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ETHNIC MEMORY AND INTERACTIONS IN PERIODS OF CRISIS: AN ANALYSIS OF BURUNDI'S TWITTERSPHERE

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Introduction

Social media played an increasingly important role after the outbreak of the 2015 crisis in Burundi and especially after the shutdown of the main independent radios in Bujumbura. For the thousands of people who left the country, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp represented fundamental tools to receive information and to stay in touch with the country of origin (Vircoulon 2016). Journalists in exile also used social media to produce alternative information to that proposed by state media. In a context where they were not physically persecuted, exiles expressed themselves much more freely, sending aggressive attacks to those responsible for their disgrace. The latter also used the same verbal violence. As a result, harsh confrontations took place online that transformed social platforms into highly competitive political arenas. The Burundi crisis went to a large extent online, becoming chiefly a communication war (Vircoulon 2018: 6).

During the crisis, ethnic references reappeared into political debate, including on social media. In a previous study (Paviotti 2018: 109), I showed that this also affected symbols of national unity such as the figure of Ntaryamira, one of the three personalities for whom a day of commemoration is observed in Burundi. President Ntaryamira did not represent a strong symbol of political or ethnic identification before 2015. Thanks to different communication strategies,² distinct communities emerged around him, with ethnic and political connotations. As a result of such a process of ethnicization, Ntaryamira was associated with a Hutu community close to Burundi's ruling party.

This chapter aims at exploring interactions within and between the communities that emerged around Ntaryamira.³ To have a better understanding of

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² The expression of accusations, the use of specific appellatives, the expression of praise, and a particular use of ethnic references (Paviotti 2018: 97).

³ A definition of online community is adopted in this paper that considers communities as 'a group of people who share social interaction, social ties, and a common interactional format,

the process of ethnicization that affected the memory of such a figure, focus will be on its 'implementations' (Holst 2011: 105). The aim is to observe how Twitter users reacted to the messages proposed by ethno-political entrepreneurs. Analysis will focus on the messages and accounts with which they interacted the most, while paying specific attention to their political and ethnic attributes and observing if their reactions changed over time.

Two aspects will be under scrutiny in this paper. On the one hand, the interactions with the tweets will be observed. The number of retweets, likes, and replies received by every tweet will be analyzed, to identify what tweets were the most popular, what type of reactions they triggered, and to what extent such reactions changed over time. The characters of the accounts interacting with such tweets will then be determined. The aim is to observe if such reactions took place according to ethnic, political, or other types of affiliation. On the other hand, the conversations that developed around Ntaryamira's commemoration will be analyzed. The aim here is twofold. On the one hand, the position occupied by ethnicity within the conversation will be observed. Attention will be paid to the circumstances under which ethnicity came into the conversation and to the reactions these calls provoked. This will permit a better understanding of the role played by memory and by ethnic belonging in the process of ethnicization. On the other hand, it will be observed if exchanges took place between the communities, or if the conversation remained within the same community. Ultimately, this will speak of the role of Twitter as an echo chamber where political messages remained among like-minded users, or as a space for discussion and confrontation between different views.

1. How does Burundi speak Twitter?

Because of its nature as a social platform where quick, short messages can be sent out to reach broad audiences, Twitter seems to be particularly apt for political communication. This is not limited to Western countries, where Internet is more accessible on average.⁴ Africans seem to make large use of social media to follow the news, especially in countries where freedom of press is scarce (Adegoke 2017). Among social media, Twitter would best suit 'the slower networks and 3G phones of many African consumers' because of its 'relatively low bandwidth consumption' (Kazeem 2016). Compared to Western countries, African users seem to be particularly politically engaged on Twitter: 8.67% of all hashtags produced on the African continent would

location or "space" – albeit, in this case, a computer-mediated or virtual "cyberspace" (Postill & Pink 2012: 126).

⁴ The percentage of individuals using Internet in 2017 was estimated at 79.6% for Europe and 21.8% for Africa (ITU 2017: 20).

be political hashtags, a higher percentage than in the US, the UK, France and Canada (Portland 2018a). Politicians' attempts to control such space for free speech are all the more frequent. They increasingly invest in social media communication, especially in view of elections (Bradshaw & Howard 2018: 5). The recent controversial measures taken by Uganda and Tanzania to restrict access to social media (Nyeko 2018) and blogs (Dahir 2018) represent concrete attacks on freedom of expression and unveil the sensitivity of the issues at stake.

