

Kaleidoscopic Patterns of Protest: Qualifying and Quantifying Visual and Textual (Self-)Representations in Eastern European Protest Cultures

Howanitz, Gernot

gernot.howanitz@uibk.ac.at
U of Innsbruck, Austria

Kaltseis, Magdalena

magdalena.kaltseis@uibk.ac.at
U of Innsbruck, Austria

Motivation

This poster presentation aims to introduce the project ‘Kaleidoscopic Patterns of Protest’, which analyzes visual and textual (self-)representations of Eastern European protest cultures both qualitatively and quantitatively. This project is funded by the Austrian Academy of Sciences and starts in January 2023.

In the last ten years, massive protests against the government and/or unfair elections took place in all three Eastern Slavic countries—Russia (2011/12), Ukraine (2014), and Belarus (2020). More recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to anti-war protests in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus as well as many other countries around the world. All these protests were mainly organized via social networks (cf. Smyth & Oates 2015; Onuch 2015), disseminated in independent media and countered by the official state-owned media. Thus, visual (self-)representations of the protest cultures must be recognized as an integral part of the protests proper: Symbols and slogans are used to spread the ideas and claims of the protesting people, which is why protests can be characterized as a “communicative act” per se (Kuße 2021). In the Russian protests of 2011/12, for example, white ribbons signified an anti-governmental stance, as opposed to ‘official’ and pro-government black-orange Saint George’s ribbons. During the Maidan protests in Ukraine, symbols of nationalist and right-wing parties were present as was the flag of Europe. In Belarus, the white-red-white flag served as the main symbol of anti-government protests (cf. Gaufman 2021). This flag had been replaced by a flag similar to the old Soviet one after a controversial referendum in 1995 and had since then remained a symbol of the Belarusian opposition (cf. Bekus 2021).

Methods

In order to capture the Kaleidoscopic Patterns of Protest in Eastern Slavic countries, we zoom in on three different types of me-

dia: (1) the self-representation of different protest cultures as disseminated on blogs, YouTube channels, and social networks, (2) the official representations of the protest cultures, in state-run and independent news broadcasts, and (3) the cinematic representation of the protest cultures in feature-length documentaries. Because of these different perspectives we metaphorically speak of ‘kaleidoscopic patterns of protest’ that our project aims to make visible. In order to achieve that we combine automatic symbol recognition using artificial neural networks (R-CNN) with multi-modal discourse analysis (MDA). With this approach we follow N. K. Hayles’ (2010) combination of “close”, “machine” and “hyper reading”; applied to visual media, “machine reading” becomes Arnold/Tilton’s (2019) “distant viewing”.

Relying on “distant viewing” is necessary because of the massive size of the corpus. Since February 2022 we have collected roughly 120,000 YouTube videos about Belarus, Russia and Ukraine including all available metadata—as of now, the total run time of these videos amounts to roughly two years. This video corpus is searched for nationalist symbols from Eastern Europe by a self-trained neural network. Training the network ourselves is necessary insofar as freely available pretrained networks do not bring the necessary domain-specific knowledge. The example in Fig. 1 shows how the pretrained network can describe the basic configuration of the video frame; however, the flags that are our main concern are not recognized or are recognized incorrectly. The context-specific information is thus provided by our own network, whose beta version we have already published (Howanitz/Radisch 2022).



Fig. 1: Sample frame from a YouTube video (left), annotations by a pre-trained net for panoptic segmentation (center), annotations of our self-trained net (right)

The results of symbol recognition are first evaluated, visualized, and then processed for MDA in MAXQDA. Finally, we use MDA to analyze selected videos to investigate the context, the actors and their roles, and the interaction of verbal and visual information. In doing so, we focus on the questions of which general patterns of visual and textual (self-)representations of protest are recognizable, which similarities and differences there are between the individual countries as well as between different media, and on the question of how protest symbols and slogans are (re-)contextualized in the respective media.

Goals

The aim of our project is on the one hand to provide a best practice example for the analysis of a large visual corpus. Furthermore, we explore visual and textual (self-)representations of protest cultures in Eastern Europe and investigate how images and texts are (re)used in different media and contexts. Finally, our project also

provides a snapshot of different Eastern European protest cultures and answers the question of what remains of the protests after a certain period of time has passed: Especially in authoritarian states like Belarus and Russia, it cannot be assumed that state media preserve the memory of anti-government protests.

Bibliography

Arnold, T. / Tilton, L. (2019): “Distant Viewing: Analyzing Large Visual Corpora”. DSH, fqz013, <https://doi.org/10.1093/digitalsh/fqz013> [last access 4 November 2022].

Gaufman, E. (2021): “The gendered iconography of Belarus protest”. *New Perspectives*, 29(1), 80–89.

Hayles, N. K. (2010): “How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine”. *ADE Bulletin*, 150, 62–79.

Howanitz, G. / Radisch, E. (2022): “Nationalist(ic) Symbols from Eastern Europe: Deep Watching Demo Scripts”. *Github.com*, 21.2.2022 (v1.0.0). Online: <https://github.com/ghowa/nationalistic-symbols> [last access 4 November 2022].

Kuße, H. (2021) (Ed.): *Kommunikacija v epochu protestov*. Berlin: Peter Lang.

Onuch, O. (2015): *EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine: social media versus social networks*. *Problems of Post-communism*, 62(4), 217–235

Smyth, R. / Oates, R. (2015): *Mind the gaps: media use and mass action in Russia*. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67(2), 285–305.

Szostek, J. (2018): The mass media and Russia’s “sphere of interests”: mechanisms of regional hegemony in Belarus and Ukraine. *Geopolitics*, 23(2), 307–329.