

Memory, politics and emotions: Historical internet memes and protests in Venezuela and Ukraine

Mykola Makhortykh (University of Bern) and Juan Manuel González (Universidad Internacional de La Rioja)

Abstract: The article discusses interactions between emotions, memory and user-generated content in the context of online political campaigns. Using as a case study internet memes related to anti-government protest in Ukraine (2013-2014) and Venezuela (2019), it compares how different political camps use these digital cultural products to stir affect and promote their political agendas. It also scrutinizes how references to the past influence the affective potential of memetic content and in what ways these references affect political meaning-making in the course of protests. The article's findings point out the tendency of pro-government memes to stir negative emotions for increasing polarization and stigmatizing oppositioners via references to hegemonic historical narratives. By contrast, anti-government memes tend to avoid polarising memories and, instead, rely on less controversial narratives to criticize authorities.

Keywords: internet memes, memory, emotions, protests, Venezuela, Ukraine, polarization

Introduction

Today, public communication is characterized by the intense use of affective language. Partially attributed to the widespread adoption of populist communicative style by political and media actors as well as ordinary citizens (de Vreese et al. 2018), it also has to do with the nature of online media, where political communication increasingly takes place. Giving rise to “affective publics” (Papacharissi 2015) and “digital affect cultures” (Döveling, Harju and Sommer 2018), online platforms enable expression of emotions via new digital formats and facilitate formation of networked publics connected via sentiment expressions. Yet, how exactly the use of emotions influences political meaning-making at the time of political upheavals and to what degree it varies between different cultural contexts is a complex question that requires a thorough investigation.

In our article, we address this question by examining the use of internet memes in the course of anti-government protests in Ukraine and Venezuela. Defined by Shifman (2014) as digital content units sharing common features of content and form, internet memes exemplify the affective turn in political communication. Utilizing the combination of visual and verbal elements to stir affect, memes effectively mobilize the audience and instrumentalize emotions for distributing their message (Milner 2013). Affective potential of memes is further amplified by the creative remixing of recognized cultural symbols, including the ones related to the past (Smit, Heinrich and Broersma 2018). By evoking strong feelings associated with the past, memes increase the audience's engagement with the present and influence public perceptions of history by re-interpreting it for the sake of current politics (Makhortykh 2015).

Unlike Western countries, which until now remain a main subject on academic inquiry on the nexus between memes, emotions and politics¹, Ukraine and Venezuela are characterized by limited media

¹ See, for instance, Milner (2013), Shifman (2014), Smit, Heinrich and Broersma (2018).

freedom. Under these conditions, online media turn into an integral space for cultural and political self-expression, where distinct practices of (memetic) content production serve as a public commentary. The importance of these practices increases at the time of political upheavals, when proponents and opponents of the regime utilize them to mobilize supporters and narrate the ongoing events. With their impressive speed of dissemination and extensive reach, internet memes are powerful elements of both political and mnemonic meaning-making.

In the article, we discuss three aspects of using internet memes at the time of political unrest in Ukraine and Venezuela. Firstly, we examine how these elements of digital culture were employed to represent and interpret anti-government protests in Ukraine (2013-2014) and Venezuela (2019) and compare how their use differed between opponents and proponents of the regime. Secondly, we explore the purpose served by internet memes in the context of the protest campaigns and discuss the role of virulent affective content in the political communication strategies. Finally, we look at the relationship between internet memes and historical remembrance and its role in the process of constructing political and cultural identities in the course of protest campaigns.

Theoretical background

Phenomenon of Internet memes

In the past years, the concept of a meme has been approached by many researchers. The existing scholarship can be divided into two broad threads: the content- and behaviour-centered memetics. The former approach (Dawkins 1976; Dennett 1995) approaches memes as pieces of information that reside in the brain and are disseminated via various media such as images, texts or rituals. The second thread (Distin 2004) perceives memes as behaviors and artifacts produced by these ideas rather than ideas themselves. For behaviour-centered memetics, the medium and the meme itself share an intrinsic relationship: the meme does not exist outside events, practices, and texts in which it appears.

