

Digital Transformation of Public Life in Russia and Belarus: Dialogue Between the Government and Citizens on New Media Platforms

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Abstract—In the context of the digital transformation of public life, the dialogue between the government and citizens on new digital platforms is actualized. Digital information openness of the authorities is one of the tools to overcome the digital divide. The empirical basis of the study was 15 channels in the Telegram messenger of Russian and Belarusian executive authorities, as well as channels of individual officials. The research was conducted using the TGStat tool. The research methodology was based on a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of content in Telegram channels. The main results of the study show that the use of various features of Telegram by the authorities as a full-fledged media is constantly increasing. It was found that messengers contribute to the creation of a fundamentally new model of public communication between representatives of the government and society. At the same time, it is noted that for the executive authorities in Russia and Belarus, interaction with the audience is not the cornerstone of their digital strategy on Telegram. Most public authorities use the messenger as a one-way communication channel. This data reveals new evidence of how the authorities are using Telegram as a tool for dialogue between government and citizens. The authors conclude that new digital channels in the near future will allow public authorities to build an effective system of communication with the population on the basis of Internet platforms.

Keywords—public life, messengers, Telegram, social media, audience, engagement.

I. INTRODUCTION

Prospective directions of digitalization of public life in recent years are becoming the subject of a number of scientific studies. Attracting the attention of the audience has become the main objective of the media in the modern digital environment. "To achieve this aim, more personalised content is now being produced, and attempts are being made to reach the user in a more direct and personal way through instant messaging platforms, especially Telegram" [1, p. 95]. In the context of the digital transformation of public life, the process of organizing the dialogue between the government and citizens on new digital platforms comes to the fore. The processes of digitalization create opportunities for the introduction of new forms of interaction between citizens and public authorities. The topic of this research is related to the need to study the increasing role of the Telegram messenger in the system of public life in Russia and Belarus.

As a result of technological transformation, digital platforms have radically changed strategies of content production and distribution, as well as technologies of public life. Following foreign researchers, by platforms we mean "digital infrastructures with affordances that offer diverse

kinds of information and communication, and opportunities to produce, publish and engage with content" [2, p. 62]. The academic community is discussing the new challenges and risks that platforms pose to traditional media, journalists and audiences. The role that social media platforms play in the dissemination of news is attracting increasing attention from academics. "Questions have been raised about the considerable market power of platforms and their ability to shape the news audiences receive in their feeds" [3, p. 2368].

Until recently, the main channels of interaction between the population and public authorities were personal visits, single days of information, "hot lines", meetings with the population in labor collectives and at the place of residence. There are a number of traditional ways of contacting local executive and administrative bodies. In recent years there is a transition from the model of informing and providing public services to the model of active involvement of citizens through digital platforms in the processes of public administration. The official websites of government bodies in most cases are platforms for one-way information, rather than full-fledged Internet platforms with developed feedback mechanisms. Social networks and messengers contribute to the creation of a fundamentally new model of communication between representatives of state authorities and society. Telegram has the greatest potential in this context.

The topic of this research is related to the need to study the increasing role of the Telegram messenger and digital communications in the system of public life in Russia and Belarus. From a niche messenger for IT-professionals, Telegram has become one of the most popular social platforms. In Russia today, Telegram is the leader among messengers by traffic volume. Analysts predict that in 2023 the service will overtake WhatsApp, its main competitor in Russia, by the number of active accounts. Telegram is already used by 40 % of the Runet audience, and the numbers continue to grow rapidly. In Belarus, Telegram is also the most popular messenger for news and necessary information. Viber and WhatsApp are also among the top three most popular messengers in 2023.

The results of research show that Telegram channels have become a unique tool of communication and influence on public opinion, different from other media channels in social networks [4, 5, 6]. Scientific works emphasize that the decline of interest in official websites and institutional media leads to the need for clear targeting, content segmentation. In these circumstances, mobile messengers, which provide an opportunity to create thematic channels, reflecting the interests of the network audience, become an alternative to

traditional media. In Telegram channels, the unidirectional dissemination of information is being replaced by developed feedback mechanisms.