In Burundi too, social media became an alternative solution to the traditional media outlets when information started to become less accessible (Frère 2016: 141). A special communication unit was put in place by the government in 2014 (Vircoulon 2018: 17), and the efforts deployed to repress dissent (Small Media 2017: 53) reveal the sensitivity of the political contents circulating online.⁵ A recent statement made by the President of the Senate about economic loss due to the use of social media⁶ raised fears of social media taxation, which would mean a restriction of Internet access. The low rate of Internet penetration in the country (7.33% as of December 2017, ARCT 2018: 3)⁷ does not necessarily correspond with the reach⁸ of messages disseminated on social media, since smartphones and mobile phones, used in place of radios,⁹ could spread information to more than one person. Political debates seem to be increasingly transferred online,¹⁰ and Burundi is no exception to this. Social media in Burundi definitely matters and is worth investigating.

⁵ In August 2016, 56 members of a WhatsApp group were reported arrested in Bujumbura for allegedly spreading defamatory statements on public officials and institutions (Small Media 2017: 14).

⁶ Inama Nkenguzamateka [burundi_senat]. (08 October 2018). #Burundi L'État accuse un manque à gagner important suite à l'utilisation des réseaux sociaux qui ne sont pas imposés [...]. [(The State points out important economic loss due to the use of social media that are not taxed [...].) Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/burundi_senat/status/1049249928403460097, consulted on 05 November 2018.

⁷ The rate is quite low if compared to the percentage of 21.8% estimated for Africa in 2017 (ITU 2017: 20).

⁸ The Internet penetration rate corresponds to the percentage of the total population using the Internet. The 7.33% rate is based on the number of Internet subscriptions in Burundi (ARCT 2018: 3). More than 7.33% of Burundi's population might have access to the Internet if more than one person accesses the Internet through the same device or using the same Internet subscription.

⁹ Radio is the principal tool used to access information in Burundi (Frère & Fiedler 2016: 120).

¹⁰ The fact that Rwandan President Kagame reacted on Twitter in February 2016 to accusations coming from the Government of Burundi of alleged attempts of destabilisation shows the relevance of social media for political purposes, even when international relations are at stake (RFI 2016).

Compared to traditional media outlets, reactions on social media can be expressed on the media itself, thus contributing to both informing and influencing opinion (Frère 2015: 160). Before the advent of social media, discussions about political issues led to a physical social platform, distinct from the media outlet. With social media, such a social platform becomes virtual, and is integrated into the media itself. This virtual space is shared by both social platform and source of information, among which exchanges often take place. For a researcher aiming to analyze reactions to information disseminated through the media, this represents an important advantage because such reactions are easily accessed, since they are found on the media itself. This is especially important when a sensitive topic is under investigation. Ethnicity is in effect one of the 'taboo' topics that are hardly discussed offline. The fact that in the cyberspace 'one can express the in-expressible' (Turner 2008: 1177) makes the study of social media particularly relevant. There are some important shortcomings in this type of research (Paviotti 2018: 93), however. The correspondence between a person's thought and their statements online is hard to assess, especially because 'outside the constrictions of real politics' (Turner 2008: 1177) one seems to feel allowed to release anger and frustrations that they would (or could) not express offline (Frère 2015: 157). In addition, when ethnicity is poured into political debate, it happens for political purposes: instrumentalized and politicized, ethnicity may or may not represent 'what people think' out there. To what extent 'the in-expressible' that is told online reflects what people think or feel is a different epistemological and ontological question that cannot be answered in the present paper, for both methodological reasons and because of the purpose of the paper. Through a focus on online interactions, the present analysis does not aim to assess the 'veracity' of what is told on Twitter, but to have a better understanding of the dynamics of the process of ethnicization of Ntaryamira's memory: who were the political entrepreneurs, what kind of ethnic discourse they put in circulation, and what type of resonance their tweets had. To have a clearer picture of the full process of ethnicization of memory, this study cannot but be completed by a 'physical' ethnographic research, which would allow to observe the extent to which the dynamics identified online reflected what happened offline.

2. Methodology

The present study is mainly empirical and conducted in an inductive way. The approach is one of content and discourse analysis and is applied to the virtual field of Twitter. The analysis relies on a refined version of the database used in my previous study. The first database included the tweets containing the name Ntaryamira produced worldwide and in all languages during four periods of activity (between 06 March and 06 May 2014, 2015,

2016, 2017) and retrieved through the publicly available Twitter Search Tool (Paviotti 2018: 95).¹¹ A new search was launched through the same tool in June 2017 to check the availability of the tweets previously collected. The tweets that were no longer available (because they were deleted, or the associated account was either suspended or did not exist anymore) were removed from the database. In total, 1,029 tweets are counted in the final database (123 in 2014, 99 in 2015, 488 in 2016, 319 in 2017).¹²

Data was analyzed in different ways according to the aspect under scrutiny. To identify the most popular tweets, some preliminary quantitative observations were made on the interactions with the tweets. A content analysis was then carried out to find out the topics that were retweeted, liked and discussed most. The political and ethnic attributes of the accounts that interacted the most with such tweets were determined by observing the content of the tweets in their timelines, and through other indicators such as cover photo, profile photo and description, pinned tweet if available. Particular attention was put on the account's 'activity, anonymity and amplification' (Nimmo 2017) to determine the identity of the account as a potential bot or fake account.¹³ Conversations, on the other hand, were analyzed through content and discourse analysis. Attention was paid to the presence of four elements evoking ethnicity in the conversations: references to past (ethnic) violence, references/appeals to the ethnic belonging, links between past and present (ethnic) violence, and anticipations of violence. The circumstances under which such elements appeared in the conversations were then observed, in the aim to analyze the role played by ethnicity in them. Finally, the analysis of the content and of the participants in the conversations made it possible to determine if the communication remained within the same ethno-political community or if confrontations took place between the communities.

