

UKRAINIAN EUROMAIDAN PROTESTS AND THE NEW MEDIA

NATALYA RYABINSKA

article
abstract

IN LATE 2013, EIGHT YEARS AFTER THE ORANGE REVOLUTION UKRAINE HAS AGAIN BECOME THE SITE OF MASS PROTESTS, THIS TIME AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION ON NOVEMBER 21 TO STOP THE EUROPEAN UNION INTEGRATION AND END THE PURSUIT OF AN ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT. THE NEW MEDIA PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN THE PROTESTS FROM THE VERY BEGINNING. THIS PAPER IS A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCUSSION ON HOW THESE NEW MEDIA WERE USED DURING THE SO-CALLED EUROMAIDAN PROTESTS IN UKRAINE IN NOVEMBER 2013 – FEBRUARY 2014 AND HOW THE PROTESTS, IN THEIR TURN, CONTRIBUTED TO THE POPULARITY OF THE NEW MEDIA IN THE COUNTRY.

INTERNET, UKRAINE, SOCIAL MEDIA,
DEMOCRATISATION, EUROMAIDAN,
PROTESTS

In late 2013, eight years after the Orange Revolution Ukraine again became the site of mass protests, this time against the government's decision on November 21 to stop European Union integration and end the pursuit of an association agreement. The new media played a key role in the protests from the very beginning: the Facebook post of a popular journalist Mustafa Nayem gave rise to the first rally on the night of November 21. In this post the journalist, known for his sharp criticism of the authorities, was somewhat doubtful whether the Facebook users who were so active in expressing their anger about the government's depriving the nation of a European future were ready to protest against these actions also offline. He proposed to go to the Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in case at least 1000 of his Facebook friends and followers support this idea by commenting or sharing it online. When in just one hour more than 700 commentaries confirming the people's readiness to protest appeared under his post, Mustafa posted on his timeline: "near the monument of Independence at 22h.30. In the result, more than 2000 Ukrainians gathered for the first protest action on the night of November 21, starting thus the so-called EuroMaidan protests, which still continue at the moment of writing this paper in January 2014.

The paper is a contribution to the discussion on how the new media influenced the so-called EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine and how the protests, in their turn, contributed to the popularity of the new media in the country.

It should be noted that the political development of the new media in Ukraine has a comparatively long history for a country where new communication and information technologies started to develop intensely only in the last decade and where Internet penetration was less than 1% only 13 years ago.¹ This history began already in 2000 when the journalist Georgiy Gongadze founded an opposition online paper called "Ukrainska Pravda" criticizing the regime of the President Leonid Kuchma. A particular boost to the political Internet's development was given by the dramatic events around the journalist: his mysterious murder in September 2000 and public accusations of the President's involvement in the affair, which started a 'Kuchmagate' scandal (also known as a 'Cassette scandal') and provoked a political crisis, with mass protests in Kiev from 15 December 2000 to 9 March 2001. The lack of coverage of these events in Ukraine's traditional media gave the first opportunity for the new media (mainly the Internet) to develop as an authoritative alternative source of information in Ukraine.²

¹ At the time of writing this paper the Internet penetration in Ukraine was 34% (FOTN 2013).

² Krasnoboka, Semetko 2006.

In 2010 its average daily readership was already around 100 000 visitors daily,³ which was comparable to the circulation of the most popular dailies in Ukraine.

It is remarkable that *Ukrainska Pravda* again abruptly grew in popularity on November 21, 2013 when the Ukrainians learned that their government decided to cease preparations to sign the association agreement with the European Union: according to digital marketing expert Maksym Savanevskyi, the number of its visitors nearly doubled that day, reaching 550,000 readers per day.⁴ This increase was in part conditioned by the splash of activity in social networks: Savanevskyi noted that *Ukrainska Pravda* experienced, among others, a ten-fold increase in traffic from both Twitter and Facebook. Generally, on November 21 and 22 Ukrainian online news media registered a record traffic in their whole history.⁵

Importantly, unlike the Kuchmagate political crisis, the EuroMaidan events were widely reported not only on the online news websites but also in social media. The latter have played an enormous role in providing urgent news about the ongoing protests. Immediately on the day of the first pro-European rally on 21 November the official EuroMaidan Facebook page was created, and garnered more than 76,000 subscribers just in the first eight days and in such a way set a new record in Ukrainian Internet.⁶ Not surprisingly, during the first days of the demonstrations the page appeared in the top 20 of Ukrainian Facebook pages and became the most “talked about,” with almost 110,000 people who commented, liked or shared the page’s content.⁷ The significant sources of the news about EuroMaidan were also the Facebook accounts of the Ukraine’s famous journalists, public activists as well as some of oppositional politicians. People who actively engaged in the protests posted pictures, video or text messages directly from the Kyiv’s Independence Square as well as from other locations of the protests, and this was an important factor in mobilizing the rest of the society.

