

## Use of Facebook by Azerbaijani Government and Opposition: Strategy and Tactics

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### Abstract

This article discusses the political activities of the Azerbaijani government and opposition via social media, particularly Facebook, by comparing how each side constructs its own particular reality in the social networks. In addition, the article analyzes the efficiency of using social networks for political communication by both parties.

### Social Media in Azerbaijan

Social media, particularly social networks, have gained huge popularity in Azerbaijan in the last three years and become an important channel of communication. The number of internet users in Azerbaijan is around 4,746,800, according to the latest information for June 2013 (Internetworldstats, 2013). The penetration rate is around 50 percent, according to IWS (Internetworldstats, 2013). However, the number of social media users is less than the number of internet users. For example, the number of Facebook users from Azerbaijan is around 1,320,000 (Pearce, 2014), which constitutes only a 27.1 percent penetration rate, followed by Odnoklassniki.ru with around 750,000 users and Vk.com (Vkontakte.ru) with 738,000 registered users from Azerbaijan (Armenian chronicles, 2013). Thus, the figures demonstrate the higher popularity of Facebook in comparison to other platforms.

Facebook is the most important medium for political communication in Azerbaijan. The leading political actors, whether pro-governmental or pro-oppositional, actively use Facebook for setting their political agenda, as illustrated by the use of Facebook for political mobilization in March 2011 and January 2013. Thus, the article aims to analyze the Azerbaijani political actors' Facebook activities: Their online tactics and respective rhetoric are studied to trace their means of constructing their own particular reality and engaging the public. For this purpose, the article reviews the Facebook activities of the ruling party, a pro-governmental youth organization, the traditional oppositional parties, such as the Popular Front Party, Musavat Party, etc., and the non-system opposition consisting of independent journalists, bloggers, and activists, who do not belong to the Azerbaijani oppositional parties though are critical towards the government and its policies, and are among the opinion leaders in the social media.

### Analytical Framework

I employ social constructionist theory as the main analytical framework to study Azerbaijani political actors' activities in the social media. Social constructionism

focuses on the construction of reality through social interactions between individuals. The key assumption is that reality is socially constructed based on the actors' cultural and historical backgrounds and knowledge, and depends on a specific context. In this process, language and rhetoric are considered as the cornerstones of social life, creating our subjective construction of meaning (Berger, Luckmann, 1967). However, language can play a role as both constructor and deconstructor by criticizing the existing reality and policies (Edelman, 1988). Valls (1996) applied the social constructionist approach to the analysis of presidential rhetoric, illustrating that by creating certain pictures of reality presidents try to justify their actions or inactions.

In this paper, the social constructionist approach focuses on social interactions between social media users and political actors in Azerbaijan. In addition, the paper attempts to analyze how these political actors try to construct a certain political reality by using specific rhetoric.

### Political Messages Delivered via Facebook

#### *The Government's Strategies*

Let us review the government's and opposition's political strategies on Facebook. Usually, both parties create groups, pages, and event pages. They were especially active before the presidential elections of 2013. The pro-governmental youth organization "Ireli" Public Union created groups and pages supporting the current president and used event pages to mobilize the electorate for offline support. The Azerbaijani opposition groups (including the non-system opposition) created pages and events, as well as online petitions, to mobilize their own constituency. In addition, in order to provide more persuasive evidence, the Azerbaijani political actors shared different types of content, such as info graphics, video content, etc. Despite using similar tools, the government and opposition apply different communication strategies on Facebook: they employ different types of messages and methods for delivering them to the public.

Government officials and pro-governmental groups do not engage with the audience but try to inform

them. Accordingly, the government uses social media to expand its official propaganda and constructs a reality in which Azerbaijan is portrayed as a rapidly developing democratic country. The analysis of official Facebook pages of “Ireli” Public Union, Ilham Aliyev and Mehriban Aliyeva support this observation. “Ireli” Public Union informs the visitors about its projects and constructs a reality, where Azerbaijani youth is presented as “happy young people who support the current regime” (Ireli, 2014). The official Facebook page of President Ilham Aliyev follows the same strategy by portraying Azerbaijan as “a rapidly developing country.” As Ilham Aliyev’s page mainly shares official information and photos from his visits and meetings, his Facebook page discourse reinforces official governmental propaganda. For example, in the post published on February 24, 2014, on Ilham Aliyev’s page, the state of democracy in Azerbaijan is described as follows: “I believe Azerbaijani people around the world are proud that we have a strong Azerbaijani state. This state works for its citizens, takes care of their problems. Our motherland is now a modern dynamic democracy” (Aliyev, 2014). This discourse is manifested through the visuals and photos as well. Ilham Aliyev’s official webpage frequently publishes photos from construction sites and opening ceremonies, creating the image of “prospering Azerbaijan.”

