



A comparative analysis of right-wing radical and Islamist communities' strategies for survival in social networks (evidence from the Russian social network VKontakte)

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative analysis of online communities of right-wing radicals and Islamists, who are considered to be numerous and dangerous extremist groups in Russian

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society. The online communities were selected based on the content posted on the largest Russian social networking site *Vkontakte*. The goal of this article is to determine the strategy and tactics employed by extremist online communities for survival on social networking sites. The authors discovered that both right-wing radical and Islamist groups employ similar behavioural techniques, with the mimicry of ideologically neutral content as the most common. In addition, every extremist community also applies some unique methods. For example, if there is a risk of being blocked, right-wing radicals tend to shift their activity and communication to the other internet-based platforms that are not under state control; however, Islamists prefer to suddenly change the content of their communities (i.e. by using secondary mimicry).

Keywords

far-right extremists, information policy, Islamists, online community, social network, strategies for survival

Introduction

In today's world, political extremism is one of the most pressing global problems. First of all, it is based on Islamist extremism and terrorism, which have intensified substantially within the last 10 years. Many countries also notice stronger right-wing radical sentiments. These processes intensify each other reciprocally, and they are dangerous as they lead to deeper social radicalization and polarization.

Right-wing extremist and Islamist slogans and calls have certain distinctive features, however, and these forms of extremism of divergent origin employ similar tactics. In order to substantiate this thesis, it is necessary to consider what tactics radical movements use to achieve their declared goals. Backes (2010) proposes a two-dimensional political space model. He classifies various extremist groups by positioning them along the following two axes: extreme egalitarian/extreme anti-egalitarian and anarchic/totalitarian. Backes places constitutional democracy in the very center, i.e. at the point of intersection of the axes. Various extremist ideologies are located in the corners of the space along the axes. According to Backes, communities of national-socialists, fascists and jihadists that are the subject matter of our study belong to one category characterized by adherence to totalitarianism and extreme anti-egalitarianism.

It should be noted that the term 'extremism' itself is a relative concept (Vermeulen and Bovenkerk, 2012: 48). Today it is primarily a legal notion, so the differences in the interpretation of extremism are reflected in the legislation of different countries. We can identify criteria and attributes in the core of extremism as an ideological stance.

Another feature is embodied in the connection between extremism and violence (Schmid, 2014). If a movement is involved in violent actions or approves of them, it is a sufficient ground to call this movement an extremist one. Violence here is interpreted as a broad term. Galtung (1990) distinguishes between three types of violence: direct violence associated with physical violence, threats of physical violence and restrictions on movement; structural violence; and cultural violence. Structural violence is associated with exploitation and institutional constraints imposed on particular social groups, while cultural violence justifies direct and structural violence. It could be ideology, religion, science, media, etc. Internet messages approving of direct and structural violence can be

a form of cultural violence. These messages should be seen as ‘pro-violence’ (Swedish Media Council, 2013). Hence, in this research, we aim to identify communities posting content of a ‘pro-violence’ nature.

In this study, we go beyond detecting right-wing and Islamist extremist communities. We will reveal the tactics and ploys used by adherents of right-wing and Islamist extremist ideas, and ensure their presence in the public sector of social networks despite increasingly tightened state censorship. With this in mind, we have monitored changes in the identified communities over a long period of time. It should also be mentioned that there are only a few studies like this, and the issue in general is very much under-investigated.

This study’s goal is to answer the following research questions:

- What right-wing radical and Islamist communities exist in Russian social networks?
- How clear-cut is the manifestation of calls for violence expressed in online communities of right-wing radicals and Islamists (evidence taken from *Vkontakte*, the largest Russian social networking site according to the number of users)?
- What strategies do extremist online communities of right-wing radicals and Islamists use to present their ideology in *Vkontakte*? What factors influence these strategies?

Problems of identifying extremist communities within Russian social networks

In 2012, Russia launched a policy to tighten state control and censorship on the internet, including the struggle against extremism. In July 2012, the corresponding laws were amended as follows: ‘On Protecting Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development’, ‘On Communications’ and ‘On Information, Information Technologies, and Information Protection’. These amendments included internet regulation rules in Russia (SOVA Center, 2012). In November 2012, the Unified Register of Prohibited Websites was launched, and it was another major innovation (*Roskomnadzor*, 2018). The register includes websites with extremist propaganda, pornography, propaganda of drugs and psychotropic substances, as well as information that encourages self-harming behavior and suicides among children. Websites are included in the register according to court judgments.

On 1 February 2014, amendments to the Federal Law ‘On Information, Information Technologies and Protection of Information’ (referred to as the ‘Lugovoi Law’) were adopted. These amendments make it possible for *Roskomnadzor* (Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, a federal executive authority responsible for ensuring compliance with the legislation of the Russian Federation in terms of mass media and mass communications, television, and radio) to immediately ban websites calling for mass riots, extremist activities, etc. The ban can follow within 24 hours by an order of the General Prosecution Office of the Russian Federation without a court judgement (Lenta.ru, 2014). As a result, another registry of banned sites was created (*Roskomnadzor*, 2013), and the number of banned online resources increased dramatically. According to the Russian SOVA Center (2018), as of 1 January 2017, 125 online resources were on the list due to their extremist nature.

According to the official statistics of *Roskomnadzor*, the number of websites or site pages banned as part of anti-extremist campaigns amounted to 2,000 in 2014, 913 in 2015 (500 of which are associated with the Islamic State [ISIS]), and 1,396 in 2016.