A significant role in informing various audiences about the EuroMaidan protests was also played by Twitter. Pablo Barberá and Megan Metzger from the New York University who conducted a research of the use of social media in the first two weeks of Ukrainian EuroMaidan rallies pointed out that though Twitter usage related to the protests was much lower

3 Dutsyk 2010.

4 Savanevskyi 2014.

5 Savanevskyi 2014.

6 Savanevskyi 2014.

7 Kapliuk 2013.

than that of Facebook (which can be generally explained by relative low popularity of Twitter in Ukraine), many people joined Twitter in the first days of the protests to communicate about EuroMaidan.⁸ The highest spike on the Figure 1 corresponds to extraordinary big amount of Twitter accounts created in the first days of the protests, especially on Sunday, December 1, the day of the largest rally in the initial stage of EuroMaidan events.

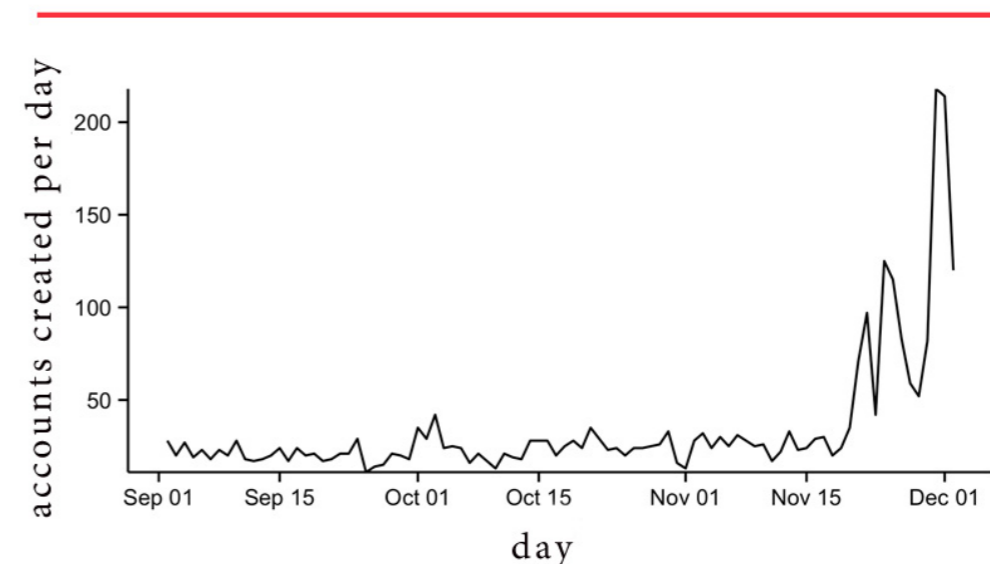


Figure 1. Ukrainian protests and the creation of new twitter accounts (Data: NYU Social Media and Political Participation (smapp.nyu.edu) lab; Figure: Pablo Barberá and Megan Metzger)

From the very beginning EuroMaidan became one of the most popular topics on Twitter. For example, in the first days of December 2013, 1 in 1000 twits in the world was with a hashtag ‘EuroMaidan,’ whereas on December 1 even one in 200 twits was about the Ukrainian protests. The Barberá&Metzger’s observations showed that many of Twitter users posting about the protests in Ukraine were writing in English. The researchers assumed that this is because unlike Facebook, which was used mainly for protests-related communications inside Ukraine, Twitter was utilized as a tool to convey information about the protest to the rest of the world and to draw the attention of the international community.