The same approach is applied by the First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva’s official Facebook page, which does not publish posts on her behalf, but news about her visits and the photos from her meetings. In this way, the page positions Mehriban Aliyeva as an active public figure simultaneously creating the image of “Azerbaijan as a fast developing country.” The photos and visuals from her opening ceremonies reinforce the official discourse offered by the government’s Facebook pages. For example, on October 14, 2013, her page published a video summarizing the outcomes of social-economic development in Azerbaijan. On January 7, 2014, her page published news about opening the Baku Recreation Center and on February 13, 2014—a post about opening the new building of the National Conservatory (Aliyeva, 2014).

It is noteworthy though that the government Facebook pages do not respond to any comments, except for “Ireli” Public Union. As a result, the engagement rates on the pro-governmental pages are quite low. The main Facebook measure of the engagement rate on various pages is People Talking About This (PTAT). The PTAT indicator for Ilham Aliyev’s page during the week of February 17–23, 2014 was 10,380, which is very low considering that the number of his followers is more than 238,000. The PTAT for the “Ireli” Public Union page in the same period was 1,276, while the number of its Facebook followers is more than 33,000.

To summarize, the Azerbaijani government’s communication strategy on Facebook aims to extend the official propaganda, to reinforce the image of a “prospering Azerbaijan,” and to inform the followers only about positive changes. In other words, its one-way communication model is reproduced on Facebook as well.

### *The Opposition’s Strategies*

The Azerbaijani opposition attempts to construct a different reality, while deconstructing the reality created by the government. The Facebook page of Ali Karimli, Chairman of the Popular Front Party, attempts to deconstruct the official propaganda by sharing news and stories from the news media. Ali Karimli shares posts about social-economic problems, protest manifestations, imprisonment of political activists, the suicide committed by a war veteran, and the purchase of a new aircraft for the Azerbaijani President (Karimli, 2014). Ali Karimli constructs a reality, in which Azerbaijan is presented as an undeveloped and non-democratic country full of injustice, and calls for public consolidation to change the current regime. Similar rhetoric is employed by Jamil Hasanli, the ex-presidential candidate from the opposition (Hasanli, 2014), by Isa Gambar (Gambar, 2014), Chairman of the Musavat Party, and by the NIDA Civic Movement (NIDA, 2014).

All the opposition Facebook pages try to deconstruct the reality that the government creates, offering an alternative reality. In addition, these pages communicate with users, responding to their questions and comments, and trying to engage them in a conversation. NIDA Civic Movement is especially active in this regard though both the party and non-system oppositional groups, as well as the opinion leaders from this camp, effectively implement the same communication strategy via their personal profiles. The personal profiles of Khadija Ismayil, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, Erkin Gadirli, Adnan Hajizade, Natig Jafarli, Rovshan Agayev, Vugar Bayramov, Natig Adilov, Mehman Huseynov, Zamin Haji, and many other non-system oppositional figures encourage active engagement and discussion on Facebook, and manage to transfer this discussion to other media, like online news websites and newspapers. Khadija Ismayil demonstrated the efficiency of Facebook activities by creating a fake party (Ismayil, 2014), after which the news media actively referred to her joke and announced the creation of a new party. Another case relates to her publishing of “confidential instructions” that she facetiously claimed came from the Azerbaijani Ministry of National Security.

Cases of creating information waves in social networks which then transfer to the traditional media and public opinion are plenty. The news media, especially the websites and newspapers, regularly follow the pub-

lic profiles of pro-oppositional opinion leaders and use their posts and statuses as the source of news. Therefore, the non-system opposition leaders' influence on public opinion via social media in Azerbaijan is quite strong.

To summarize, the Facebook communication strategy of the Azerbaijani opposition, including the non-system opposition, aims to deconstruct the reality offered by the government and to create an alternative reality, simultaneously engaging the population in discussions and actions. In other words, the opposition employs a two-way communication model on Facebook.

### Conclusion

A brief overview of the Azerbaijani pro-governmental and pro-oppositional actors' activities via Facebook demonstrates that this social network functions predominantly as a platform for propagating their political ideology. The Azerbaijani government continues to portray

Azerbaijan as a rapidly developing democratic country, where there is no need for changes, while the opposition depicts Azerbaijan as a non-democratic country full of injustice, criticizing the government and urging changes. Even though government officials have large numbers of Facebook followers, the government is losing grounds in the social networks. The traditional opposition, together with non-system opposition, is succeeding in the social media owing to the activities of its opinion leaders being rather popular among the public. The government officials do not communicate with the audiences and do not respond to their comments or questions, while the opinion leaders from non-system opposition are actively engaged with their audiences and do respond to their questions. Consequently, although the pro-opposition Facebook pages have fewer followers, the opposition's influence on public opinion is obviously stronger.

### About the Author

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