According to Telegram audience research, there were more than 300,000 channels in Russian-language Telegram in 2021, but half of the users were subscribed to less than 15. The typical user read 5-10 channels, most of which had notifications turned off. News channels were read by four out of five respondents. More than half of the users subscribed to entertainment or educational channels. In Belarus, the study showed the dominance of Minsk among subscribers of major Belarusian media channels. At the same time, 75% of the 70,000 respondents noted that Telegram was their main source of news [7].

II. METHOD AND DATA

The aim of the article is to study the specifics of the dialogue between the government and citizens on new media platforms in Russia and the Republic of Belarus. The Russian sample includes Telegram-channels of administrative centers of each of the federal districts of the country. Since the administrations of Pyatigorsk, Nizhny Novgorod and Yekaterinburg have no relevant media resources on the Telegram messenger platform, five Telegram channels were included in the sample. The empirical basis for the Republic of Belarus were the official Telegram channels of six regional executive committees, the Telegram channel of Minsk City Executive Committee, as well as channels of several mayors and regional governors. The study was conducted in February 2023 using the tool TGStat.

The present study analyzes how Russian and Belarusian authorities produce and distribute content on Telegram, and how they interact with the audience. First of all, such parameters as page maintenance activity, number of subscribers, activity in communication with the population were assessed. We start with the following series of questions related to the object of study: What is the content strategy of the channels, what do they talk about? What formats of content are used? Is the content in the Telegram channel unique or is it hyperlinks to official websites? What tools do the authorities use to interact with the audience? Is it possible to leave comments? Are there surveys in the Telegram feed? What is the general reaction of subscribers to publications? What is the main audience of Telegram channels?

The design of this research was based on a systematic review of the literature, which has resulted in the main contributions to the state of the issue [8, 9, 10]. Firstly, the technique of direct observation was chosen as a strategy of the scientific method. Second, we used analysis from tgstat.com, which is the largest analytics service for more than 1,2 million Telegram channels and chat rooms, tracking more than 25 million new postings daily. The observation period was from January to February 2023. The exploratory unit of analysis, which was the object to be studied, was comprised of 15 channels in the Telegram messenger of Russian and Belarusian executive authorities, as well as their ongoing behaviour and attributes on this application.

III. RESULTS

For a pilot study of the main channels of interaction between the population and state authorities in the Russian Federation on the Telegram platform, the channels of the administrative centers of each of the federal districts of the

country were selected. In the Central Federal District - the channel "City of Moscow" (@mosrutop) of the Moscow government (15797 subscribers), in the North-West - "Information Management" (@pressmol) of the administration of St. Petersburg (4278 people), in the South - "Administration of the City of Rostov-on-Don" (@Rostov_Gorod_Admin) - 1311 subscribers, in Siberian - "Mayor's Office of Novosibirsk" (@nsk54_official) with an audience of 2803 people, in the Far East - "Administration of Vladivostok" (@adm_vl) with an indicator of 13205 subscribers.

It is important to note that on the official portal of the executive power of the administrative center of the North Caucasian Federal District - the city of Pyatigorsk, there is no link to the official Telegram channel. Only links to the sites Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, Twitter, My World and LiveJournal are presented. Also, a link to the Telegram channel available to visitors is not provided on the official website of the administration of Yekaterinburg. There are no links to social networks at all on the website of the administration of Nizhny Novgorod, which is the center of the Volga Federal District (Table 1).

TABLE. I. TELEGRAM CHANNELS OF THE EXECUTIVE AUTHORITIES OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE CENTERS OF THE FEDERAL DISTRICTS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, FEBRUARY 2023

Channel name	Address	Number of subscribers	Engagement, %	Citation Index
Moscow City	@mosrutop	15797	28,0	277,2
Information Management	@pressmol	4278	18,0	129,2
Administration of the city of Rostov-on-Don	@Rostov_Gorod_Admin	1311	34,0	4,0
Mayor's Office of Novosibirsk	@nsk54_official	2803	60,0	15,7
Administration of Vladivostok	@adm_vl	13205	37,0	132,6

The top three most popular publications of the Moscow City channel as of the end of February 2023 include a post about the restoration of the Khludov-Panteleev house, the announcement of "the Unizversky Quest" intellectual competition, which was held by the Moscow Zoo on student day, as well as information about the upcoming chess in the centers of Moscow longevity. However, as can be seen from Table 2, the activity of the audience is rather low. The number of views is hundreds and thousands of times greater than the number of reposts and reactions. There are no comments under these posts, as the corresponding opportunity for the audience is disabled.