The rise of digital media and the growing number of means for creating and remixing digital content signified the beginning of a new life for the concept. Wiggings and Browers (2015, 1903) synthesize the content- and behaviour-centered memetic and define memes as remixed and iterated messages which are rapidly spread by the means of participatory culture. Shifman (2014) defines internet memes as groups of digital content units serving as collective creative expressions through which cultural and political identities are communicated. Compared with analogue memes, internet memes have faster reproduction rate that enables their viral distribution.

Shifman (2014) lists six qualities that contribute to the virality of internet memes: positivity, high arousal emotions, packaging, prestige, positioning and participation. Because of these qualities, internet memes have become a highly popular form of online communication which does not only facilitate production of affective digital content, but also serves as an important means of representing both the past and the present views on societal matters. By studying how internet memes are used to communicate popular feelings about ongoing political processes, we can better understand the relationship between politics and digital emotions and scrutinize the relationship between individual creativity and collective self-expression (Silvestri 2018, 3998).

Internet memes and political communication

In addition to their intrinsic qualities, the popularity of internet memes can be partly attributed to the changes in political communication. The ongoing rise of populism is accompanied by the intense use of polarizing messages used by political actors to demonstrate that they are not constrained by political norms and mobilize their supporters (Ott 2017). The use of emotional attacks and reliance on negative identity constructions are two common strategies used by populist parties in the Western democracies. Under these conditions, internet memes become particularly effective means of communication, which allow different types of actors to embed polarizing statements into entertainment content and combine aggressive messages with a humorous and amateurish tone.

The ability of internet memes to engage with the wide audiences in a humorous way, while communicating “deadly serious” (Shifman 2014, 1290) topics makes them an integral form of political commentary. The turn from legacy media towards more amateurish information sources (e.g. one’s personal network on social media) amplified the memes’ use for distributing political messages. By enabling more agency for ordinary internet users (Wiggings and Bowers 2015, 1896), memes facilitate the transition from passive consumers of political information to active prosumers using memetic content as a commentary and a means of self-expression (see, for instance, Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Burgess 2008; Shifman 2014).

These reasons also contribute to the frequent use of internet memes during protest campaigns. Being able to convey a variety of social, cultural, and political meanings and simultaneously arouse affective reactions in interpersonal settings, memes are effective means of constructing protesters’ identity and mobilizing their supporters (Bozkuş 2016). In the case of identity-building, memes enable new modes of presentation and facilitate the distribution of the protesters’ message across the borders and platforms to make it visible for the large number of internet users. Often, this process involves the adoption and re-mixing of global cultural elements to produce new hybrid protest identities transcending the local context and appealing to a broader audience (Shifman 2014).

In the case of mobilization, memes combine emotionally charged messages with a polyvocal manner of communication that makes them appealing to the large segments of the audience (Milner 2013). Using memes as a rhetorical device, protesters can bring together citizens and mobilize support for the collective actions in the public sphere (Bozkuş 2016). Examples of realization of such mobilizing potential vary from Occupy Wall Street movement (Milner 2013) to the presidential elections in the US in 2016 (Ross and Rivers 2017). At the same time, it would be incorrect to assume that this function can be employed only by counter-public actors as memes also increasingly used to reinforce official political discourse (Makhortykh 2015).

The complex interplay between different functions and political affiliations in the memes production and distribution as well as the implications of this interplay for the role of memes as a means of political communication is a subject of particular interest for our study. The use of internet memes can, indeed, facilitate the communication and understanding between different societies, but it can also increase the polarization within divided communities. Within the political environment, memetic content has significant rhetoric potential that allows citizens to “to participate in collective actions,

while maintaining their sense of individuality" (Shifman 2014, 129). The question is to what degree this potential is realized and if it can also be abused.

Internet memes and historical remembrance

The increasing use of internet memes as a means of political communication has implications for the societal perception of both the present and the past. By re-mixing and re-activating historical memories for the sake of present, memes contextualize the ongoing developments and enhance the emotional load of their messages by relating to the past sorrows and triumphs. By doing so, memes help audiences to interpret the current events by offering new perspectives in the process of meaning-making (Silvestri 2018, 3998), but also influencing the societal perception of the past which is being reused for memes' production (Makhortykh 2015).