Far-right extremism on the Russian internet

It is extremely difficult to provide a strict definition of the term 'right-wing' or 'right-wing radical', or even to apply the terms with precise characteristics. The problem is that there is no established terminology designating this type of ideology in contemporary political discourse. In an attempt to define the features of political parties that can be classified as being 'right-wing radical', Norris (2005) lists a dozen phrases ranging from 'far' or 'extreme'-right to 'libertarian' but this list still cannot be seen as complete. In addition, in many cases a certain movement is classified as right-wing, but this estimate is relative. At a certain point, different authors can classify a certain movement as 'right-wing', whereas in other cases they do not include those movements in this group (Mudde, 2007: 3).

It is also impossible to draw clear distinctions between different types of right-wing ideologies just because the number of these ideologies is very high. Furthermore, each term describing 'right-wing' radicals comprises specific ideological narratives, making it different from other variations. For example, Ramet (1999) distinguishes five types of right-wing radical parties in Central and Eastern Europe: ultranationalists, fascist and cryptofascist, clerical, ultraconservative and radical-populist.

All these types of right-wing radical ideology are present in Russia. Presumably, there are also types of right-wing ideology not included into this classification (e.g. pagan right-wing radicalism). In this study, we address one sector of the mentioned right-wing movements characterized by Ramet as 'fascist and cryptofascist', and often associated with Nazism and neo-Nazism. This type of ideology has a sound subcultural basis embodied in the skinhead subculture. Subcultural features (i.e. music, sympathy for certain people, slogans and mottos) can be clearly identified in a stream of heterogeneous right-wing radical rhetoric.

Over the past few years, the issue of detecting right-wing radical websites, materials, and users sharing extremist content on the internet has frequently been addressed by researchers (Cohen et al., 2014; Davidson et al., 2017; Figea et al., 2016; Perry and Scrivens, 2016; Scrivens et al., 2017; Shrestha et al., 2017). Over the last 10 years, several intriguing studies on racism, nationalism and xenophobia on the Russian internet have also been published (Etling et al., 2010; Grinko, 2014; Koshkin, 2011; Nikiporets-Takigawa and Pain, 2016; Pain, 2014; Pain et al., 2013; Volkov, 2011). However, the existing studies on nationalism and right-wing radicals on the Russian internet are mostly qualitative and descriptive, whereas there are almost no studies on the number and dynamics of online communities within Russian social networking websites.

Extremist Islamism on the Russian internet

Islamist communities on the Russian social networking sites are insufficiently investigated as well. The subject of this research is barely distinguished among general studies on online extremism in Russia and related issues (i.e. information warfare,

cyberterrorism, etc.), which are in the focus of Russian and Western researchers. Here, it is worth mentioning publications on: (1) Islamists' information campaigns on the Russian internet and in the media sphere (Demidov, 2013; Manoylo et al., 2009; Mikhailovsky et al., 2014; Panarin, 2006; Panarin and Panarina, 2003; Rastorguev, 1998); 'cyber-jihad' phenomena ('media-jihad') (Liang, 2015; Nechitailo, 2013; Nikolaichuk and Guruleva, 2015); (2) global online activity of Islamist extremist groups (e.g. Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, Imarat Kavkaz) including Russia (Awan, 2007; Blaker, 2015; Bunt, 2009; Cross, 2013; Farwell, 2014; Ignatenko, 2005; Kurbanov, 2010); (3) the specific character of social media use by Islamist extremist groups (Twitter and Facebook) (Al-Shishani, 2010; Berger and Morgan, 2015; Ducol, 2012; Hussain and Saltman, 2014; Klausen, 2015; Koschade, 2006); and (4) issues of opposing online Islamist extremism (Fisher, 2015; Liang, 2015; Schmid, 2015).

The main problems of identifying Islamist communities on social networks are caused by the ambiguity of criteria used for separation of extremist groups from non-extremist movements in Islamism, and separation of the content of Islamist resources from Islamic-oriented resources (representing moderate and traditional opinions in terms of theology, religious law and ethics) in the case of close terminology and common topics. In Russia, there are two official lists of banned extremist and terrorist organizations: the list introduced by the Ministry of Justice (2018a) and the unified federal list of terrorist organizations (NAC, 2018). Both lists include a total of 80 entities. The share of Islamists of various types among them is 32 percent (26 entities).

Traditionally, experts classify followers of Islamism into violent extremists (jihadist or salafi-jihadists) and non-violent radicals or even 'non-violent extremists' (Bonino, 2018; Schmid, 2014; Wintrobe, 2006).

The viewpoint that denies the presence of the unambiguous relationship between extremists and violence, implying physical violence, is considered to be the most common. In particular, Wintrobe (2006) is convinced that extremism is primarily associated with the marginal views (predominantly political) of individuals or movements, which are out of the mainstream in terms of a certain issue or dimension. Two other features of extremism, that is (1) its connection with violence in an attempt to achieve the declared goals, and (2) intolerance (i.e. extremists are 'rigid and intolerant of other points of view') are secondary (p. 6). This concept is supported by Mulloy (2005: 21) and it can be expressed briefly as 'extreme vs mainstream'. Determining the boundaries of 'extremism', Backes (2007: 250) states that the value kernel of an extremist mindset, at least implicitly, contains apologia for violent actions towards an individual or certain social groups, thus disrupting the balance of civil equality and civil liberties in a pluralist democratic society. He defines the essential setting of extremism as monism or monocracy, i.e. autocracy.