8 Barberá, Metzger 2013.

 NOT ONLY INFORMATION

However the role of social media in the EuroMaidan protests was not constrained to information sharing. They were also widely used for organization and coordination of protesters' actions. For example, the official page of EuroMaidan on Facebook was the site where protesters discussed plans of future actions, warned against using violence, shared advice on how to deal with police forces and avoid being provoked by government agents. There were also different posts with flyers to print and distribute around the city, maps of places with free tea and open access to Wi-fi, information about time and place of various protest actions such as pickets or marches, and much more.

Additionally, a number of Facebook pages was created for coordinating various activities to help EuroMaidan. A special Facebook page (EuroMaidan SOS) was created to provide legal assistance to protesters who were detained and/or accused of breaking Ukrainian laws. It gathered information about victims of police beatings, government pressure and detentions, and served for organization of various protest actions near the courts and police offices where the detained protesters were brought to or prosecuted. The next web-based initiative was the site galas.com.ua where, on the one hand, the protesters could place information about their urgent needs (such as warm clothes, food, medicines or housing for demonstrators from outside Kyiv), and on the other, the people ready to help announced which kind of assistance were they ready to grant. The authors of galas.com.ua created an interactive map of Kyiv making it possible for protesters to find the kinds of help they need in different districts of the capital city. A separate Facebook page was created for the needs of medical volunteers who came to the Independent Square almost from the very start of EuroMaidan and organized free medical aid to EuroMaidan participants. There also appeared a special page on Facebook called 'Get to Maidan' serving for people's self-organization around reaching the Maidan: on that page the car owners from different districts of Kyiv driving to Maidan offered their help in bringing people to the protest locations. This was especially useful in the moments when the Maidan was attacked by riot police in the middle of the night. In Twitter the same function was served by communications under the hashtag #gettomaidan.

People at regional EuroMaidans also coordinated their actions via social media. For example, when after the start of clashes between demonstrators and police officers on Kyiv's Hrushevskoho Street the activists in Lviv blocked the local Interior Ministry troops and riot police from exiting

their bases and going to Kyiv, Facebook was used by them for mobilizing and repositioning their resources (people and vehicles) dependent on where they were most needed.

“

WHAT IS PARTICULAR ABOUT SOME ONLINE TV CHANNELS IS THAT THEY GATHERED RATHER STRONG TEAMS OF JOURNALISTS READY TO WORK FOR LITTLE MONEY OR EVEN FREE OF CHARGE

The Ukrainian protests in late 2013 - early 2014 significantly contributed to the development and popularity of a new phenomena in the Ukrainian Internet and online television. Live streams of the protests by several online TV channels, which have recently appeared in Ukraine, became a significant alternative to the news of traditional television channels extensively controlled by the government or the oligarchs loyal to the authorities. What is particular about some online TV channels is that they gathered rather strong teams of journalists ready to work for little money or even free of charge. This is because many Ukrainian journalists who used to work for the country's largest TV channels had to leave because of patronizing censorship (by the government and the stations' owners, the powerful oligarchs), which intensified in the years of Victor Yanukovich's Presidency. One of the bright success stories of the online TV in Ukraine is the project Hromadske.TV ("Public TV"), which started in June 2013 and planned to go on air in late November with one show per week. The EuroMaidan protests changed these plans and the channel had to start broadcasting on November 22 for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Professional journalists who were soon joined by numerous volunteers reported live from the site of the protests with the help of a few iPhones which, thanks to an app, they used to film events themselves and send recordings directly to the studio. They also debated current Ukrainian events in the studio with the invited guests, whose selection was aimed at representing the views of different social and political groups in Ukraine.

All of this has brought Hromadske rather great popularity. For example, already in the first days of the protests the number of the viewers simultaneously watching the channel reached 100 thousands.⁹ The general amount of people who watched Hromadske on November 24, when tens of thousands Ukrainians went to manifestations in Kyiv, was as much as 761 380.¹⁰ A recent survey of EuroMaidan protest participants by Olga Onuch

⁹ Minchenko 2013.

