Virtual Transnational Movements in the Caucasus

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Introduction

The region of Caucasus is a cauldron of ethnicities with the dozens of languages spoken as native languages in close geographical proximity and most complex regional politics between independent nations and ethnic regions. It is known as a hotbed of transnational Islamic movements calling for the unification of Caucasus. Many people from the Caucasus live in diaspora in Russia and many other countries. Social network sites provide people both at home and in diaspora with powerful tools to engage in identity work and social movements, forging networked virtual communities with different identity labels.

We study virtual groups from the Caucasus on social network site VKontakte (VK), most popular among young Internet users in the fSU - about 254 million accounts by May 2014. Certain open features of VK profiles allow for the analysis of geographic position of users, membership of the groups, the content of groups' pages, and 'friendship' ties between groups.

Besides the multitude of groups narrowly defined in terms of ethnicity or locality ("True Armenians" or "Real Azeri Men", or "We are from Baku") there are many groups aspiring to offer regional panethnic identities ("Men from Caucasus are cool" or "United Caucasus"). Many of these groups, especially with some socio-political claims (like "United Caucasus") can be seen as virtual social movements. Individual participation in these groups provides data for multivariate measurement of ethnic and national identities [Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston & McDermott 2009, Lee 2009] in the virtual world of social media. The phenomenon of pan-Caucasian groups is similar to panethnic group categories (like Latin Americans), which become important and even institutionalized in diasporic organizations [Okamoto, Mora 2014]. Some researchers have identified the role of such 'supra-ethnic' categories in the formation of national identity [Brubaker 1994].

Methods and data

To collect the data we used API «Vkontakte». HSE Sociology of Education and Science Laboratory has developed special programs and data collection methods in the social network "Vkontakte". The data collection went in three steps: 1) searching for and selecting of groups for analysis; 2) downloading the networks and attributes of groups; 3) downloading the posts on groups' walls. At the initial stage our search resulted in over 50,000 groups based on all ethnonyms from the region. We cleaned the data by selecting only active groups with more than

50 members, and then manually checking for content. Finally, for network analysis without LDA we retained 887 groups representing all ethnic groups of Caucasus, and for LDA topic modelling we selected 287 groups with Armenian (79), Azeri (82), Georgian (58) and pan-ethnic Caucasian (68) key words, which gives us a balanced data set for analysis.

We identified groups from the Caucasus by searching for certain key words in group names, and using API wall.get and R scripts obtained 500 posts for each group as well as the reactions to them (liking and commenting). We collected the data on ethnic and geographic composition of different groups, on their activity, and on inter-group ties. In particular, we measured co-participation (how many members A group also participate in B group) and created networks with weighted edges, using Jaccard coefficient as a measurement of similarity between groups in terms of co-participation [Tan, Steinbach, & Kumar 2005].

Posts on the groups' walls were used for topic modelling, and we collected the text content, date of publication, number of likes, comments and reposts. From each group we used 500 most recent posts with maximum preservation of structure in MongoDB. We used these texts for the LDA [Gruen & Hornik 2011] using R package - "tm" [Feinerer 2008]. The texts were preprocessed: deleted punctuation, extra spaces, numbers, and all word forms were lower-cased, then we performed lemmatization using Mystem program [Segalovich 2003]. The results of LDA topic modelling was used to classify groups by their content foci ranging from local cuisine to regional politics to the issues of religion.

Results

The creation of multi-ethnic group names (i.e. «GEORGIA-AZERBAIJAN» or «Georgians, Armenians, Russian, Greeks, and all Christians») is very much influenced by local conflicts – there were no groups which would combine Azerbaijan and Armenia in its name. In the network of groups Armenian and Azeri users are linked through Georgian and pan-Caucasus groups, which have much higher betweenness centrality than Azeri and Armenian.

Religion evidently is not most salient issue and not the major factor in national group formation, but it is a factor and a resource in building multi-ethnic groups. Armenian and Georgian groups focused on single-ethnic issues are linked through the groups like «Georgians, Armenians, Russian, Greeks, and all Christians». Azeri groups are linked with those pan-Caucasian groups which has Islamic themes present. Pan-Caucasian groups are linked together across religious divides and provide mediation for all groups of three nations.

There are groups which exhibit negative political attitudes against other ethnic groups. There are Armenian groups against Azerbaijan and vice versa («The world against the policy of Azerbaijan» and «South Azerbaijan / Güney Azərbaycan»), and several Georgian which

condemn Russian policy in the region – they often are associated with the support of national military forces (i.e. «The armed forces of Georgia | GEO-ARMY.GE» and «★ Armed Forces of Georgia / GEO-ARMY.GE ★». There are groups solely devoted to the discussions of Russian-Georgean war over South Ossetia and the Abkhazian conflict.

Our results show that most groups carry no political ideology or specific religious turn. Many are used by e-diasporas (mainly migrants in Russia) to maintain their symbolic allegiance to their national / ethnic groups. It seems that much of pan-ethnic (pan-Caucasian) virtual communities / movements is supported by transnational existence of offline diasporas.

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