Following Bale (2013), Schmid (2014: 15) considers the following definition of Islamism to be the most accurate: 'Islamism is a supremacist variant of mainly Sunni "political Islam". It is anti-secular, anti-infidel and anti-Western; its goal is to establish a state (caliphate) whose puritanical features should resemble those of the early Islam.' Regardless of the social and political context (i.e. the current Islamist movements in Europe or in Muslim countries), the distinction between so-called

non-violent and violent extremists is illusory. Schmid believes that the concept of 'non-violent extremism' should be strictly differentiated from 'not-violent extremism'. The first is associated with the ethics of nonviolence (Ghandi and others) and absolutely rejects homicide, whereas the latter can be applied to Islamist movements that use no physical violence apart from as a tactical tool (at least up to a certain moment), at the same time having common goals and methods with overt jihadist movements. A 'participationist' Islamist group (as opposed to a 'rejectionist' group) collaborating with the governments of secular states may simultaneously be extremist 'in terms of its ideology and reject Western core values' (Schmid, 2014: 7).

The latter statement is of great value for our study since we can use it as a basis to identify Islamist extremist communities mimicking moderate Islam in an online environment.

In Russia, Islamism is represented by various movements with a special position occupied by heterogeneous Salafi Islam. In Russia, Salafism is known as Wahhabism. It started to spread in the 1990s under the ideological and financial influence of Saudi Arabia (Dobaev et al., 2013; Silantiev, 2007; Yarlykapov, 2000). Currently, this movement is present mainly in the North Caucasus, as well as in some areas of the Volga Federal District represented by separate Salafi groups, from moderate to similar to terrorist, being supportive of the 'Islamic State'. Up until summer 2015, Imarat Kavkaz was the center of extreme Salafism in the North Caucasus. This ramified network entity pursued an active information policy to spread its ideology. It also operated its own website *Kavkazcenter.com*. After the death of its leader Dokku Umarov and the subsequent internal conflict, the entity split into a number of military groups controlled by separate field commanders (Malashenko, 2017: 128–129). Some of them swore allegiance to the 'Islamic State'.

In Russia, Islamists who do not openly promulgate violent methods are represented by such movements as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, and Nurjular. Nevertheless, they have been classified as extremist entities by court judgements. The first two are even included in the unified federal list of terrorist organizations (NAC, 2018). The Muslim Brotherhood is listed as a terrorist organization due to offering financial support to illegal armed groups in Chechnya. The second organization, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, is characterized by anti-Semitic, anti-Western ideology, denial of the secular state, and an ambition to establish a worldwide Islamic Caliphate. Traces of this organization are occasionally detected and prohibited by court decisions in various cities of Russia, mainly in communities of migrants from Central Asia. Although extremist Islamists use terminology that is almost identical to the categories of traditional Islam, they use only a few inherent favourite topics based on the religious categories of Islam (e.g. *kufir*, *shirk*, *takfeer*, *bid'ah* [innovation]), which they interpret in a radical way. All these topics are related to the radical separation of Islam from any other value system (religions, cultures, ideologies) and socio-cultural segregation, on the one hand, in the world of Muslims, which implies separation of 'true Muslims' from those who are errant (*ahl al-dalala*), heretics, and innovators (i.e. a group of Islamic countries that distort the religion); on the other hand, in the whole world, which implies separation of Muslims from *kuffar* (i.e. all non-Muslims).

Methods and data

Related work

With social networks growing exponentially, problems related to detection of extremist content, recruitment of supporters of right-wing radicals and Islamists, and radicalization of extremist sentiments have attracted the attention of a large number of researchers (Ashcroft et al, 2015; Gitari et al, 2015; Gröndahl et al, 2018; Hartung et al, 2017; Myagkov et al, 2018; Scanlon and Gerber, 2014; Schmidt and Wiegand, 2017; Ting et al, 2013; Wei et al., 2016). However, the overwhelming majority of studies in this area focus on investigating approaches to identification of various forms of extremist discourse; only a few studies address identification of strategies and tactics that enable extremist ideology supporters (right-wing radicals and Islamists) to successfully propagate their ideas on social networks and to recruit new followers. One of the most successful studies of this type is the one performed by Johnson et al. (2016), who developed an ‘ecological approach’ to the investigation of extremist communities. In eight months, the authors were monitoring *Vkontakte* tracking pro-ISIS aggregates and found 196 aggregates. They identified three strategies employed by pro-ISIS groups to hide from the authorities: (1) change of the community name; (2) restriction of the community visibility mode to the ‘community members only’; and (3) ‘reincarnation’ of the community, i.e. disappearance of the group, followed by its revival under a new name, but the majority of its former members are the same. Schwemmer (2018) performed one more ‘ecological’ study of online communities. He was monitoring the activity of the German right-wing movement ‘Pegida’ on Facebook for 18 months and concluded that their strategy for recruiting followers consists of the radicalization of content and intensification of xenophobia over time. Weaver (2018), on the contrary, believes that right-wing radicals avoid ‘punishment’ from social networks by editing the content of their accounts to ensure that it complies with the requirements of host-companies.

Data collection

Data for this research were collected in three stages. At the first stage, two glossaries with linguistic markers were compiled. Using the first list, we identified the most radicalized subgroup of far-right extremists within an extremely heterogeneous group of right-wing radicals. The second list helped us to find and identify an extremist segment of Islamist groups, as well as to separate extremist communities from Islamic communities posting moderate and traditional religious content, and from groups that do not justify violence (including terrorism) and do not generate hate speech.

At the second stage, we conducted a search for communities posting content containing linguistic markers presented in the glossary. The search was based on *Vkontakte*. As a result, we identified communities with extremist content. At the third stage, we monitored the activities within these communities. In particular, we were tracking changes in content within the four-month period. Consequently, the final dataset for our study incorporates the results of monitoring of activities within the communities considered to be extremist.