¹⁰ Teleprostir 2013.

and Tamara Martsenyuk funded by British Academy showed that 51 percent of them got information about protests from Internet news sites, such as Spilno TV and Hromadske TV.¹¹ The use of new technologies and voluntary work of many specialists helps the channel to exist without a support from Ukrainian politicians and oligarchs. The station is financed by donations from inside and outside of the country.¹²

WHAT SOCIAL MEDIA CAN AND CANNOT DO ABOUT THE PROTESTS

As one can assume basing on the above, the role of the new media in the Ukrainian rallies in November 2013 - February 2014 was essential. Does it mean that the development of information and communication technologies is itself a factor enhancing democratization? A number of researchers participating in the debate about the role of new communication and information technologies in general and social networks in particular in democratization of the countries with authoritarian and hybrid regimes outline that the new technologies themselves cannot impact the politics and the societies in these countries. For example, Denis Volkov from Levada Center in Russia demonstrates that the young, well-educated, and well-off Russian urbanites regularly use the whole variety of Internet resources (forums, blogs, networks) but they go on the Internet for entertainment and interaction and not for participating in political life, engaging in public protests or even reading political news.¹³ He explains this partly by an inability of opposition political parties and the so-called non-system opposition to offer ideas, proposals and values, which would be attractive for the Russian Internet community. A similar conclusion, though with regard to a different context and obstacles, was made by Marc Lynch from George Washington University, who studied the effects of social media in the Arab spring. He pointed out that social media cannot substitute the hard and patient party work or grassroots organizing.¹⁴ His findings correspond to the ideas of other scholars who state that while the Internet can amplify political involvement, it is the underlying cause or organization that remains central to the activism.¹⁵

11 Onuch 2014.

12 In 2013 the US Embassy and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands provided the start-up funds of about 1 mln UAH (around 142 thousands USD) for the station. They were spent to purchase the station's basic equipment and getting the website running.

13 Volkov 2012.

14 Lynch 2013.

15 See for example:: Jensen 2006, Lusoli, Ward 2006.

If we analyze Ukrainian protests of late 2013 early 2014 in the frameworks of these ideas we will see first, that oppositional politicians in Ukraine, similar to their Russian counterparts appeared to be generally unable to motivate people (including the Internet community) to engage in political activities, neither via online nor offline methods. What is representative is that the MPs from Udar, one of the major opposition parties in the Ukrainian Parliament, instead of intensifying their activity in social networks during the EuroMaidan declared that they close their accounts because of the threat of their hacking. Indeed, the e-mail and social networks accounts of several oppositional politicians were attacked by hackers in the early days of the protests. However, a mere closure of Internet accounts was not an adequate reaction for these events on the part of the politicians, because it limited their communications with potential followers. Importantly, the leaders and prominent members of other main opposition parties, Batkivshchina and Svoboda, were not especially active online during the protests as well, except of very rare instances.¹⁶



DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES WERE USED NOT ONLY BY THE PARTICIPANTS OF EUROMAIDAN RALLIES, BUT ALSO BY THEIR OPPONENTS FOR THEIR OWN PURPOSES

In contrast to them, the representatives of Ukrainian civil society-journalists, editors of Internet-based opposition media, activists from non-governmental organizations, artists, cultural figures and scholars appeared to have the ideas to mobilize wide circles of the society for the protests and hold up the confidence among people. They were also active in the social media for quite a long period preceding the EuroMaidan events, and had thousands of friends and followers on Facebook and on other Internet platforms. Therefore, when these known and trusted people wrote in their online accounts “I am going to Maidan,” this worked as a catalytic agent for people's mobilization for the demonstrations.

However, if it wasn't for the reversal of pro-European course by the Ukrainian government, the protests would never have erupted. And yet, a big part of Ukrainian society got furious about this decision and thus had significant reasons for going to the protests on Maidan on November 21, 2013. The idea of a pro-European foreign policy course defined by the Ukrainian Government's decision this day was supported by at least 42% of

