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## Violent conflict and online segregation: An analysis of social network communication across Ukraine's regions<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

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Does the intensity of a social conflict affect political division? Traditionally, social cleavages are seen as the underlying cause of political conflicts. It is clear, however, that a violent conflict itself can shape partisan, social, and national identities. In this paper, we ask whether social conflicts unite or divide the society by studying the effects of Ukraine's military conflict with Russia on online social ties between Ukrainian provinces (*oblasts*). In order to do that, we collected original data on the cross-regional structure of politically relevant online communication among users of VKontakte social networking site. We analyze the panel of provinces spanning the most active phases of domestic protests and military conflict and isolate the effects of province-specific war casualties on the nature of inter-provincial online communication. The results show that war casualties entice strong emotional response in the corresponding provinces, but do not necessarily increase the level of social cohesion in inter-provincial online communication. We find that the intensity of military conflict entices online activism, but activates regional rather than nation-wide network connections. We also find that military conflict tends to polarize some regions of Ukraine, especially in the East. Our research brings attention to the underexplored areas in the study of civil conflict and political identities by documenting the ways the former may affect the latter. *Journal of Comparative Economics* 44 (1) (2016) 163–181. Department of International Relations, Lehigh University, United States; Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering, University at Buffalo, SUNY, United States; Lehigh University, United States; Department of Computer Science and Information Systems, The University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

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## 1. Introduction

Does the intensity of social conflicts affect political divisions? On the one hand, the traumatic experience of violence may reinforce polarizing identities (Wilkinson, 2004). On the other, violent conflict may help consolidate the society and promote social capital (Russett, 1990; Voors et al., 2012; Blattman, 2009). How exactly do violent conflicts reshape the society? We attempt to answer this question by studying the effects of Ukraine's "Revolution of Dignity" and the military conflict with Russia on online social ties between Ukrainian provinces.

Researchers identified digital communication and online activism as increasingly consequential forms of behavior, as well as important mechanisms of political change. Social media has been shown to affect civic engagement, political participation, and economic choice.<sup>1</sup> Digitally enabled forms of political communication have also become increasingly important sources of attitudinal and behavioral data. As the digital revolution gives rise to new electronic forms of mass communication and virtual association, it opens greater opportunities to study how people form attitudes, express their opinions, and engage in collective behavior. In this paper, we explore such opportunities by analyzing ways in which political information shapes online social engagement.

We examine online political activism and engagement during the period of political contention spanning the anti-regime Euro Mайдan protests, annexation of Crimea, and armed insurgency and foreign intervention in Eastern Ukraine. We believe that Ukraine's case presents advantageous settings not only for investigating online activism as an increasingly popular form of civil engagement, but also for evaluating long-standing questions about the role of violent conflict in promoting social change. Ukraine's turbulent politics provide a rich context for studying social conflict. In Ukraine, the relative weakness (Aslund and McFaul, 2006; Birch, 2000) and "fluidity" (Zielinski et al., 2008) of institutional mechanisms of routine public engagement (political parties, unions, advocacy groups) make virtual communication a particularly important venue of political engagement.

The ability to freely exchange opinions and share relevant political information is the cornerstone of a democratic society (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995). In new democracies that lack proper institutions, social networking websites such as Facebook may not only provide easily accessible venues for political expression, but also serve as substitutes for underdeveloped institutions of civil society.<sup>2</sup> In order to analyze such increasingly accessible and important mechanisms of political expression, we collected original data on the cross-regional structure of politically relevant online communications. In particular, our dataset contains user-created posts and comments from public political groups in VKontakte (VK.com)—the largest, by the number of registered users and daily visits, social networking site in Ukraine. Each post and related comments, in addition to the date and time stamp, contain user-specific information such as their name, self-reported home and current cities, education, the list of languages spoken, etc. Unfortunately, due to the privacy concerns, the individual-level data, while present in the original dataset, had to be first aggregated to the group level before we could use it for our analysis. Nevertheless, we are able to utilize information on contributors to specific discussions, including their regional composition.

Our analysis of virtual communication carried out in VKontakte discussion groups reveals that the intensity of military aggression as captured by the widely publicized information about army fatalities while uniting some segregates other parts of the Ukrainian social media community. We analyze volumes of cross-provincial communication and engagement in online discussion groups and find that information about civil protests (Maidan) and war casualties leads to greater online activism on the part of users from the affected provinces. Such engagement, however, remains mostly localized and does not affect other parts of the country. We also find considerable variation in the ways different parts of the country respond to the violent conflict as measured by the number of casualties.<sup>3</sup> Political information enticing a strong emotional response has a polarizing effect in Eastern *oblasts* (provinces), but not in the rest of the country. While in Western *oblasts* war casualties result in increased disengagement from the rest of the country, in the East they lead to greater polarization. This finding corroborates previous studies that link online communication to political fragmentation and polarization (Rozenblat and Mobius, 2004; Duvanova et al., 2015; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Webster, 2007; Prior, 2007).<sup>4</sup> To our knowledge, it is the first study to systematically examine the causal effects of divisive news on the digitally enabled form of public engagement.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section develops our argument, analytical model, and hypotheses. We then describe our data collection, methods, and aggregation procedures in Section 3. Section 4 presents our empirical analyses. Conclusions that summarize our results and contributions are presented in Section 5.

<sup>1</sup> Researchers find empirical links between exposure to digital communication technology and political attitudes (Kerbel, 2009), voting (Christakis and Fowler, 2009; Vitak et al., 2011; Bond et al., 2012), civic engagement (Jennings and Zeitner, 2003; Jensen et al. 2007; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013), campaign contributions (Hamilton and Tolbert, 2012), support for political parties (Norris, 2003), and collective action (Earl, 2011; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Scholars studying authoritarian regimes link social media to oppositional attitudes and protest behavior (Tang et al., 2012; Howard and Hussain, 2013; Lim, 2012; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). Social media is also identified as an effective tool of governance that affects policymaking (Kerbel, 2012; Baum, 2012; Lawless, 2012). Enikolopov et al. (2015) demonstrate that blogs affect stock market and corporate governance. See Fox and Ramos (2012) and Jensen et al. (2012) for a review of the related literature.

<sup>2</sup> See Beissinger (2012) for a related discussion.

<sup>3</sup> We divide Ukraine into Western, Center, Southern, and Eastern parts according to the established convention. The list of *oblasts* falling into each region is presented in Fig. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) on the contrary, find that the ideological fragmentation in online news consumption is higher than in offline media, but low in absolute terms and in comparison to face-to-face communication. While we do not make any claims about the absolute levels of social media fragmentation in Ukraine, our finding that information about intensity of fighting heightens regional segregation of virtual network does not contradict Gentzkow and Shapiro's conclusions and further extends this line of research.

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