The instrumentalization of the past via memes intensifies at the time of political upheavals, when references towards specific historical episodes can amplify the affective potential of a message and facilitate its interpretation. Smit, Heinrich and Broersma (2018) highlight three common ways in which historical memory and memes interact at the time of protests. Firstly, memes enable re-mixing of the past and present and increase the virality of the meme via recognizable cultural references. Secondly, memes serve as mnemonic building blocks for the identity of protest movements by situating their actions within historical context and legitimizing their demands. Finally, memes can promote polarized and antagonistic representation of the past by instrumentalizing controversial historical episodes for stirring affect among the audience.

All these forms of interaction between memory and memes involve a dialogue with existing cultural texts codifying the societal perception of the past (Laineste and Voolaid 2017, 44). In this way, internet memes also serve as an entry point for re-assessing the past and its discussing its present interpretations. The possibility of using memes for mnemonic meaning-making is particularly relevant for the countries with fractured memory regimes, where citizens have limited capabilities for influencing public historical discourse because of the intense instrumentalization of the past by political elites (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 17). The processes of memory revisionism intensify at the time of political upheavals, when the current state of power relationships in society (including the symbolic control of elites over the past) is challenged. Yet, similar to the use of memes for political resistance, the memetic revisions of the past can be counteracted by the opposing party employing memes to promote official memory narratives.

Methodology

Data collection

To implement our study, we collected memes used during two online protest campaigns: the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine (2013-2014) and anti-Maduro protests in Venezuela (2019). In the case of Ukraine, we extracted memes from two online communities on Vkontakte, the country's most popular social networking site at the time of protests. The first community - Euromaidan (<https://vk.com/club64920284>) - was run by supporters of anti-government protesters, whereas the second - Anti-Maidan (<https://vk.com/antimaydan>) - was supporting pro-government forces. The

choice of these communities was attributed to them serving as prominent spaces for discussing the protests in Ukraine (Gaufman 2017). From each of two communities, we extracted 200 memes (duplicates were dropped) produced in the period from January 20 till February 1 2014².

In the case of Venezuela, we observed less meme-making activities and did not find online communities which could serve as a single source of pro- or anti-Maduro memes. Because of the more dispersed mimetic activity, we had to collect data from multiple communities across different platforms. We used search queries for two major social media platforms in Venezuela - Facebook and Twitter - to identify communities publishing memes related to the protests from 23 January till 10 March 2019. Examples of communities which were used in the study include Venezuela Libre (<https://www.facebook.com/venezuelagianni/>) and Voluntad Popular (<https://twitter.com/voluntadpopular>). Together, we collected 113 pro-Maduro memes, 231 anti-Maduro memes and 56 memes without a distinct political affiliation.

Data analysis

Similar to earlier studies (Makhortykh 2015), we used inductive coding to identify features of internet memes relevant for our study. We focused on three sets of features: 1) content: features related to memes' content in general; 2) political: features related to memes' content in the context of political communication; and 3) historical: features related to memes' content in the context of historical remembrance.

The content-related features included characteristics related to the visual representation of the subject in question. The first three characteristics deal with the meme's general format and are mutually exclusive: 1) only image: memes made by visual content only; 2) only text: memes made by verbal content only; and 3) image and text: memes combining both verbal and visual elements. Then, we coded the presence/absence of specific particular visual elements, in particular the ones referencing popular culture, which constitute memes in questions; this classification is not mutually exclusive as memes can combine several different elements: 1) obscene language: memes including obscene language such as *gavno* (feces in Ukrainian); 2) graphic content: memes including graphic images (e.g. dead bodies); 3) political figures: memes including images of politicians (e.g. Maduro); 4) newspaper cartoon: memes including images similar to a newspaper comic strip; 5) animated cartoon: i.e. memes including images similar to animated cartoons (e.g. Dragon Ball); 6) movie references : i.e. memes including references to movies (e.g. Terminator).

