a result, we selected four channels: *Пул Первого* (@pul\_1) and *Желтые Сливы* (@zheltyeslivy) represented the pro-government cluster while NEXTA Live (@nexta\_live) and *Беларусь головного мозга* (@belamova) were run by the opposition.

The empirical material involved posts with a visual element, i.e., static image or video. We sorted out posts that were not directly or indirectly related to politics. The sampling involved a total of 625 visual objects: 370 from opposition channels and 255 from pro-government channels. Some of the data was processed using the SPSS software.

## Results and discussion

### Visual format

The research material involved 56.6% photo content and 43.7% video content ( $N > 100\%$ ); one case involved both video and photo content. This photo vs. video ratio was almost the same for all four channels: 57.3 vs. 42.7% in the pro-government channels, 56.2 vs. 44.3% in the opposition channels. Apparently, images prevail in online communication in social media; this general trend is known to marketers and visual communication researchers (Jenzen et al., 2021; Cornet et al., 2017).

Static images predominated (53.4%) (Table 1), probably, because photographs program a certain mood in the audience, which then influences their perception of the text (Brantner et al., 2011, p. 526).

Most photographs were published in the post-election period, associated with public protests. They show protest actions, rallies, representatives of the current government and the opposition, ordinary citizens, etc. However, the pro-government channels posted memes that ridiculed the actions of the opposition, screenshots of posts in social networks, and photocollages. The opposition channels preferred posters, screenshots, sketches, and guidelines for protesters. The posters and sketches called for protests while the guidelines explained how to resist security forces.

Video content was less variable. In general, 71.5% showed live user-generated content from protest sites or polling stations while 15% were edited cuts of television and radio programs and 8% were video messages from political figures. The pro-government channels often turned to media content and posted propaganda videos in support of the current government. The opposition channels confined to the here-and-now mode: they used live video content and on-air broadcasting to shape an alternative information agenda (Table 2).

Table 1

| Image format          | Channel type            |                     |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
|                       | Pro-government, % total | Opposition, % total |
| Photo                 | <b>49.3</b>             | <b>56.3</b>         |
| Photocollage          | 6.8                     | 2.4                 |
| Screenshot            | <b>13</b>               | <b>8.2</b>          |
| Guidelines            | 0                       | <b>5.7</b>          |
| Meme                  | <b>16.5</b>             | 1.4                 |
| Sticker               | 0.7                     | 0.5                 |
| Poster                | 2.7                     | 13                  |
| Sketch/cartoon        | 3.4                     | 6.3                 |
| Graphics/infographics | 0.8                     | 0.9                 |
| Map                   | 0                       | 2.4                 |
| Scan                  | 0                       | 3.4                 |
| Photomontage          | 6.8                     | 0                   |
| Miscellaneous         | 0                       | 0                   |

Note:  $N > 100\%$  caused variability in the data for the opposition channels.

Table 2

| Video format  | Channel type            |                     |
|---------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
|               | Pro-government, % total | Opposition, % total |
| Live          | <b>45.9</b>             | <b>88.5</b>         |
| TV/radio cuts | <b>35.8</b>             | 1.2                 |
| Interview     | 1.8                     | 1.2                 |
| Video address | <b>8.3</b>              | <b>7.9</b>          |
| Propaganda    | <b>6.4</b>              | 1.2                 |
| Miscellaneous | 1.8                     | 0                   |

Note:  $N > 100\%$  caused variability in the data for the opposition channels.

Most photographs and videos posted by the opposition were user-generated. This content peaked during Period II, i.e., after the elections. The main purpose of user-generated content was to shape a different picture, alternative to the one broadcasted by the pro-government media. However, in such a way protesters also broadcasted their personal narrative, as well as attitude to the political situation and protest actions. They want to show people the difference between what they experienced and what the official TV channels show to make the following statement: *They lie to you, see?* (Jenzen et al., 2021, p. 430).

## Visual content

As for the composition, most visuals showed people, e.g., crowds (35.5%), groups (17.4%), one person (18%), and symbols (41%). The pro-government channels focused on small groups or personalities, e.g., politicians, celebrities, athletes, etc., who called to preserve the rich historical and cultural heritage of the country, to vote for stability, and support the elected president.

The opposition channels showed crowds in photo and video reports from protest events. As a result, their photo and video content in the post-election period also included a lot of cars from motorist rallies or traffic jams caused by protesting crowds, as well as casualties in clashes between protesters and security forces (Table 3).

