

The Geopolitics of Social Media in Eurasia

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Abstract

Social media and its effect on the global political scene has been the subject of much discussion since the widespread uprisings that are continuing to play out in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The interest in the political potential of social media has led everyone from the media to academics to ask whether the transformations that are underway in the MENA region will spread to the former Soviet Union?

While there are many similarities between the two regions, from long-serving authoritarian leaders to poor economic conditions, there are also numerous differences that will serve to limit the effect of social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter as driving forces for political change in the region. Indeed, the use and effectiveness of social media even in the Arab Spring countries is often misunderstood and overestimated. This is especially true in the former Soviet Union, where internet usage levels – and particularly social media users – are relatively low when compared to their Western counterparts. This is not to say, however, that the former Soviet Union has not or will not continue to see transformative changes – several states in the region are no strangers to revolution and/or widespread political upheaval. But these outcomes are brought about by much more deeply rooted geopolitical forces: political divisions, a geography that hampers high levels of economic development, for instance. Social media is one tool that has contributed to the evolution of national political systems, but it is not the cause of revolutionary change in and of itself.

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The transformative effect of social media on today's global political scene receives a great deal of attention. This spotlight has intensified many times over since the 'Arab Spring', in which autocratic leaders who had been in power for decades were driven from office, with Facebook-organized protests and Twitter feeds playing an important – though perhaps misunderstood – role.

With countries like Tunisia and Egypt as the first states to succumb to these uprisings, the 'Arab Spring' is continuing to play out and to destabilize the political status quo across the region, from Libya to Syria to Yemen. It has also caused many to ask whether the movement that is gripping the Middle East and North Africa might spread to other countries and regions that share certain social, political, or economic features, particularly regimes led by long-standing autocratic leaders. One such region that has received a significant amount of attention in this regard is the former Soviet Union.

The former Soviet Union is no stranger to autocratic states with long-serving leaders, some of whom have been in power since before the collapse of the Soviet Union roughly two decades ago. Many countries in the region face the same problems as Middle Eastern societies: high levels of social inequality, corruption, and youth unemployment, for example. And indeed, there are and have been social media-based movements in

these countries, some of which have already had significant political consequences.

However, the capacity of social media to significantly affect the wider geopolitics of the former Soviet Union has been, and remains, fairly limited. While it is very likely that social media will serve as an important tool in shaping political processes in the region, it is more likely to respond to other more powerful forces – rather than independently driving developments.

A diverse region

In order to understand the impact of social media on countries in the former Soviet Union, one must first understand the geopolitical dynamics and trends at play across the region.

First of all, this is a diverse region, ranging from countries like Estonia, a member of the EU, NATO, and Eurozone, to countries like Tajikistan, which has much more in common with Afghanistan than it does with its former Soviet counterpart, Estonia.

Broadly speaking, the former Soviet Union in its present form can be divided into five categories, which reflect geographic as well as political proximity: the Baltics, the Eastern European countries, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Russia proper.

Rather than evaluate the role and potential impact of social media on the region as a whole, it would perhaps be more productive to apply

In this context, decisive political changes in certain former Soviet states might serve Russian interests, while in others, Moscow would be in favor of maintaining the status quo. One example of this is Russia's support for the April 2010 revolution in Kyrgyzstan, which brought in a government more willing to cater to Moscow's interests

it to each of these sub-regions. Of course, even the countries within the identified sub-regions are significantly different from one another in terms of political outlook: for instance, Georgia's pro-western and European-oriented national strategy is more similar to the Baltic countries than its neighbors in the Caucasus. Nonetheless, considering the situation within sub-regional divisions is still more useful than looking at this vast region without drawing such distinctions.

That being said, one geopolitical trend that does apply to the entire former Soviet Union area is Russia's resurgence as a major regional power. While Russia spent the 90's and early 2000's in a state of political and economic chaos, and in geopolitical retreat, Moscow's power relative to the region has been on the increase since the middle of the past decade, a shift epitomized by Russia's war with Georgia in August 2008. However,

Moscow's resurgence has not only been felt in the security realm. The reversal of the Orange Revolution with the election of Viktor Yanukovich as president of Ukraine in 2010 and the formation of the Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan - now set to become a Common Economic Space in 2012 - are examples of Russia's growing political and economic influence in the former Soviet periphery.

This is not to argue that Russia is in the process of re-creating the Soviet Union, but Moscow's influence in the region is clearly on the rise. The U.S's focus on the political theater in the Middle East and the ongoing financial and political troubles of the European Union have given Russia a window of opportunity to install political, economic, and security levers in many of the former Soviet states. Thus any analysis of the geopolitics of the former Soviet Union must take into account Russia's relationship with these states – and social media is no exception.

In this context, decisive political changes in certain former Soviet states might serve Russian interests, while in others, Moscow would be in favor of maintaining the status quo. One example of this is Russia's support for the April 2010 revolution in Kyrgyzstan, which brought in a government more willing to cater to Moscow's interests; on the other

hand, Russia condemned opposition protests in Belarus and was one of the few states to support the crackdown on protestors by Belarusian security services. The same principle can be seen in Russia's support of opposition protests against the Saakashvili regime in Georgia, but its hesitation to back demonstrations in countries like Armenia, a staunch Russian ally.