The far-right extremist subgroup is characterized primarily by pronounced manifestations of Nazism, racism, superiority of the white race, and diminishing other races and nationalities. Compiling the relevant list, we kept in mind that far-right extremism is the ideology of a certain subculture. In order to describe supporters of this subculture more precisely, we used very specific markers. This guaranteed only minimum difficulty in interpreting (names and subcultural slang). We used two types of sources to compile the glossary of linguistic markers of right-wing extremists: (1) materials officially recognized in Russia as extremist (e.g. music and literary works, films, videos, articles on internet websites, etc.) (Ministry of Justice, 2018b); and (2) a list of words and phrases specific to right radicals' communication. To compile this list, we engaged two males aged 32 and 28, both belonging to the skinhead subculture. This enabled us to increase the relevance and accuracy of the glossary, which contains many commonly used words. Both males are Russian residents and active users of social networking sites. Earlier, the 32-year-old expert had been a member of a criminal group committing attacks on migrants from Central Asia due to racial hatred. He was convicted of those crimes and was imprisoned. The second expert had no legal problems. While working on the list, the experts kept informing the authors of this article on what linguistic markers they use to communicate with other representatives of far-right groups and to identify representatives of the subculture. For the purpose of marker identification, we used the following principles as guidelines: (1) a marker must represent the subculture of right-wing radicals (namely, those of them who support the ideology of white supremacy); and (2) a marker must be a specific term not used by ordinary citizens in everyday communication; so our glossary is full of many anglicisms (i.e. English loan words and names) and abbreviations. After that list was tested, the terms were filtered based on the test results. Some terms and expressions belonging to the group of general words with broad meanings or widely used in other specific contexts were excluded from the list. For example, we excluded the search term '*chyort*' (originally, the Russian for 'devil'), which is a pejorative designation for a representative of non-white races in the far-right environment (e.g. natives of the Caucasian regions of Russia and the Transcaucasian republics, natives of Central Asia, etc.). However, Russians widely use this word in everyday communication without any racist overtones. In addition, we excluded terms not used in everyday communication, but widely used in other specific contexts. For example, we excluded the term POV (the abbreviation of the expression 'Prisoner of War' used in far-right communication) since, in social networks, this term refers to a genre of adult video (point of view). Testing the glossary, we found out that the number of messages containing this term in the context of the adult video genre is extremely high so the use of this term gave numerous irrelevant results. After the list of far-right extremists' linguistic markers was complete, it was discovered that the most frequent linguistic items are: 'white power', 'white pride', '*kidat' zigu*' (to give a Nazi salute), '*tsunaref*' (a scornful name for immigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia widely used by right-wingers in Russia), '*prygnuli na chernykh*' (to jump onto black individuals), BORN (the abbreviation of the famous extremist organization of Russian nationalists, namely Combat Organization of Russian Nationalists), 'blood and honor', 'rasialist' (racist), 'people hate', 'misanthropic divisions', 'Votan Jugend', 'RaHoWa', 'prisoner of war', 'hate core', '*nazi ska*', 'NSBM', '*dnevnik Ternera*' (Turner Diaries), etc.

The second list contains terminology specific to Islamist discourse or a combination of terms, some of which may coincide with the traditional Islam categories. In this case, the sources of the linguistic markers were works of the ideologists of Islamism included in the Russian official list of extremist materials (Ministry of Justice, 2018b). In addition, we used programs and the most significant materials of extremist and terrorist organizations banned in Russia (Ministry of Justice, 2018a; NAC, 2018). Those significant materials included: (1) works of the founder Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and contemporary ideologists of Wahhabism (i.e. Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, Muhammad ibn Salih ibn Al-'Uthaymeen, etc.), other Salafi groups, proclamations of Salafi-type terrorist movements; (2) materials on or about the Islamic State (ISIS); (3) materials of the Muslim Brotherhood (Sayyid Qutb and others). Materials of Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami and Nurjular, considered to be moderate movements, were not used as sources of linguistic markers. It should be noted that they carry on their activity without restraints in most European countries and the USA (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood). The following terms and expressions are the most characteristic of Islamist online communities: 'crusaders', 'murtads' (separatists), 'munafiks' (hypocrites) 'idolaters', 'Taghut' (a false object of worship in Islam or an idol), 'mushriks' (worshippers of idols), 'harbis' (enemies who fight muslims), 'kafirs' (disbelievers), 'Russian kafirs', 'Rusnya' (a dismissive distorted name for Russia), 'Salafi *mazhab*' (a Salafi belief school), 'daulah' (Arabic for 'the State'; in this case, an indication of 'the Islamic State'/ISIS), '*mujahideen*', '*Shahid*', etc.

At the second stage of our investigation, we launched an automated detection of right-wing radical and Islamist online groups containing the identified linguistic markers. The search was based on the most popular Russian social network *Vkontakte* and performed by means of the specialized system of analysis and monitoring of social media *InfoWatch Kribrum*. Kribrum is an online search engine developed by Infowatch and Kribrum, which enables a search for information by specified linguistic markers (i.e. the search object is composed of these markers). Based on certain linguistic markers, Kribrum identifies relevant newsworthy events, messages in online communities, and posts from the personal profiles of users of social networking sites. All data are downloaded as an XLS/CSV file. The file contains the message, its date, the author, the owner (i.e. the community or the page, where it was posted), the region, and also the audience coverage. This software is commercial.

In the course of our study, the search was performed from 29 May to 4 June 2017. This period was chosen randomly. The processes within the identified communities were being monitored for 4 months (from 29 May to 29 September 2017). The choice of this period was dictated by common sense. We were monitoring activity within the communities for several months in order to obtain reliable data on changes in their patterns of behavior over an extended period. The completed monitoring after the amount of obtained data was sufficient for our purposes.