The politics-related features included characteristics dealing with the meme's function. We identified five possible functions none which is mutually exclusive: 1) humour: memes serving entertainment purposes; 2) sarcasm: memes entertainment purposes, but having a bitter/darker component to it; 3) criticism: memes criticising a political figure and/or political force; 4) polarization: memes emphasising the divide within a given society; 5) propaganda: memes mobilizing the audience to support a political figure and/or political force.

² The period corresponds to the increase of protest activity, following the beginning of intense clashes between protesters and police in the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv, and the first deaths among protesters.

The history-related features included references to specific historical episodes/periods used to amplify the message behind the meme. We identified six categories of historical references: 1) early Modernity: memes referencing events from the 15th and 16th century (e.g. the rise of Zaporozhian Sich); 2) 19th century: memes referencing events from the 19th century (e.g. Latin American Wars of Independence); 3) 20th century: memes referencing events happening in the 20th century (except specific episodes listed below; e.g. Stalinist repressions); 4) WWII: memes referencing the Second World War; 5) Caracazo: memes referencing a series of riots in Venezuela in 1989; 6) post-1991: memes referencing events following the end of the Cold War (e.g. NATO bombings of Yugoslavia).

Findings

Content features of internet memes

We started our analysis by examining general content features of memes used during the protests in Ukraine and Venezuela. Similar to earlier studies (Makhortykh 2015), we found that the majority of memes (86%, see Tab. 1) combined verbal and visual elements. Such distribution of formats can be attributed to rather commonsensical reasons: in contrast to image- or text-only memes, the combination of verbal and visual elements facilitates remixing of existing media texts (e.g. photos or screengrabs (Nowak 2016)) by integrating them with new verbal descriptions (e.g. jokes or slogans).

Table 1. Content-based characteristics of memes

Category	Ukraine		Venezuela			Total
	Pro-regime	Anti-regime	Pro-regime	Anti-regime	Neutral	
Image only	11% (22)	14.5% (29)	10% (11)	5% (11)	14% (8)	10% (81)
Text only	4% (8)	4.5% (9)	2% (2)	4% (9)	4% (2)	4% (30)
Image and text	85% (170)	81% (162)	88% (100)	92% (211)	82% (46)	86 % (689)

Unlike general formats of memes which were consistent in both cases, the use of specific visual elements varied significantly between Ukraine and Venezuela, in particular concerning several features such as the presence of politician's images or the use of graphic content. These differences were less significant in the case of different camps coming from the same national context (e.g. pro- and anti-government protesters) and were mainly present on the national level of comparison. Their presence can indicate the embeddedness of memes into the local culture and specific practices of online communication.

Table 2. Visual elements present on memes

Category	Ukraine		Venezuela			Total
	Pro-regime	Anti-regime	Pro-regime	Anti-regime	Neutral	

Obscene language	20% (40)	14.5% (29)	4% (5)	12% (27)	13% (7)	13.5% (108)
Graphic content	32.5% (65)	28.5% (57)	18% (20)	15% (34)	10% (5)	23% (181)
Political figure	14% (28)	23.5% (47)	45% (51)	52% (119)	48% (27)	34% (272)
Newspaper cartoon	7% (14)	14% (28)	5% (6)	5% (12)	0% (0)	7.5% (60)
Animated cartoon	5% (10)	3.5% (7)	2% (2)	11% (26)	13% (7)	6.5% (52)
Movie reference	4% (8)	5.5% (11)	0	2% (4)	3% (2)	3% (25)

As shown in Tab. 2, 48% of Venezuelan memes contained the image of a politician varying from contemporary Latin American actors (e.g. Evo Morales) to North American (e.g. Donald Trump) to historical European (e.g. Adolf Hitler) and Latin American (e.g. Simon Bolivar) personalities. The largest number of memes showed Nicolás Maduro and Juan Guaidó, but there was also a number of images showing Donald Trump. Usually these images were used to ridicule or to glorify a specific politicians, thus aligning with criticism/propaganda functions. Two examples of similarly looking glorifying memes are shown on Fig. 1: the image to the left shows Guaidó with a signature “Venezuela can not stand it anymore. President, ask for military intervention. Image to the right shows Maduro against the backdrop of his followers with a signature “HandsOffVenezuela”.