TABLE. II. AUDIENCE INDICATORS OF THE MOST POPULAR POSTS OF THE CHANNELS OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE CENTERS OF THE FEDERAL DISTRICTS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2023

Channel name	Post content	Number of views, thousand	Number of reactions	Number of re-posts	Number of comments
Mocow City	Restoration of the Khludov-Panteleev house	13,8	42	16	0
	"Unizversky Quest"	11,1	16	15	0
	Chess tournament	11,1	19	9	0
Infor-mation Mana-gement	Weather conditions on January 30	4,9	0	25	0
	Weather conditions on February 12	4,6	0	22	0
	Appointment of the head of the district	3,7	0	39	0
Admini-stration of the city of Rostov-on-Don	100th anniversary of G. Balaev, concert	1,9	12	4	0
	Snow removal, February 14	1,5	11	13	0
	Telethon "Everything for victory"	1,3	9	5	0
Mayor's Office of Novo-sibirsk	Relocation of the collection point	6,6	24	45	0
	Accommodation of victims	3,4	26	25	0
	Collection of humanitarian aid	2,9	13	40	0
Administration of Vladi-vostok	Transport network update	33,6	22	37	349
	Bus fare increase	16,5	19	197	234
	Movement restriction	16,1	18	20	0

A similar situation with comments is also observed in the St. Petersburg channel of the Information Department. In addition, it is not possible for subscribers to send reactions to messages in this channel. The most popular posts in terms of the number of views were publications about the expected yellow level of weather danger on January 30 and February 12, respectively, as well as information on the appointment of Andrey Kononov as head of the administration of the Kronstadt district on February 20.

The ability to comment on the channel "Administration of the city of Rostov-on-Don" is also limited. The most popular publications from the beginning of the year were the message about the concert in honor of the 100th anniversary of the birth of the composer and arranger Georgy Mikhailovich Balaev on January 25, the report on the work of public utilities in the snowfall on January 14, presented by the deputy head of the city administration for housing and communal services Alexei Pikalov and the announcement telethon "Everything for Victory", which will be held live on the TV channel "Don24" on February 21, published on the 9th of the same month.

All the publications most in demand since the beginning of 2023 among the audience of the Novosibirsk City Hall channel are related to the partial collapse of a house on Lineinaya Street, which occurred on February 9 as a result of a gas explosion. They were published on the same date. The administration effectively used the media platform and this group in order to promptly inform and organize the fire victims, which is confirmed by the high rates of the number of reposts. The most popular posts were: information about the collection of humanitarian aid for residents affected by the collapse of the house, the decision to accommodate residents from the damaged building in the Severnaya Hotel, as well as the publication that the temporary collection point for humanitarian aid, which was deployed at the school No. 85, carried over.

The Telegram channel "Administration of Vladivostok" is of the greatest interest in terms of the activity of subscribers in the comments. Despite the fact that representatives of executive authorities do not publish responses to subscribers' comments and do not participate in discussions initiated by the audience, such openness of

authorities brings positive results. The channel's citation index is one of the highest among those analyzed and is second only to the indicators of the capital group. The number of subscribers is also comparable to the audience of the City of Moscow channel - 15,797 and 13,205 people, respectively. At the same time, the population of Vladivostok is only 5 % of the population of Moscow.

The most popular publications among the residents of Primorye were publications on the renewal of the rolling stock of ground transport (February 15), indexation of fares in public transport (February 16) and a post on the restriction of traffic through a railway crossing located near Uspensky Street, dated January 23.