At the third stage, we analyzed messages with linguistic markers. The messages were filtered, interpreted, and only those were selected that clearly proved that their authors supported far-right ideology. Next, we performed the detailed analysis of the personal pages of the authors of selected messages; of the groups where those messages were posted; as well as of the communities, where the authors belonged (links to these communities were available on the authors' pages). This stage, aimed at identifying extremist

groups, appears to be a part of the first step in the data analysis and it could have been presented in the section on the discussion of the results. However, we include it in this section since the objective of the study is not restricted to detection of communities with extremist content, and our ultimate goal is to analyze the activity inside these communities, to investigate the transformation of content over time, and so on.

Due to the abundance of right-wing radical communities, we focused our attention on relatively small communities (with fewer than 1,500 participants). Regarding Islamist groups, it should be noted that they are more closely controlled by the authorities. Consequently, their circle is very narrow compared to that of right-wing radicals, thus even small groups of this type were studied. Apart from the monitoring results, this is confirmed by the official statistics. According to the prosecutor of Dagestan Republic, 500 Islamist websites were blocked in the region in 2016. Furthermore, access to nine social networking groups with more than 50,000 participants, engaged in the propaganda of extremism and terrorism, was limited (Kavpolit, 2016). In 2015, according to *Roskomnadzor* (2015), 500 out of 913 extremist websites were Islamist and were associated with propaganda of the ISIS.

After the selection was completed, the remaining groups were distributed according to the degree of extremism of the media content presented in the groups. This was challenging, and we realized that our approach was largely subjective and relative.

Nevertheless, when identifying right-wing radical communities, we followed the generally accepted evaluation criteria, including such concepts as glorification of the Third Reich leaders; demonstration of National Socialism symbols; humiliation of and call for physical violence against representatives of non-white races (i.e. blacks, migrants from Central Asia, and natives of the Caucasus); praising criminals convicted of crimes motivated by racial hatred; and justification and active approval of racism, Nazism and xenophobia. Finally, we selected groups, where the media (audio and video recordings, text statements, and images) contained explicit calls for violence such as overthrowing of state power, expressed active support for Nazi slogans, and/or humiliated human dignity on racial and national grounds. In addition, the selected pool of communities was extended with groups aimed at promoting far-right music, literature, and/or products with far-right symbols. These communities are often a good 'harbor' for far-right extremists (Galloway and Scrivens, 2018).

Having finished selecting right-wing radical groups, we recorded (1) the presence of all the above-mentioned characteristics, (2) their regularity and repeatability in the content of groups, and (3) the context, in which they were detected. In terms of context, we were able to detect groups related to the German weapons from World War II. Some of these groups were not taken into account since the issues they discussed were purely historical. However, the other groups of this type displayed contexts showing their admiration for Nazism and fascism, so they were included in the study list.

Investigation of Islamist communities identified signs of extremism based on the general characteristics of extremism as stated in the Russian legislation. In the case of Islamist communities, the signs of more veiled extremism (normally without direct calls for violence) included direct or indirect apologia for the activity and ideology of terrorist organizations (e.g. Al-Qaeda, Imarat Kavkaz, ISIS), as well as specific discourse containing hate speech in relation to moderate and traditional Muslims, gentiles, and secular authorities and society. We also addressed some reference materials, such as the Hate

Symbols Database (2018), Methodological Recommendations for Identifying Signs of Extremism Propaganda in the Educational Environment via the Internet (2015) for the purpose of interpreting right-wing and Islamist content of online communities.

The principles of critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Flowerdew and Richardson, 2018; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; Rogers, 2004; Van Dijk, 1987, 1993) were used to identify right-wing and Islamist communities, as well as to study changes in the content of these communities. Furthermore, certain results obtained through critical discourse analysis were used to study issues of racism, nationalism, discrimination, and right-wing populism (Ekström et al., 2018; Engström, 2014; Forchtner and Kølvråa, 2017; Moufahim et al., 2007; Padovani, 2016; Richardson and Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2015), and Islamism (Gamlem, 2008; Hamrita, 2016; Irawan, 2017; Pasha, 2011; Zaid and Ad, 2018). Application of this research method in studying discourse is crucial since extremist content is often disguised and ‘mingled’ with other topics related to the historical, anthropological, political, cultural, or religious aspects of the Russian population’s life.

The degree of extremism in the online content was estimated by means of the Extremist Media Index, proposed by Holbrook (2015) for analysis of media materials of Islamists and right-wing radicals. The selected communities were divided into three levels by their content: ‘moderate’, ‘fringe’ and ‘extreme’. The moderate level was assigned to groups containing materials on general religious, philosophical, historical, etc. topics without any explicit support for violence based on hatred. This content reveals a moderate attitude towards extremist ideas, which can be referred to as ‘expressing silent discontent’. The fringe level was assigned to groups that posted radical and confrontational political content, but did not call for violence at the moment of study. In this case, hostility and anger can be expressed simply as discontent, without humiliating human dignity and justifying violence aimed at migrants or *kuffars* (disbelievers). The extreme level was assigned to groups whose members justified or glorified violence against certain groups of people because of their race, nation, faith, origin, etc.