Figure 1: Political figure memes from Venezuela

Unlike Venezuela, only 19% of Ukrainian memes showed images of political actors. The majority of them were Ukrainian ones: these included Viktor Yanukovich and three opposition leaders: Klichko, Yatseniuk and Tiagnybok. Occasionally, images of Russian (e.g. Vladimir Putin), European (e.g. Herman Van Rompuy) politicians also appeared, but it occurred less frequent compared with Venezuela. Several memes included images of historical political figures, in particular Stalin. Unlike images of contemporary politicians, which were usually used for satirical purposes, historical actors were more frequently presented with awe. Such a distinction can be attributed to the larger resentment towards local political actors among both pro- and anti-government camps in Ukraine and more horizontal nature of Ukrainian protests.

An example of the different uses of political actors' images for memetic purposes in Ukraine are shown on Fig. 2. The image to the left shows Joseph Stalin, the head of the Soviet Union in 1930s-1940s. The modernized image of Stalin sitting on a Soviet bike has a nostalgic feeling to it and is accompanied by a signature: "Can you let me know how to get to Hrushevskogo street [the place of heavy clashes between protesters and police]. I feel that I am missed there". The meme presents Stalin as a caring figure who is willing to restore order in the light of authorities' inability to deal with the unrest. A different attitude is expressed by the image to the right satirizing personal qualities of Ukrainian oppositionaries and their indecisiveness via the following signature: "We have three clear demands: a box of carrots [reference to Yatsenyuk's nickname - i.e. "The Rabbit"], a leather coat of SS officer [reference to Tyagnybok's right-wing attitudes], new boxing gloves, helmet and a mouthguard [reference to Klichko's sport career]"



Figure 2. Political figure memes from Ukraine

The use of graphic elements also varied between Ukrainian and Venezuelan memes. In the case of Venezuela, around 14% of memes included graphic elements, varying from nudity and weapons to scenes of fighting. The presence of such elements served as an effective means of stirring affect among the audience. Many of these memes included references to Caracazo massacres in 1989, whereas others showed more generalized images of human suffering (e.g. malnourished children) as shown on Fig. 3. The meme to the left uses the image of Caracazo victims to stigmatize anti-government protesters. It is accompanied with a signature "3.000 oppositioners dead. This "democracy" liked the Yankees and the media were silent." The image to the right approximately also criticizes opponents of Maduro by contrasting starving children from Africa with Venezuelan kids and stating "Media made you believe that Venezuela needs more help than Africa".



Figure 3. Graphic content memes from Venezuela

The use of graphic content was more intense in the case of Ukraine, where 30.5% of memes included images of violence. The higher visibility of graphic content compared with Venezuela can be attributed to the peak of violence during the time when Ukrainian memes were collected together with the higher polarization of the Ukrainian society. Under these conditions, a number of Ukrainian memes includes images similar to the one shown on Fig. 4. The meme to the right was used by pro-government camp to dehumanize anti-government protesters by presenting them as opponents of traditionalistic values and symbolically connecting them with Nazi Germany by putting them against images of Soviet soldiers. The signature under the meme says “Wait until these bastards will get closer, Misha”.

The meme to the left on the same figure comes from anti-government camp and shows a burning serviceman of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs. The meme sarcastically addresses their suffering by describing it as “an act of self-inflammation committed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs serviceman as a protest against his criminal orders”. Similar to another meme on the same figure, its main function is related to the societal polarization and can be viewed as a form of dehumanization of the opposing side.