The broad theme reflected by these scenarios is that Russia is seeking to establish a sphere of influence in its former Soviet periphery, whereby governments are willing to cooperate with Moscow, and refrain from significant interaction with outside powers, particularly Western ones. Thus regime changes in pro-western countries like Georgia and the Baltics are in Russia's interests, while the governments of many of the other countries in the former Soviet Union pose less risk in their current forms. This does not mean that Russia controls the extent to which social media can affect the governments in the latter countries, simply that Moscow's views and presence must be taken into account by these countries.

Social media: the strengths and weaknesses

Having considered the geopolitics of the former Soviet Union, it is important to consider the effects of social media can have on geopolitics. There are a number of factors to consider when gauging the impact of

social media on the region.

The first and most obvious factor is internet access. After all, without internet, there is no access to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube. The former Soviet Union is in general an area made up of low to middle income countries, and so as expected, internet usage levels are lower than in the West.

According to the Internet World Stats website,¹ the percentage of internet usage penetration in Germany – a benchmark of European and Western internet usage - was just under 80 percent. In the European countries of the former Soviet Union (excluding the Baltics), this number is much lower – 43 percent in Russia, 46 percent in Belarus, 34 percent in Ukraine, and 31 percent in Moldova. In the Caucasus sub-region, numbers are similar, with an average of 40 percent penetration, while Central Asia as a region averages around 22 percent.

An additional factor, one that stems from the first, is the number of social media users in these countries. This is influenced by the total national population, and so it is to be expected that Russia – with roughly 4.6 million registered Facebook users – is the leading country in terms of total social media users. However, this also corresponds to the level of internet usage in a country. For instance, Azerbaijan has a relatively

¹ <http://www.internetworldstats.com>

high proportion of internet users in comparison with the rest of the region (47 percent), and therefore boasts a greater number of Facebook users than most of the other FSU states – just over 450,000 users, according to APA news agency. Only Ukraine, Georgia, and of course Russia have more people on Facebook than Azerbaijan.

However, these numbers can be misleading in terms of determining which countries are prone to political turbulence and revolutionary activity. For instance, Russia has a relatively high Internet and Facebook usage, whereas Kyrgyzstan's usage is quite low. But Kyrgyzstan has experienced far more political volatility than Russia, so clearly there are other forces in play in stimulating political transformation across the former Soviet states.

This observation brings to bear the third factor, which is the ability to harness the usage of social media into physical (as opposed to virtual) social action. As the numbers demonstrate, internet-using citizens make up the minority of most national populations across the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, those who use social media make up only a fraction of the total internet users. Therefore, to generate serious transformation of a country's political system via social actions like protests and demonstrations, social media users must have the ability to expand their support base beyond social media

and, ultimately, beyond internet users.

There are two reasons for this. First, there is the practical reason – just as social media makes communication easier in a certain way, it also exposes this communication to surveillance by the host government. This allows the government to monitor communications, and respond to any plans being made by users more swiftly than if those plans were being discussed in private back-room discussions. Furthermore, governments have the power to shut down Internet services altogether.

Secondly, there is a more traditional reason – historically, virtually all successful revolutions have had to appeal to the broader masses. This means not only appealing to the young and tech-savvy (who tend to belong to the middle/upper classes), but bringing out the shopkeepers, retirees, and rural communities to support the movement. Ultimately, this was the difference between Iran's successful Islamic Revolution in 1979, and the failed Green Revolution in 2009. The former successfully appealed to the masses, and a broad cross-section of society, while the latter did not.

Social media in the former Soviet space

This is not to say that social media has no influence on the geopolitics of the former Soviet Union. However, rather than generating revolutionary changes in the political systems of the countries in the region, it has

contributed to the evolutionary changes that are already underway.

Russia

Russia is the country that has been on the receiving end of the most speculation about the capacity of social media to bring about Egypt-style unrest that could unseat the Moscow government. However, Russia is actually one of the least affected countries in terms of social media-related protests happening on the ground. For social media movements to have an impact on a country as vast as Russia and to overcome the security apparatus that has proven so effective in clamping down on unregistered protests, these movements would need to gain mass appeal, which, so far, they have not.

Baltics

The Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are unique to the region as they are the only ones who are members of key Western institutions such as the European Union and NATO. The Baltic states are all representative democracies with relatively free societies and open media. In this sense they are no more susceptible to revolution via social networking than other EU country- Germany or France, for instance. Therefore social media is unlikely to play any significant role in transforming the political processes in a revolutionary way.

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Belarus

Belarus is actually quite susceptible to political change via social media, at least theoretically speaking. The country has experienced some serious financial and economic problems, due in no small part to the political isolation from the West imposed by the government of Alexander Lukashenko. There were attempts by opposition groups and activists to organize “silent protests” via Facebook. However, after weeks of bringing relatively low numbers of people out onto the streets (typically in the low hundreds) and the detention of these activists by Belarusian authorities, the Facebook protests began to fizzle out, and eventually were cancelled until the opposition could organize a larger and more effective movement.