¹¹ The database consisted of a Microsoft Excel worksheet reporting the text and the URL of every tweet retrieved, its date of production, the username (handle) and the full name of the tweeter, the language used, and the translation of the message when needed. Translations were provided by two Kirundi-speaking persons that were not in contact with each other (on the translation of the tweets, see Paviotti 2018: 95).

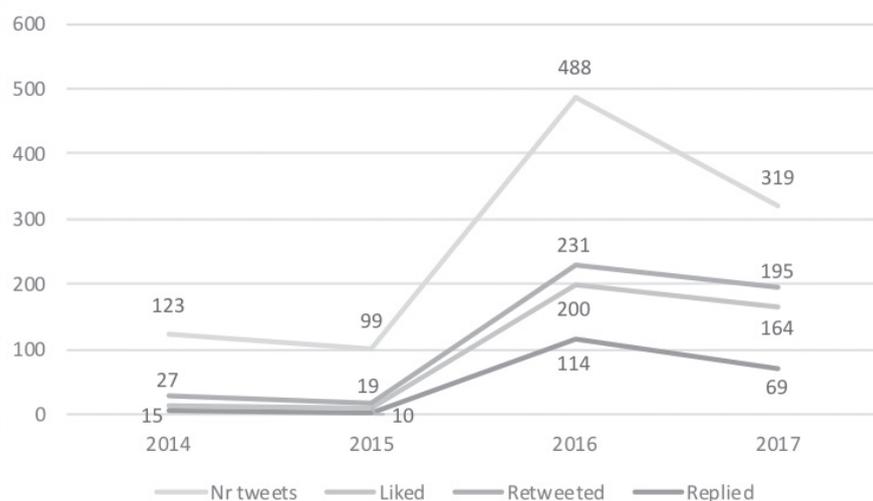
¹² 320 less than in the first database. No additional search for the tweets containing the hashtag #JusticeForNtaryamira was launched this time (Paviotti 2018: 95-96). The tweets retrieved through the first search represented a sufficient amount of material for the purposes of this analysis.

¹³ Following Nimmo (2017), bots are defined in this paper as automated social media accounts. Fake accounts, automated or not, show a more human-like behaviour. Either way, bots and fake accounts do not correspond to an existing individual in the physical world nor do they express their views.

3. Interactions with tweets: retweets, likes, and replies

The number of tweets that were retweeted, received a like or a reply significantly increased in 2016 and 2017, in comparison to 2015 and 2014. The increase is of 30/40% for both retweets and likes,¹⁴ and around 20% for replies.¹⁵ In 2016, almost half of the tweets under scrutiny were retweeted (47%) and received a like (41%). Such percentages rose above 50% in 2017 for both retweets and likes. Replies, on the other hand, never exceeded 23% of the total tweets (which percentage was reached in 2016).

Figure 1: number of tweets liked, retweeted and replied to



Source: Dataset.

3.1. Retweets

To identify the type of tweets that were retweeted the most, the attention was put on those tweets that presented at least half of the highest number of retweets received by a message in the correspondent year.¹⁶ Compared to

¹⁴ 22% of the tweets were retweeted in 2014, 20% in 2015, 47% in 2016 and 61% in 2017. As regards likes, 12% of the tweets were liked in 2014, 10% in 2015, 41% in 2016 and 51% in 2017.

¹⁵ 4%, 3%, 23% and 22% of the tweets received a reply in 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 respectively.