Figure 4. Graphic content memes from Ukraine

Finally, we examined the use of existing cultural texts which were remixed for producing memes used in Ukraine and Venezuela. The distribution of original texts' formats here was rather similar between Ukraine and Venezuela (with the single exception of higher use of animated cartoons for anti-government memes in Venezuela), but the specific choices of text varied significantly and reflected local cultural specifics. Ukrainian memes were usually relying on Soviet cultural texts, whereas Venezuelan ones more frequently employed texts related to global popular culture (e.g. Japanese manga or US sitcoms). An illustrative example is provided on Fig. 5: the meme to the left comes from Ukraine and refers to a classic Soviet war movie "Come and See" (the reference is reflected in a signature which reads as "Sit and See"). By contrast, the meme to the right from Venezuela used as scene from Dragon Ball animated series to emphasize the stability of Venezuela against "robbers from other countries".



Figure 5. Cartoon and movie references in Ukraine and Venezuela memes

Politics-related features

Following our examination of memes' general features, we analyzed the functions of the memes. While memes are often discussed as purely entertainment content (Burgess 2008), in our sample humour- or sarcasm-related functions were not the most frequent one (see Table 3). While these functions were rather common, in particular among anti-government memes which often employed humour/sarcasm to criticize corrupt authorities and their supporters (see, for instance, Fig. 4.2), the majority of memes went beyond purely entertainment functions.

Table 3. Politics-related features

Category	Ukraine		Venezuela			Total
	Pro-regime	Anti-regime	Pro-regime	Anti-regime	Neutral	
Humour	15.5% (31)	30.5% (61)	13% (14)	36% (83)	66% (37)	28% (226)
Sarcasm	29% (58)	29.5% (59)	14% (16)	30% (70)	27% (15)	27% (218)
Criticism	10.5% (21)	19.5% (39)	58% (65)	59% (136)	12.5% (7)	33.5% (268)
Polarization	29.5% (59)	16.5% (33)	35% (40)	26% (61)	10% (5)	25% (198)

Propaganda	60% (120)	36.5% (73)	69% (78)	44% (101)	14% (8)	47.5% (380)
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The function which was the most common both among Ukrainian and Venezuelan memes was propaganda. It was particularly present among pro-government memes, which often propagated the ideology of the regime and praised its defenders. Such memes often featured propagandist slogans (e.g. HandsOffVenezuela or RussialsWithYou) and included symbolic elements such as national emblems of Ukraine and Venezuela or Soviet/US flags (for Venezuelan examples see Fig. 1). The purpose of these memes was to stir positive affect among the audience and mobilize their support towards a propagated cause

Two examples of the propagandist memes are shown on Fig. xx. The one to the right comes from the pro-government camp in Ukraine and shows a row of members of the special police unit with a signature “These are the true heroes of Ukraine”. The one to the left is coming from pro-government camp shows expressions of support to the Maduro regime coming from the different parts of the world.



Figure 6. Propaganda-related memes

While anti-government camp also used internet memes for propaganda purposes, the distinct feature which differentiated anti-government memes (in particular, Ukrainian ones) was their frequent use of criticism function. While in Venezuela approximately an equal number of memes criticized state officials and oppositionary politicians, in the Ukrainian case significantly more memes expressed criticism of the government personalities, in particular Yanukovych. Such memes usually involved the use of sarcasm and emotional statements to make the criticism more viral.

Fig. 7 shows examples of criticism memes used in the two countries. The image to the left comes from Ukraine and shows President Yanukovych with bloodied hands. The signature under the image says “The hands did not kill anyone”. The sarcastic contradiction between the image and the signature emphasizing that Yanukovych is both a murderer and a liar is amplified by the references towards the famous statement by previous President Yushenko “These hands did not steal anything”.

To the right, a similar image is shown coming from Venezuela. Featuring Maduro and Diosdado Cabello, the President of the National Constituent Assembly, presented in the form of diabolical creatures the meme also blames officials for being cruel liars. The signatures refer to statements made by Maduro and Cabello in relation to the repelled attempt of opposition to bring humanitarian aid to the country from Colombia and read as “Celebrate, we won ‘the war’!” and “We stopped ‘the invasion’!” The celebrating officials are contrasted with the images of starving and sick children in the bottom of the meme.