As a result of the study, it can be concluded that the most effective tool for interaction between the executive authorities and the population in Telegram channels is the use of the functionality of these sites not only for the purpose of unilaterally informing about the events taking place in the municipality, but also for the purpose of providing "platforms for statements" to the public. Despite the lack of feedback from the authorities and responses to comments, a channel with an open commenting option demonstrates significantly higher audience engagement rates than channels with similar quality content, but without such an opportunity. The channels used by the municipal administration to overcome crisis situations - informing and organizing the population - are also characterized by high audience involvement. At the same time, most of the channels in terms of functionality are "traditional municipal media" on a new platform, inferior in terms of audience indicators, as well as the quality and quantity of content to regional commercial channels that inform about the life of the municipality.

The channels of six regional executive committees were selected on the Telegram platform to study the specifics of interaction between the population and public authorities in the Republic of Belarus - Brest (@brestoik), Vitebsk (@vitebsk_region_officially), Gomel (@gomel_region_gov), Grodno (@pul_4region), Minsk (@minsk_region1), Mogilev (@reMogilev), Minsk city executive committee channel (@minskiygorispolkom). The channels of the mayor of Brest (@Rogachuk), Gomel (@VAPrivalov) and the Telegram

channel of the governor of the Mogilev region (@isachenkobel) were also studied (Table 3).

TABLE. III. TELEGRAM CHANNELS OF THE REGIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES AND GOVERNORS OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS, FEBRUARY 2023

Channel name	Address	Number of subscribers	Engagement, %	Citation Index
Brest Regional Executive Committee	@brestoik	4550	67	43,2
Vitebsk region. Officially	@vitebsk_region_officially	3623	59	50,6
Gomel region officially	@gomel_region_gov	9082	44	118,7
Pul 4 Region	@pul_4region	3039	203	71,8
Minsk Region About the Main	@minsk_region1	4400	94	41,5
RM - Mogilev Region News	@reMogilev	952	16	72,7
Minsk City Executive Committee	@minskiygorispolkom	5697	57	147,9
Alexander Rogachuk	@Rogachuk	11591	54	71,4
Vladimir Privalov. Officially	@VAPrivalov	6183	81	37
Isachenko ONLINE	@isachenkobel	1518	542	12,5

The number of subscribers to the Telegram channel of the Brest Regional Executive Committee @brestoik was 4550 people. We should not exclude the influx of subscribers. For example, according to TGStat statistics, from December 27 to 30, 2022, the increase in the number of subscribers was 1,330 people. Anyway, the channel relies on short news and photo collections. Occasionally a video is published. Among the advantages of the channel we can mention simple language, friendly communication with the audience. Unique content is made for the channel, and there are practically no links to the "parent" site. There are also no reposts from other channels, all content is author's. Each post can be evaluated by reaction. There is no opportunity to comment. Each post contains the hashtag #iregion.

The official Telegram channel "Vitebsk region. Officially" @vitebsk_region_officially (3623 subscribers). The posts are more reminiscent of brief informational notes with photos. The variety of formats is not great, texts and photos are used more often. The editors of the channel put emoji at the beginning of each sentence. The posts often contain references to the publications of the city newspaper Vitsibichi and the BelTA news agency. Links to the website of the Vitebsk Regional Executive Committee are rarely used. There is no communication with the audience, the channel uses the strategy of broadcasting rather than communication.

The "Gomel region officially" channel has the largest number of subscribers among the examined sites. @gomel_region_gov (9082). The statistics of the TGStat analytical service, however, show that only 44 % of them regularly read the channel's posts. As we can see, a large number of subscribers does not necessarily mean that the content reaches all of them. You need to look at the reach of the publications. The high citation index (118,7) of this channel indicates that the posts are often reposted. We

believe that the Gomel Regional Executive Committee views this channel exclusively as a means of broadcasting official information, which makes communication with the audience unidirectional. One can often find quite voluminous texts on the channel, as well as reposts of publications of other state channels. In our opinion, regional officials and employees of budgetary institutions are the main audience of such channels. The analysis shows that ordinary citizens of Gomel Region do not actively follow the channel "Gomel region officially".