Table 3

| Composition            | Channel type            |                     |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
|                        | Pro-government, % total | Opposition, % total |
| Crowds                 | <b>26.7</b>             | <b>41.6</b>         |
| Groups of 2–4 people   | <b>24.3</b>             | <b>12.7</b>         |
| Separate people        | <b>24.7</b>             | <b>13.2</b>         |
| Nature                 | 2.3                     | 1.1                 |
| Cultural heritage      | <b>6.7</b>              | 3                   |
| Symbols                | <b>41.2</b>             | <b>40.8</b>         |
| Industries             | 2.3                     | 1.1                 |
| Cars                   | 6.3                     | <b>12.5</b>         |
| Casualties             | 3.1                     | <b>9.5</b>          |
| Torchlight processions | 1.6                     | 5.8                 |
| Clashes                | <b>7.8</b>              | 5.9                 |
| Animals                | 1.6                     | 0                   |
| Not detected           | 2                       | 8.3                 |
| Miscellaneous          | 1.6                     | 0.5                 |

Note:  $N > 100\%$  caused variability in the data for the opposition channels.

The rivalrous channels used visual content to create a positive collective identity of *us* vs. *them*, thus competing for public visibility and antagonizing each other through visual narratives (Rossi et al., 2016).

Symbolism appeared to be the most important compositional element in both types of channels. The pro-government channels posted the official red-and-green Belarusian flag and coat of arms, cultural heritage objects, brown-and-black St. George's ribbon, etc. The opposition channels demonstrated images of the white-red-white flag, i.e., a historical flag used by the Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918, white ribbons, white flowers, and gestures, e.g., clenched fist, V-sign, heart, etc. The opposition channels also posted images of torchlight processions, i.e., night rallies with smartphone flashlights. Such symbolism creates the *us* vs. *them* effect, facilitating identification and differentiation of opposing forces. In addition, symbolism addresses collective memory: symbolism and ritualism evoke knowledge of the past (Halbwachs, 1992), which makes them an effective mobilization tool. According to Michael Schudson, a cultural symbol has the greatest impact when it

possesses four key characteristics. First, it is retrievable, i.e., recognizable. Second, it has certain rhetorical power. Third, its connection with local traditions gives it resonance. Fourth, it possesses institutional stability (Schudson, 1989). The above-mentioned symbols meet these conditions: as a result, they attract people and resonate with their collective memory (Liao, 2010, p. 38), mostly because they appeal to history and traditions.

Table 4

| Actors                   | Channel type            |                     |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
|                          | Pro-government, % total | Opposition, % total |
| Political leaders        | <b>44.7</b>             | <b>14.6</b>         |
| Public persons           | 6.6                     | 4                   |
| Community organizations  | 1.6                     | 1.1                 |
| Industrial enterprises   | 0.4                     | 2.7                 |
| Children                 | 1.2                     | 1.4                 |
| Young adults             | 0.8                     | 1.4                 |
| Old age pensioners       | 0.8                     | 1.4                 |
| Security forces          | 2.4                     | <b>12.4</b>         |
| Professional communities | 2.4                     | 11                  |
| Protestants              | <b>38</b>               | <b>50.3</b>         |
| Voters                   | 1.5                     | 6.5                 |
| Not detected             | 2                       | 1.6                 |

Note:  $N > 100\%$  caused variability in the data for the opposition channels.

As for the actors, 45.3% were protesters, 27% were political figures, and 8% were security forces. The pro-government channels paid more attention to political leaders and broadcasted their opinions (44.7%) whereas the opposition channels concentrated on protesters (50.3%) (Table 4).

## Conclusion

Opposing political Telegram channels use visual strategies to broadcast their political views and engage users into political communication. In this study, the pro-government Belarusian channels employed visual content from traditional media to demonstrate Belarusian cultural values. They posted photos and videos with native right-wing politicians, political experts, athletes, and celebrities, who voiced their support of the current government. The opposition channels employed more diverse visuals to involve and mobilize their supporters, e.g., guidelines, posters, maps of protest routes, etc. They showed live content of protests and protesters to create a sense of involvement and encourage protest communication.

The data obtained confirm Pierre Bourdieu's ideas on *symbolic power* (Bourdieu, 1991) and Ervin Panofsky's concept of *mental habitus* (Panofsky, 1957). When Telegram moderators post a particular visual element, be it a static image or a video, they are guided not only by the socio-political situation and the intentions and *mental habits* (Panofsky, 1957) of their online users, but also by those of offline protesters. The latter visualized events to convey their version of reality and involve the former in offline protests.

Our results can be interpreted and further explored in line with the theory of *media imaginaries* to understand how protesters use digital communications to facilitate mobilization, as well as how social media become more and more important in such representations (Treré, 2018). In our study, opposition channels proved to make the most of the visual potential in social media. By publishing user-generated content during protests, they broadcasted the way their audience perceived the events and what they see as important, thereby creating a model of reality. However, opposition channels published user-generated content with a particular purpose in mind, thus distorting both the transmission of user-generated reality and the actual events themselves to end up with artificially constructed ideas.

Our research adds to previously published observations about the visual content and strategies in political communication, thus clarifying the structure and content of Telegram channels as the key communication platforms in time of political crisis in Belarus. The research prospects involve the effect of visual content on the transition from online activism to actual offline protests. In our next study, we will continue to develop the topic of *artifacts of involvement* as a trigger mechanism.

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**Bio note:**

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