The list of the linguistic markers of extremist Islamist communities was compiled without any assistance from experts or informants from the corresponding Islamist communities since the language and discourse of Islamists do not contain numerous slang or jargon expressions, and are mostly saturated with traditional Islamic terms. This is due to the fact that Islamism is oriented towards ‘authentic’ Islam (in their interpretation) cleared of historical innovations and distortions. The specificity of Islamist discourse lies in the context of the use of common terms and expressions and in their radical interpretation. Therefore, when compiling the list of Islamist linguistic markers, the context of terms was considered by determining stable expressions that consisted of several terms (e.g. *start/wage/join jihad/gazavat*’ against Russian occupants/*murtadds*).

Results

VKontakte-based communities of right-wing radicals and Islamists

A total of 42 groups were selected by means of the described algorithm (Table 1). The total amount of accounts who are participants of the selected communities is 637,645,

but the actual number of members can be less, as some accounts can be members of two or more communities. In regard to the age and gender of the members, we came to the conclusion that the selected communities are mostly represented by 18–30-year olds, predominantly males. The number of males is 504,567 (79%); the number of females is 120,421 (21%). Only 288,156 people (45.2%) of the total number of members specified their place of residence (see Table 1).

Among the Islamist segment of the social network *Vkontakte*, filtration showed 33 extremist communities (Table 2). The total number of accounts registered in the selected groups is 228,160. The analysis of the specified age of members of extremist Islamist communities showed that the 18 to 23 age group prevails in nearly all the communities. The 24 to 29 age group is the second largest. Thus, the majority of members are young people under 30 (see Table 2).

The total number of females in all Islamist communities exceeds the total number of men by 2.6 percent. Here, we should also emphasize that all members of Islamist communities indicated their gender. Referring to our estimation of the gender composition of Islamist communities, it should be noted that the above-mentioned 2.6 percent difference occurred predominantly due to only one large community, known as Islam-Ayats, Hadith and Quotations.

Although Islamism, i.e. radicalized political Islam, is also not homogeneous and comprises various ideological trends, such as Sunni Salafism, in non-violent and jihadist forms, the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, that of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the Shiite form of religious fundamentalism originating from the ideology of the Iranian revolution, etc., the analysis of the content of extremist Islamist communities showed that only various radical Salafi groups and supporters of the Islamic State are interested in the social network *Vkontakte*. Other Islamists and terrorist organizations experience difficulty ‘surviving’ under the extreme surveillance over their resources carried out by Russian special services. Interestingly, these communities seem to avoid representing their organizations on *Vkontakte* and prefer to use other (‘safer’) alternatives for propaganda on the internet. For instance, this is evidenced by the fact that we found no single online group related to the Muslim Brotherhood or Hizb-ut-Tahrir; however, their active divisions operate in some regions of the Russian Federation. We found five groups connected with ISIS but, by the time the data were downloaded, three out of those five communities had become inaccessible due to being banned. The second of those five communities contained direct links to the official materials of ISIS media structures, provided via the ISIS Android application called Al-Bayan Radio.

Calls for violence within online communities of right-wing radicals and Islamists

Out of a total of 42 right-wing radical communities, 9 are moderate, 19 are fringe, and 13 are extreme. The White Supremacy group is closed, so we could not view the content. The group contains a link to an external source, i.e. a website containing extremist materials on white supremacy. Among the moderate groups, one is abandoned since the content has not been updated since July 2017. Another group in this category displays a notice saying that the content has been partially moved to the social network Telegram (in particular, music

Table 1. The list of far-right communities.

Title of a community (in Russian)	English translation of title	Number of members on 29 May 2017
Pravye	Right	144243
Rasovaya antropologia	Racial anthropology	47498
Russkie Regiony	Russian regions	41508
Probuzhdenie	Awakening	34315
Right Hardcore Crew	Right Hardcore Crew	21531
Prizrak rossiyskogo maydana	Ghost of Russian Mайдan	20282
Tesak – fan-soobshestvo	Tesak – fans' community	19785
Antisionism	Antizionism	19517
RN/Natsia: Svoboda: Otechestvo/	RN/Nation: Freedom: Homeland	18401
Akademiya Poryadochnykh Skinov	The academy of decent skinheads	17087
NATIONALISM	NATIONALISM	15613
Natsia Probuzhdenie	Nation Awakening	15014
Pravye. Zapasnaya	Right. Reserve [group]	14597
BELIY FRONT	WHITE FRONT	14493
Top Pravoy Muzyki	Right wing Music Top	12745
88 nozhevykh ↑	88 knife wounds	12692
Slava Rusi	Glory to the Rus'	11064
SLAVYANSKIY NATSIONALIST	SLAVIC NATIONALIST	10488
Pravye Peterburg	Right of Petersburg	10700
Russkiy Sector – Natsionalnaya Sluzhba	Russian Sector – National Service	10361
RUSSKIY NATSIONALNIY MARSH	RUSSIAN NATIONAL MARCH	10059
Sion	Sion	9597
⚡Der ТБР⚡	⚡Der TBR⚡	9491
Obschestvo Rasovoy Gigieny	Racial Hygiene Society	8450
Natsionalnoe Prozrenie	National Epiphany	8225
BELAYA SOVEST	WHITE CONSCIENCE	8204
WOTANJUGEND	WOTANJUGEND	7690
WHITE 88	WHITE 88	7547
Russkiy Peterburg ❄️ Obschina	Russian Petersburg ❄️Community	5843
Natsia Pravye (Krov Severa)	Nation Right (Blood of the North)	5731
Tropa Ubermensha 2.0	Path of the Ubermensch 2.0	5641
LITERARY_TERRORISM	LITERARY_TERRORISM	4812
Soprotivlenie	Resistance	4796
Beloe Prevoskhodstvo	White Supremacy	4709
VARYAZHSKAYA RUS	The Varangian Rus'	5075
STOP MIGRANT	STOP MIGRANT	4165
JUNGVOLK	JUNGVOLK	3751
BonMart	BonMart	3392
Belye Dni	White Days	2404
Russkaya Vologda	Russian Vologda	2278
Chest I Vernost	Honor and Loyalty	2246
RaHoWa Today	RaHoWa Today	1605

Table 2. The list of Islamist communities.