The most successful of the sources we reviewed is the Telegram channel of the Grodno Regional Executive Committee "Pul 4 Region" @pul_4region (3039 subscribers). In particular, the channel's description immediately caught our eye: "The Governor's PUL to cover the activities of the head of the Grodno Region Vladimir Karanik. Exclusive. Backstage meetings at a high level". According to the TGStat service, the audience engagement ratio is 203 %. This can be explained by the fact that "Pul 4 Region" actively attracts traffic from other Telegram channels. Speaking of content, we can note the great attention to short videos, which are one of the most engaging content formats today. Each post can be evaluated by reaction, but there is no opportunity to comment, as in the three channels discussed earlier.

The channel "Minsk Region | About the Main" @t.me/minsk_region1 is run by the Minsk Regional Executive Committee. It has 4400 subscribers, the engagement rate was 94 %. This figure, again, can be explained by the large number of reposts to other channels. In the profile description, the resource positions itself as follows: "A channel about the Minsk region, the latest and most relevant news. Be aware of all the events of your region!" The content is presented in a fairly light form. The editors of the channel try to address the user with language that is informal and friendly. The text is structured thanks to emoji at the beginning of paragraphs, also a lot of photos and videos are published in the "here and now" format. Each post can not only be evaluated by reaction, but you can also leave a comment on it, but comments are rare.

The Telegram channel of the Mogilev Regional Executive Committee @reMogilev showed the lowest engagement rate among the local government platforms we examined. The number of subscribers to the channel named "RM - Mogilev Region News" is 952 people, of which only 16 % read the posts. This can be explained, in particular, by the insufficient amount of content on their own. The channel very often features reposts of posts from other state channels. There is an official narrative in the posts, and the editors of the channel do not seek to interact with the audience. There is neither opportunity to leave a reaction to the publication, nor to write a comment. Not surprisingly, according to TGStat statistics, the number of subscribers to this channel is decreasing rather than increasing every month.

The official channel of the Minsk City Executive Committee @minskiygorispolkom has a similar broadcasting strategy. Taking into account the population of Minsk (1,94 million people), the number of subscribers is extremely low - only 5697 people. The channel tells about events with the participation of city officials, official meetings of the mayor, etc. There is no possibility to leave an editorial comment to the posts, as well as to write a comment. Thus, the channel is more like a corporate media outlet in its functions.

Let's move on to an analysis of the channels of individual officials. The official Telegram channel of Brest City Executive Committee Chairman Alexander Rogachuk

@Rogachuk was launched in July 2020 and became one of the first Internet resources of its kind in Belarus. At the beginning of 2023, it had 11591 subscribers. It is important to note that the chairman of the Brest City Executive Committee personally runs the channel. Each publication has an average coverage of 54 %. It is not possible to comment on posts in the Telegram channel "Alexander Rogachuk", nor is it possible to add reactions at the moment.

Among the Belarusian channels studied, the Telegram channel of the Chairman of the Gomel City Executive Committee "Vladimir Privalov. Officially." The channel was launched on December 31, 2022, and gained 6183 subscribers in less than two months. "This is by no means a news feed, I see no reason and no point in competing with journalists - they do their job professionally. In my telegram channel I plan to tell what is now on the agenda of the city authorities, to build a feedback line with the citizens, to share my thoughts on various aspects of life in Gomel" - noted Privalov [11]. The channel's news feed is informal in nature, you can leave a reaction to each post, but the possibility of commenting is disabled.

Anatol Isachenko, chairman of the Mogilev Regional Executive Committee, also has his own channel @isachenkobel, which has 1518 subscribers. Unlike the two previous channels, the content here is presented in an official business style. There is no feedback from the audience. Posts are published several times a week. At the same time, the audience engagement rate is 542 %, which is explained by reading the posts outside the channel, for example, as a result of reposting to other channels.

Having analyzed the most popular publications of Belarusian channels in the last 30 days by the number of views, retweets, reposts, comments and reactions, we can distinguish the following patterns.

Most often, local authorities on their Telegram pages talk about working events, important events in the region, meetings with officials and citizens. Many of the posts contain an official narrative. It is not always possible to find posts in Telegram channels in which regional heads talk about solving problems. None of the channels we studied contain polls. Of the ten channels studied, comments are open only in one, but their number is small. This suggests that regional officials, heads and employees of state institutions are a large part of the audience of the studied Telegram channels. Ordinary residents, as a rule, do not actively follow government channels on Telegram.