16 Savanevskyi 2014.

Ukrainians, and according to Irina Bekeshkina from Democratic Initiatives Foundation, their amount steadily outnumbered the share of the supporters of integration with the Russia-led Customs Union since 2012.¹⁷ This was a strong motivating force for demonstrators to engage in the rallies in first days of EuroMaidan. As for the chief reasons, which mobilized Ukrainians for the protests at their second stage, initiated by the brutal beating of students by the police on the night of November 30, they were even more ponderable. This time people were moved by an outrage at the police's violence as well as by the desire to change life in Ukraine. The opinion polls conducted by the Democratic Initiative on the Kyiv's EuroMaidan on December, 7-8 showed that as much as 70% of people went to the EuroMaidan because of the brutal beating of demonstrators, and 50% of protesters explained their engagement with the protests by their willingness to change life in Ukraine.¹⁸ To this we can add that opinion polls conducted in Ukraine in the weeks preceding the protests showed that more than 60% of Ukrainians believed that the developments in Ukraine were heading in the wrong direction.¹⁹ Besides, around 80% of Ukrainians believed that their state authorities were corrupt and that corruption was widespread in the judiciary and law enforcement.²⁰ We can assume that this dissatisfaction with the authorities was the underlying cause for people's protests, which were triggered by the government's actions (initially – the decision to cease preparations to sign the association agreement with the EU, then – the unwarranted use of force against peaceful demonstrators, and after January 16 – the adoption of a package of undemocratic legislation by the Ukrainian Parliament). The Internet and social media only significantly facilitated the process of people's self-organization around these protests and helped them activate and develop the already existing social networks as well as create new ones. Here we can agree with Pablo Barberá and Megan Metzger's conclusion that social media served as an important strategic tool for the EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine.²¹

It is worth mentioning that digital technologies were used not only by the participants of EuroMaidan rallies, but also by their opponents for their own purposes. The latter used them chiefly for discrediting the protest actions as well as for intimidating the protesters. In particular, social media were applied for sharing the rumors that people participating in the rallies were paid. For example, according to Savanevskyi, some Twitter users used

the #EuroMaidan hashtag on Twitter to promote the message “I was invited to EuroMaidan. Was offered Hr 100 (for participation). But I won't go. I'd better go with my wife to the theatre.” Funny enough, some of the people who twitted this message were women.²²

Besides, social media were also used to discredit the EuroMaidan leaders and supporters. For instance, in December 2013 the social networking platforms became the tools of a smear campaign targeting a popular journalist, prominent public speaker and a member of the public committee of EuroMaidan Vitaliy Portnikov. The campaign was based on a video containing intimate and illegally obtained images of the journalist. The video was distributed via the Internet.

Digital technologies were also used for intimidation of EuroMaidan participants. For example, soon after December 16 when the Ukrainian Parliament adopted the law foreseeing prison terms of up to 15 years for “mass violation” of public order, the protesters started receiving SMS-warnings ‘Dear subscriber, you are registered as a participant of riots.’

CONCLUSION

The analyses of EuroMaidan protests in the press often outline that their characteristic feature is a peculiar self-organization. Nadia Diuk, a vice president of the National Endowment for Democracy, has already called them “Ukraine's Self-Organizing Revolution.” Indeed, the EuroMaidan, which in fact consists of a wide spectrum of activities from mass demonstrations, blockage of government buildings, picketing luxury residences of the Ukraine's chief office holders and ensuring security of participants of the rallies to public lectures at Free University of the Maidan is well organized and coordinated. This organization and coordination, as well as the people's mobilization for the above diverse activities (not only in Kyiv but also in a number of Ukrainian cities and towns) is much indebted to social media as a tool of social networking and community building. Besides, the social media together with online news media significantly contributed to the spread of information about the EuroMaidan rallies. In their turn, the protests stimulated the rise of popularity of Internet-based news media as well as attracted thousands of new users to social media in Ukraine.