Fig. 7. Criticism-related memes

The last memetic function which was rather frequently used both by pro- and anti-government camp was related to polarization. Unlike memes criticising specific political actors such as Yanukovych or Maduro, polarisation memes attacked the large categories of population by stigmatizing them for their political preferences and stirred divide within a country. Such memes were effective, but also highly problematic means of mobilization which was more often employed by the pro-government camp. Such memes often appealed to the moral values by presenting the current political conflict as a binary confrontation between “the Good” and “the Evil”.

Two examples of such polarizing memes are shown on Fig. 8. The meme to the left comes from Ukraine and shows the political confrontation in the country as the struggle between the biblical forces. The Western part of Ukraine with more active support to anti-Yanukovych protesters and strong pro-Western sentiment is shown as the one captured by Devil. By contrast, the Eastern and pro-Russian side is shown as the one affiliated with God. Such a choice of binary oppositions affiliates with strong traditionalist sentiments often expressed by pro-government memes (see, for instance, Fig. 4).

In the case of anti-government meme from Venezuela to the right, Maduro supporters are compared with German Nazi. The choice of comparison here can be attributed to two factors: firstly, Nazism is referred as a symbol of totalitarianism and universal Evil. Secondly, the emphasis on anti-Western

sentiment of Maduro’s supporters is important to contrast them with pro-Guaidó protesters advocating for cooperation with the West. Such interpretation aligns with the general tendency of presenting Maduro as opponent of Western liberal values by anti-government campaign.



Fig. 8. Polarisation-related memes

History-related features

The last part of our analysis dealt with history-related features of internet memes. As shown in Tab. 5, these features were more frequently used in the case of Ukraine (25% of all memes compared with 17% for Venezuela). The same table also shows that selection of historical references varied significantly between the two cases and different camps involved in them. Some historical references were used only in one country (Early Modernity in Ukraine) or only by a single side (Caracazo by pro-government side in Venezuela). The use of other references (WWII) was distributed highly unequally: only 5% of related memes were used in Venezuela, whereas other 95% were employed in Ukraine. These observations can be attributed to the different cultural memory traditions, in which specific episodes of the past have varying degrees of prominence and, thus, different mobilizing potential.

Table 5. History-related features

Category	Ukraine		Venezuela			Total
	Pro-regime	Anti-regime	Pro-regime	Anti-regime	Neutral	
Early Modernity	10	7	0	0	0	18
19th century	4	2	4	5	0	27
WWII	42	17	0	3	0	62
20th century	10	3	11	8	0	49
Caracazo	0	0	16	0	0	16
Post-1991	5	0	9	10	0	5

Despite different selection of historical references, we observed similarities in the ways these references were employed. Both pro-Maduro and pro-Yanukovich camps frequently used references to traumatic and polarizing episodes related to the mass violence such as Caracazo and WWII. By actualizing these memories and the stirring affect associated with them to present the protests as a source of insecurity similar to the one associated with the violent past, they mobilized their supporters and at the same time dehumanized the opponents. Examples of such memes are shown on Fig. 9.



Fig 9. Caracazo and WWII memes

The Venezuelan meme to the left shows pre-Chavez government officials (old white males) against the bloodied backdrop with a signature “Opposition’s economic plan can return Venezuela to the era of Caracazo”. The reference affectively relates opposition with memory of the historical suffering and suggests that its purpose is the revival of the bloodshed. The meme to the right comes from Ukraine and relates pro-Western anti-regime protesters to the Nazi Germany, presenting them as servants of Fashington (Fashism + Washington). Using a symbolic image of a human skull, it also emphasizes existential threat to Ukraine from them.

While anti-government protesters also occasionally employed references to the traumatic past to dehumanize their opponents (see Fig. xxx), their use of the past was more diverse. In Venezuela, anti-regime protesters often sarcastically re-appropriated memories to criticize the regime. Such re-appropriations usually involved older memories related to the Venezuelan War of Independence in the 19th century. These memes often featured the image of Simón Bolívar, a national hero of Venezuela, whose status as a moral authority was instrumentalized to criticize Maduro’s regime and support the protesters’ demands. An example of such meme is found on Fig. 10, where Bolívar looks at Maduro and asks him what he has done to his country.