According to the number of views, the highest positions are taken by posts related to social topics (purchase of new ambulances, construction of hospitals and kindergartens). The audience is also interested in such topics as awarding the winners of various competitions, victories of the region's residents in sports competitions. Popular are posts on the theme of urban improvement. For example, on the channel "Vladimir Privalov. Officially" channel, a post where residents of Gomel were invited to discuss which squares and parks of the city could be decorated with new avenues of chestnuts gathered a lot of reactions (Table 4).

TABLE. IV. AUDIENCE INDICATORS OF THE MOST POPULAR POSTS OF THE CHANNELS OF THE REGIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES AND GOVERNORS OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS, JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2023

Channel name	Post content	Number of views, thousand	Number of reactions	Number of re-posts	Number of comments
Brest Regional Executive Committee	Collegium of the General Directorate of Health	9,7	20	24	0
Vitebsk region. Officially	Awarding the winners of the competition	9,16	10	61	0
Gomel region officially	The ceremonial events	9,9	18	15	0
Pool 4 Region	Construction of significant social facilities	13,8	38	59	0
Minsk Region About the Main	Biathlon competition	7,4	7	24	1
RM - Mogilev Region News	Exhibition "Intellectual Belarus"	7,0	2	54	0
Minsk City Executive Committee	Reception at the deputy	20,8	0	169	0
Alexander Rogachuk	Rising water levels in rivers	10,0	0	28	0
Vladimir Privalov. Officially	Planting chestnuts in the city	2,9	57	3	0
Isachenko ONLINE	Purchase of new ambulances	13,2	0	100	0

Speaking about the type of content distributed, it should be noted that most channels place native formats of materials without links to sites. More often than not, reliance is placed on small short news and photo collections. In many cases, the news is accompanied by graphic symbols at the beginning of the text, which makes the news more enjoyable to read and visual. Recently, short videos have increased in popularity. Posts with videos are highly engaging. We can recommend that local authorities add commenting capabilities to their Telegram feeds. These findings are consistent with previous scientific studies that have found that the concept of attention is crucial [12, 13, 14].

IV. CONCLUSION

As a result of the research we can draw the following conclusions. A comparative analysis of the dialogue between the government and citizens in the Telegram messenger of

the Russian and Belarusian state authorities shows that they are building up their presence in this platform in order to attract the attention of users and expand their reach. Of course, the number of channel subscribers depends on the region's population. If we compare the official communities of Moscow and Minsk mayor's offices, we can note that the channel in the Russian capital pays a lot of attention to city news, while in Belarus it mainly tells about events involving city officials, official meetings of the mayor.

The results of the study showed that in a number of cases, local administrations use Telegram channels exclusively as a means of one-way communication. This strategy was found in Russia in the "Information Management" channel (@pressmol) and in Belarus in the "RM - Mogilev Region News channel" (@reMogilev). We can recognize the most successful model of running the channel that allows for two-way communication with the audience. This model, in

particular, was found in the channels "Administration of Vladivostok" (@adm_vl) and "Vladimir Privalov. Officially" (@VAPrivalov).

Within the framework of this study, attention was also focused on the formats of the content distributed. Both in Russia and Belarus, multimedia resources occupy an increasingly prominent place in Telegram channels. The exception is the channel "Information Management" (@pressmol), which publishes only texts. In many channels, texts are emoji-filled. Some channels identify themselves to the user through a greeting in the morning, this is more typical for Russia. Also in the Russian Telegram channels of the authorities one can often find infographics, while this content format is absent in the Belarusian channels.

Overall, the study concludes that for state authorities in Belarus and Russia, interaction with the audience is not a key factor in their Telegram strategy. More often than not, the authorities use a one-way communication model. Although they value the characteristics and technical capabilities offered by Telegram (multimedia features, mass distribution, etc.), only a small number of the public authorities analysed adapt their content and try to strengthen ties with users.

We see the prospects of this study in the comparative analysis of new trends and innovations caused by the wide spread of the Telegram platform and its impact on the information support of the authorities not only in the Russian-Belarusian, but also in the international context.

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