Title of a community (in Russian)	English translation of title	Number of members on 29 May 2017
Islam–ayaty, hadisy i tsitaty	Islam–Ayats, Hadith and quotations	162782
TAUHID	TAWHID	12695
Chernookaya	Black-eyed	10123
Voprosy i otvety o Islame	Questions and answers about Islam	7732
Galaktika Tauhida	Galaxy of Tawhid	6361
Anti-Myuridism	Anti-Myuridism	5542
J\AVAB	J\AVAB	2817
Islamskii istorii	Islam Stories	2534
Religiya Ibrakhima	The religion of Ibrahim	2396
Opravdanie nevezhestva v Tauhide	Justification by ignorance in Tawhid	2259
QURAN	QURAN	1526
Darul Islam	Darul Islam	1356
رعد	The thunder (Arab.)	1175
Real'noe litso gruppy 'Hajimuridy poimut'	The real face of the group 'Hajimurids Will Understand'	992
Veruyuschie – brat'ya drug drugu: Koran 49:10	The believers are but brothers: Quran 49:10	871
Na puti Allaha	On the path of Allah	861
خير	The good (Arab.)	702
FAWAID	FAWAID	668
Oproverzhenie_72_	Denial_72_	579
Diin Al-Islam	Diin Al-Islam	511
GRANADA [former name: al-Furqan]	GRANADA	472
اذاعة البيان	Al-Bayan Radio (Arab.)	408
الإسلام الحقيقي	True Islam (Arab.)	357
Antikufr antishirk	Antikufr antishirk	345
Rabbanikum	Rabbanikum	326
SALAFI PATH	SALAFI PATH	299
Dinul hunafa	Dinul hunafa	296
Lozh' sakhavatnikov	The false of Sahwa adepts	184
Podumaite ob etom!!! Dlya chego nam dan razym?!	Think about it!!! What have we been given a mind for?!	175

considered to be the 'most radical'). Historical and anthropological materials, as well as music and distribution of goods with right-wing radical symbols prevail in the content of moderate groups. One of 19 fringe groups informs users that, due to the policy of the *VKontakte* administration, the group has been moved to the social network Telegram. The content of the above-mentioned groups is much more politically charged and contains criticism of the Russian authorities from the nationalist perspective. During the monitoring period, only three of the extreme groups remained available. Six groups were blocked at

the request of *Roskomnadzor* and four groups were removed for unknown reasons. One group was abandoned since its content had not been updated since 2013. Thus, by the end of the monitoring (29 September 2017), only two extreme groups remained active.

We revealed 5 moderate, 20 fringe and 4 extreme Islamist communities. During the period of monitoring, one community made its content much more radical, declaring overt support for the Islamic State, and moved from the moderate to the fringe category.

Right-wing radicals' and Islamists' strategies for survival under state censorship

We distinguished the following strategies implemented by right-wing radicals to survive in a state-controlled social network:

- Posting materials related to historical, religious, cultural, geographic, and anthropological topics (often very tendentious) to camouflage nationalist and racist content. This strategy can be called *mimicry of scientism*.

For example, the community 'White Supremacy' harnesses Hermann Wirth's works to justify the superiority of the 'white race', making references to the Dahl Russian Dictionary and quotes from Fyodor Dostoevsky's works. This group posts materials on modern history and the Middle Ages in European history with references to authoritative academic sources. Another similar example is the group 'Rasovaya antropologiya' ('Racial Anthropology'), which promotes the racial theories of the first half of the 20th century and posts links to modern publications and materials on genetics and evolution presented in a biased manner.

- Inspiring the community members through promotion of a healthy lifestyle, sports (in particular, martial arts and skills in weapon handling), abstinence from alcohol and drugs, moral values, censure of vice and debauchery, etc. Simultaneously, nationalist arguments, i.e. calls for preservation of racial purity, the fight against racial genocide, etc. are perfectly harnessed as incentives. This strategy can be described as *mimicry of traditional values*.

For example, the group '*Probuzhdeniye*' (Awakening) contains numerous posts that (1) encourage young people to participate in sports and abandon bad habits, as well as (2) praise such 'truly' human qualities as courage, audacity, and readiness to self-defence. Incidentally, an analysis of this group's visual images reveals that the authors turn to representatives of the skinhead subculture.

- *Community renaming* is also actively used as a survival tactic.

For example, the community '*Natsiya | Probuzhdeniye*' (Nation | Awakening) was renamed '*Chest' i Krov'*' (Honour & Blood).

- Another tactical ploy is posting no text materials in favour of merely *visual images*.

For example, the community ‘Belaya Søvest’ (The White Conscience), whose latest posts date back to July 2017, post only photos. Some of these photos present an appeal to the spiritual strength, show images of strong and aggressive animals coupled with Russian folk costumes.

- Abandoning the controlled media, *shifting to a more open media space* (i.e. other social networks, external internet resources, etc.).

As an illustration, the community ‘Der TBR’, which explicitly publicizes the history of the Third Reich, has published an announcement stating that they intend to post the most radical materials on their Telegram channel and encouraging the community members to subscribe to this channel.