Fig 10. Early Modernity and 19th century memes

In the case of Ukraine, anti-government camp used references to the Early Modernity for the similar purpose, albeit the sarcastic component was less pronounced. Instead, references to the past were used to emphasize the legitimacy of protesters' demands by relating them to the positively charged historical images such as the ones of the Zaporozhian Cossacks. Often references in the Ukrainian historiography as the fierce fighters for the Ukrainian independence, Cossacks were featured on several memes directed against the regime; one of them is shown on Fig xx. The meme shows a colourful image of a Cossack fighter with a signature "The time for justice is coming. Euromaidan".

An interesting case is represented by references to the 20th century, which were used by both pro- and anti-government sides in the two countries. The majority of these references dealt with the socialist memories and often featured prominent historical personalities, in particular anti-Western ones (e.g. Stalin, Castro, Noriega), associated with it. Depending on the camp, these references were used either for propaganda (e.g. by emphasizing Maduro's loyalty to socialist ideas) or criticism purposes (e.g. by relating Yanukovich to the failed Soviet system).



Fig 11. 20th century memes

Fig xx shows two examples of these memes coming from the anti-government camp in Ukraine and Venezuela. The meme to the left comes from Ukraine and combines the image of protests in Kyiv with a TV showing Swan Lake ballet. The broadcasts of Swan Lake were usually used in the Soviet Union at the time of political upheavals, most notable after the death of Brezhnev and the unsuccessful Soviet coup d'etat in 1991 preceding the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The reference both presents Yanukovich as a remnant of the Soviet system antagonistic to Ukraine and hits to his ultimate demise.

The meme to the right from Venezuela also draws parallels between the 20th century and the current time, but does it more in a comparative than metaphorical manner. The meme compares the number of dead, tortured and exiled during the time of military dictatorship in Venezuela and the Chavist period. By doing so, it emphasises the criminal nature of Maduro's regime and the need to overthrow it.

Conclusions

Our examination showed a number of differences in the way internet memes used during protests in Ukraine and Venezuela were composed. The use of visual elements such as politicians' images and graphic content varied significantly and reflected specific features of the respective protest campaigns (e.g. more vertical-based and less violent protests in Venezuela and more horizontal-based and more violent confrontation in Ukraine). We also observed profound differences in relation to cultural references used to produce protest-related memes (Western mass cultural in the case of Venezuela and Soviet mass culture in the case of Ukraine) that points to the large degree of national embeddedness of internet memes and affective reactions stimulated by them.

Unlike memes' general features, we observed cross-national similarities in the politics-related functions of memes and emotions stirred by them in this context. Both in Ukraine and Venezuela, the

anti-government memes often employed sarcasm and humour to creatively criticize the regime and its affiliates. By contrast, pro-government memes more frequently stirred more negative emotions as part of polarization effort used to propagate feelings of anger or repulsion towards their political opponents. In such a way, internet memes were used to construct the negative identity of opposition forces and stigmatize them as puppets of the West or opponents of traditionalist (Ukraine) or socialist (Venezuela) values.

The latter observations also align with our findings concerning the use of historical memories for producing memetic content in the context of protests. Both in Ukraine and Venezuela, pro-government memes frequently instrumentalized hegemonic historical narratives in the respective societies (Caracazo in Venezuela and Second World War in Ukraine). These narratives are important elements of official memory politics in the two countries, so memes served as a means of reinforcing the state's control over the past. The polarizing and highly affective nature of these narratives facilitated the mobilization of the audience by presenting anti-government protests as a possible reiteration of earlier historical tragedies.

Some of the anti-government memes (in particular, in Ukraine) also relied on the same historical narratives as pro-government ones, using historical memories for the sake of polarization. More often, however, they referred to the more distant past (Early Modernity in Ukraine and 19th century in Venezuela) which had less polarizing effect for the society. Such memories were less capable for stirring affect and, thus, had lesser potential for constructing negative identities of opponents (and mobilizing the audience against them). Instead, they were used to provide a commentary on the current political situation using recognizable historical images which were equally appealing both to the opponents and supporters of the regime.

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