Ukraine

In geographical terms, Ukraine straddles Russia and the EU, and in a sense, its political system reflects this duality. While it by no means shares the representative democracy enjoyed by the Baltic states,

nor does Ukraine have the same centralized and autocratic system of its Belarusian and Russian neighbors. However, the administration of President Viktor Yanukovich has come under increased scrutiny over the politically motivated detentions of some of Yanukovich's rivals,

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notably former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. This incident sparked anti-Yanukovich protests, and indicated early signs of political isolation from the West, as in Lukashenko's Belarus, though to a far lesser extent. However, social networking has played only a limited role in organizing the opposition. Indeed, the Orange Revolution was more a product of grassroots political movements (with a certain amount of support from the West) rather than driven by social networking activity. Therefore it is likely that social media will continue to play a fairly marginal role in shaping the future of Ukraine's political system and orientation.

Moldova

Moldova has been quite affected by social media, with the so-called 'Twitter Revolution' of 2009. But the political and geopolitical realities have exposed the limits of what a

"revolution" of this type can really change in Moldova. While social networking did contribute to bringing tens of thousands of people onto the streets to protest – and eventually overturn – the Communist victory in parliamentary elections, this event ushered in a period of more than 2 years of political deadlock. Moldova is split between pro-European parties and the pro-Russian Communists, which retain a great deal of national support, despite being relegated to the opposition. This level of support has enabled the Communists to single-handedly block the appointment of a President in the country. It seems unlikely that social media activism will be able to unlock this stalemate.

Caucasus

Georgia is another country that has experienced a revolution – the 2003 'Rose Revolution'. But this pre-dated the widespread usage of social media tools like Facebook and Twitter, and provides further proof that transformative change was quite possible before the era of social media.

In Azerbaijan, opposition forces tried to utilize social media to organize protests against the government. Azerbaijan had an entire Facebook movement called "March 11", which was dedicated to organizing protests against the government. However, as in Belarus, this movement fell far

Armenia has one of the lowest Facebook usage rates in the former Soviet Union- and yet had one of the largest protest campaigns across the region this year

short of its organizers' expectations. The number of people who showed up on the streets was far smaller than the number of member of the Facebook group, supporting claims that many members of the groups were not actually Azerbaijani citizens living in the country. In the same way as Belarus, the members of the Facebook-organized movement did not represent the wider population, and therefore its capacity to seriously challenge the government and security services was limited.

On the other hand, another country in the Caucasus – Armenia – has had significant protests in the past year. At their height, these protests reached over 10,000 people and were occurring on a bi-monthly basis in the early part of 2011. However, these protests were not fueled by social media tools such as Facebook; rather they were the product of grassroots campaigning by the opposition group, the Armenian National Congress (ANC), led by former Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan. Indeed, Armenia has one of the lowest Facebook usage rates in the former Soviet Union-

and yet had one of the largest protest campaigns across the region this year (though these too failed to achieve their aim of forcing snap elections).

Central Asia

Kyrgyzstan is yet another country that has recently experienced a revolution – in fact, 2 in the past 6 years. But Kyrgyzstan, like the rest of Central Asia, has a low proportion of internet users, particularly among the rural areas and older people. Thus the revolutions were minimally influenced by social media; instead they were a product of deeper geopolitical issues, such as the divided and clan-based society and widespread disenchantment with the corruption and nepotism of the country's leadership.

Other countries in Central Asia are also unlikely to be seriously affected by social media. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan both have internet usage rates in the single digits in terms of population percentage.² Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan could see significant social and political disruption in the coming years, but this is due uncertainty about leadership transitions, as opposed to Facebook or Twitter.

² Turkmenistan 80,400 Internet users as of Jun/10, 1.6% penetration rate, per ITU; Tajikistan 700,000 Internet users as of Jun/10, 9.3% penetration rate, per ITU. Link: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm>

Conclusion

While its effects have varied across the different sub-regions of the former Soviet Union, social media has not been a game-changing force in Eurasia. In the main, social media-organized protests in the region have had a limited effect in creating the political change they were seeking. Moreover, in the revolutions and political changes that have occurred in the former Soviet Union over the past few years, social media has not been as a primary force or feature.

If anything, the use of social media has been shaped by geopolitical circumstances, rather than the other way around. Countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, mountainous, poor, and geographically isolated; the low internet usage and marginal effect of social media on the political system serve to emphasize these geopolitical realities. Belarus - located in Europe and surrounded by EU members - has a relatively high rate of internet and social media usage. However, the government's tight control of opposition groups and the demographic profile of social network users (mostly young and urban) has limited their ability to influence the political system and to lead social movements.

Certainly social media can act - and has acted - as an enabler of significant political developments. But far from causing revolutions - and more importantly - ushering in regime

change following these revolutions, social media simply serves as one tool amongst many as a force for political change.

This is not to say that social media will not have an impact on the geopolitics of the former Soviet Union. However, rather than producing revolutionary changes to the political systems of the countries in the region, it will contribute to the evolutionary changes that are already underway.