It should be noted that some groups are explicitly politically charged. They openly criticize the Russian authorities of various levels. In this case, the strategies of these groups do not differ from those used by conventional opposition media. These groups exploit a standard set of right-wing radical themes, including the following: migrants as a source of crime (see the *Vkontakte* group ‘*Stop migrant*’=Stop the Migrant), anti-Semitism (see the group ‘Zion’), denial of tolerance (see the group ‘*Pravye Peterburg*’=The Right of Petersburg), and, in particular, harsh criticism of the authorities and President Vladimir Putin (see the group ‘*Prizrak Rossiyskogo Maydana*’=The Ghost of the Russian Maidan).

As Islamist extremism on the Russian internet is under increasing pressure from the state, Islamist communities tend to develop various tactics of adaptation to maintain their presence on Russian social networks.

- *Mimicry of moderate and traditional Islam*. Most communities carefully disguise their actual ideological stance and camouflage their content to resemble general Islamic topics or moderate (not-violent) Salafism, which is manifested only in calls for a truly Islamic mode of life and condemning the vices of secular culture. According to the data we obtained, at a certain stage of development and strengthening in the virtual space, some communities tend to demonstrate the true views of their founders by showing that in the sudden radicalization of their content.

As an illustration of this phenomenon, we can pick out the large community ‘*Chernookaya*’ (The Dark-Eyed Lady), which initially displayed the moderate Salafi content aimed mostly at a female audience; however, by summer 2017 the community changed the content dramatically, overtly announcing that it is a follower of ISIS. For this purpose, they posted a paper called ‘Scientists of Evil’, which was based on an ISIS publication in the journal *Rumia*, where all well-known Salafi theologians (mostly from Saudi Arabia) were called pseudoscientists, while the ideology of the Islamic State was proclaimed as the only true one. In the same month, they reposted the community ‘*Ansaruddin*’ (over 2.8 thousand members), which openly promotes the ISIS ideology. We found this community after we finished monitoring, so we did not analyse it in detail.

- *Quotation collage*. The method of citing and compiling texts extracted from ‘authoritative’ sources is one of the leading methods for adapting the propaganda of Islamist extremist views on *Vkontakte* to the conditions of the strictly controlled internet.

The range of these sources varies from the Quran, which is sacred to all Muslims, to works of medieval and modern Salafi ideologists, which are considered authoritative by smaller groups. In this context, the common tactic used to represent extremist views is to arrange numerous quotations in such a way that they produce a certain suggestive effect (i.e. they ‘are read’ in a radical semantic context). Editorial comments (by administrators and users) are minimal or completely absent.

The striking example of this tactic is the community ‘*Na puti Allaha*’ (Seeking the Path of Allah). One of the posts dated 4 November 2016 quotes the words of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who said that a person becomes a disbeliever (*kafir*) and an apostate (*murtadd*), if he/she does not have the three elements of the faith: belief of the heart, speech of the tongue, and acts of the limbs (here, actions conforming to the religious law are meant). The next post of 5 November 2016 quotes the words of Imam Muhammad al-Shafi’I, a representative of the classical Sunnī theology, who said that anyone who does not believe in at least one verse (*ayat*) from the Book of Allah is *kafir*. Thus, we see that a semantic row is created, where the central theme is segregation of *mūnafiq* (hypocrites) and true believers.

- *Disguised extremist content and secondary mimicry.* The content of communities is very dynamic; it can undergo significant changes. Sometimes it can be almost completely changed because of changes in the policy of a group’s administrators or due to external factors, such as the risk of being blocked.

For example, in summer 2017, the community Al-Furqan was renamed ‘GRANADA’, and declared pseudo-reorientation to Arabic language studies. At the same moment, another community ‘*Oproverzhenie_72*’ (Denial_72), characterized by rapid growth of its members, changed its status to ‘closed group’ (presumably due to the threat of a ban) and was redesigned to create a false impression of being removed from the web, i.e. the title ‘Deleted’ appeared and most of the content was transformed into posts on the community wall with the ‘members only’ access mode.

Conclusion

In this study, our goal was to perform a comparative analysis of the survival strategy of right-wing radicals and Islamists, which are ideologically different political groups, reciprocally in contention with each other. Both of them use social networks to spread their ideas. Initially, we thought that right-wing radicals would be better represented in *Vkontakte* in comparison to Islamists. This hypothesis originates from the fact that, over the past few years, the Russian authorities have been actively exploiting anti-Islamic rhetoric and fighting against international terrorism to justify their political actions. So, we believed that right-wing radicals would feel more ‘comfortable’ and safe using the Russian social network *Vkontakte*, which conforms to the Russian legislation.

Indeed, in the course of the study, we found that the number of online communities demonstrating signs of nationalism and right-wing radicalism appears to be much larger in comparison to that of online communities, which, in one way or another, express sympathy for Islamist ideas. Surprisingly, however, the right-wing radical communities with explicit extremist content dissolved rather quickly. They were either blocked by the decision of

authorities, or deleted, or moved to another platform. For example, some of them moved to Telegram, which was beyond the control of Russian authorities. Now this messenger is banned in Russia. Thus, our assumptions were only partly confirmed. Monitoring of online communities revealed that, despite the ideological difference, right-wing radicals and Islamists use the same type of strategies and techniques to ‘survive’ under conditions of growing pressure from the state. In general, these strategies can be described as an intention to imitate politically and ideologically neutral content. In this context, identification and separation of extremist content from different content within social networks becomes a pressing issue. It should be noted that there are numerous specialized references on right-wing radical extremism and Islamism on the internet; however, very few attempts have been made to compare these ideological groups and identify the common features of their extremist practices. Hence, we believe that a comparative study of these ideological groups will improve the general understanding of the phenomenon of ‘political extremism’.

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