17 UNIAN 2013.

18 DIF 2013.

19 Razumkov Center, March 2013, October 2013.

20 Razumkov Center, October 2013.

21 Barberá, Metzger 2013.

22 Kapliuk 2013.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barberá, Metzger 2013 Barberá, P., Metzger, M., "How Ukrainian protestors are using Twitter and Facebook," *Washington Post* (blog), 04-12-2013 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2013/12/04/strategic-use-of-facebook-and-twitter-in-ukrainian-protests/>), accessed 22-01-2014.
- DIF 2013 "Maidan-2013," *Democratic Initiatives Foundation, DIF*, Kyiv, December 7-8, 2013 (<http://www.dif.org.ua/en/events/gvkrigkaeths.htm>), accessed 22-01-2014.
- Dutsyk 2010 Dutsyk, D., "Media Ownership Structure in Ukraine: Political Aspects." In: O. Khabyuk, M. Kops (eds.), *Public Service Broadcasting: A German-Ukrainian Exchange of Opinions. Results of the Conference on October 20th, 2010 in Cologne, Germany*, 2010, pp. 29-40.
- FOTN 2013 "Freedom of the Net 2013: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media." Ed. by Sanja Kelly, Mai Truong, Madeline Earp, Laura Reed. *Freedom House*.
- Jensen 2006 Jensen, J., "The Minnesota E-democracy project: mobilising the mobilised?" in: S. Oates, D. Owen, R. K. Gibson (eds.). *The Internet and Politics: Citizens, Voters and Activists*, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 34-51.
- Kapliuk 2013 Kapliuk, K., "Role of social media in EuroMaidan movement essential," *KyivPost*, 01-12-2013 (<https://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/role-of-social-media-in-EuroMaidan-movement-essential-332749.html>), accessed 22-01-2014.
- Krasnoboka, Semetko 2006 Krasnoboka, N., Semetko, H. A., "Murder, Journalism and the Web: How the Gongadze Case Launched the Internet News Era in Ukraine." In: S. Oates, D. Owen, R. K. Gibson (eds.). *The Internet and Politics: Citizens, Voters and Activists*, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 164-183.
- Lusoli, Ward 2006 Lusoli, W., Ward, S., "Hunting protestors: mobilisation, participation and protest online in the countryside alliance." Paper presented at the ECPR Joint Session, University of Edinburgh, 2006.
- Lynch 2013 Lynch, M., "Twitter devolutions: How social media is hurting the Arab Spring," *Foreign Policy*, 07-02-2013.
- Minchenko 2013 Minchenko, O., "Hromadske telebachennia zaraz dyvytsia ponad 100 tys. liudey odnochasno (Hromadske TV is watched now by 100 thousands people simultaneously)," *Watcher*, 01-12-2013 (<http://watcher.com.ua/2013/12/01/hromadske-telebachennya-zaraz-dyvytsya-ponad-100-tys-lyudey-odnochasno/>), accessed 23-01-2014.
- Onuch 2013 Onuch, O., "Social networks and social media in Ukrainian "EuroMaidan" protests," *Washington Post* (blog), 02-01-2014 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/01/02/social-networks-and-social-media-in-ukrainian-EuroMaidan-protests-2/>), accessed 22-01-2014.
- Razumkov Center, March 2013 "Assessment of the situation in Ukraine," Public opinion poll, *Razumkov Centre*, March 2013 (http://www.razumkov.org.ua/eng/socpolls.php?cat_id=27), accessed 22-01-2014.
- Razumkov Center, October 2013 "Assessment of the situation in Ukraine," Public opinion poll, *Razumkov Centre*, October 2013 (http://www.razumkov.org.ua/eng/socpolls.php?cat_id=27), accessed 22-01-2014.
- Savanevskiyi 2014 Savanevskiyi, M., (November 29, 2014) "#EuroMaidan: ukraiinska tsyfrova revolutsiia ta ostannii shans analohovym politikam staty tsyfrovymy (#EuroMaidan: Ukrainian digital revolution and the last chance for analogue politicians to become digital)," *Watcher*, 29-11-2014 (<http://watcher.com.ua/2013/11/29/yevromaydan-ukrayinska-tyfrova-revolutsiya-ta-ostanniy-shans-analohovym-politykam-staty-tyfrovymy/>), accessed 22-01-2014.
- Teleprostir 2013 "Hromadske bie rekordy perehliadiv (hromadske beats records of visitors)," *Teleprostir*, 26-11-2013 (<http://teleprostir.com/news/companynews/show-21957-gromadske-tb-b-e-rekordi-perehliadiv>), accessed 22-1-2014.
- UNIAN 2013 „Pryhlynykiv Eurointehratsii v Ukraini stae vse bilshe – opytuvannia (The number of EU integration supporters grows – opinion pool)," *UNIAN*, 21-08-2013 (<http://www.unian.ua/politics/825410-prihlynykiv-evrointegratsiji-v-ukrajini-stae-vse-bilshe-opytuvannya.html>) accessed 22-01-2014.
- Volkov 2012 Volkov, D., "The Internet and Political Involvement in Russia," *Russian Education and Society*, vol. 54, no. 9, 2012, p. 49-87.

— **Natalya Ryabinska** holds a PhD in Sociology from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences. She is an Assistant Professor at the Bogdan Janski Academy in Warsaw, Poland. She also teaches at the Graduate School for Social Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences and Collegium Civitas. She investigates the transformation of mass media in the former Soviet Union, media systems in post-communist countries, new media and democracy and international communication in Eastern Europe.

by #Babylon'13