¹⁶ If the highest number of retweets received by a tweet was 70, for example, the tweets under scrutiny received between 35 and 70 retweets. An exception was made for 2017, when the highest number of retweets was 174 but no other tweet received between 87 and 174

the massive production of tweets in 2016 and 2017, the retweets focused on very few messages in those two years: 13 (out of 195) in 2017 and 7 (out of 231) in 2016.¹⁷ The messages retweeted were produced by accounts that belonged to or were politically close to the Government of Burundi (except for one message in 2017): the Presidency,¹⁸ CNDD FDD, the Burundi Ambassador at the UN, government and CNDD FDD Communication Advisers,¹⁹ and some pro-government accounts such as Ikiriho [Ikiriho],²⁰ Umuvuga Kuri [Umuvugakuri], Fridolin Nzambimana [Fridolinandres], Understand Burundi [QCbdi].²¹ The messages produced by these accounts mainly provided information about the commemoration taking place in Bujumbura and mentioned those present in such activities: Nkurunziza and his wife, Ntibantunganya and his wife, CNDD FDD representatives, diplomatic representatives in Bujumbura, archbishop Ngoyagoye, Burundian authorities. The authors of these tweets chose to inform about the presence of these people and not that of other participants. By emphasizing the fact that these people were commemorating Ntaryamira, the link between such figures and the late President was reinforced (Paviotti 2018: 109). The outreach obtained through retweets here is more relevant than the content of

retweets. In this case, the second highest number (63) was taken into account. The tweet receiving 174 retweets can be considered as an outlier. It was posted by Pierre Nkurunziza to express satisfaction after an exchange with Ntaryamira's wife (Pierre Nkurunziza [pnkurunziza]. (23 March 2017). *J'étais très heureux de m'entretenir, ce matin, avec Mme Sylvana Mpabwanayo Ntaryamira, Epouse de S.E. feu Président Cyprien Ntaryamira.* ['I was very glad to exchange this morning with Sylvana Mpabwanayo, wife of H.E. late President Cyprien Ntaryamira.']) Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/pnkurunziza/status/844844356179668992>, consulted on 30 July 2018).

¹⁷ Given the big difference between the highest numbers of retweets received in 2015 (13) and 2014 (7) and the highest numbers of retweets received in 2016 (70) and 2017 (174 or 63), it makes little sense to compare 2017 and 2016 with 2015 and 2014. Both in 2015 and 2014, 3 tweets could be counted among the most retweeted messages.

¹⁸ Burundi's Presidency [BdiPresidence], Pres. Pierre Nkurunziza [pnkurunziza], Second Vice-President Joseph Butore [ButoreJ], the Presidency TV Ku Kirimba [kukirimba].

¹⁹ Doriane Munezero [MunezeroDoriane], Landry Sibomana [landrysibo], and Nancy Ninette Mutoni [nancymutoni].

²⁰ This online magazine, which appeared after the 2015 troubles (Vircoulon 2018: 18), mainly reports on government's activities, emphasizing their beneficial effects for the country's development.

²¹ Umuvuga Kuri ('I tell you the truth' in Kirundi) usually posts messages that praise President Nkurunziza, express the pride of being Burundian, attack external inferences in Burundi's internal affairs, and retrieve memories of past (ethnic) violence (<https://twitter.com/Umuvugakuri>, consulted on 28 July 2018). Fridolin Nzambimana (<https://twitter.com/Fridolinandres>, consulted on 28 July 2018) and Understand Burundi (<https://twitter.com/QCbdi>, consulted on 28 July 2018) also tweet on the activities of Nkurunziza, the government and CNDD FDD, and report data and events that speak of the country's development.

the message, which in itself is quite simple. Retweets seemed to be used to ensure that Ntaryamira was associated with these political figures and not with others. This would complement the discursive strategy aimed at giving visibility to the tribute paid by political figures (Paviotti 2018: 104), for it helps strengthen the internal ties of the in-group, and leads to political legitimization of the figures close to President Ntaryamira, presented as symbol(s) of national unity.

Among the other most retweeted messages, few pointed out that justice and truth were still needed; a couple of messages recalled Ntaryamira's values, and one message insinuated that the opposition to Nkurunziza's third term was actually motivated by ethnic reasons.²² The latter is particularly relevant because it was part of the discursive strategy that gave ethnic connotations to the group of Ntaryamira (Paviotti 2018: 99-101), and because such message was the most retweeted in 2016. Again, the amplification effect of the retweets is more relevant here than the content of the single tweet.

Umuvuga Kuri [Umuvugakuri]. (02 May 2016). #Burundi @pnkurunziza & 3. Mandat st des prétextes.Ngendandumwe,Ndadaye,Ntaryamira,. Ils avaient combien de mandats? [(‘#Burundi @pnkurunziza & 3rd term are pretexts. How many terms did Ngendandumwe, Ndadaye, Ntaryamira have?’) Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/Umuvugakuri/status/727068656547586048>

The accounts that produced most retweets were also close to the Government of Burundi for their large majority.²³ This is understandable because retweeting a message means increasing its outreach, which nobody wishes for a view that is opposed – unless a commentary is added

²² The remaining three most retweeted messages in 2016 and 2017 provided information about the event in which Ntaryamira died. On the other hand, in 2015 and 2014 the most retweeted messages mainly provided information about the 1994 event; one accusation was moved in 2014 against France: Yalti Golle [golle_o]. (13 April 2014). CYPRIEN NTARYAMIRA (BURUNDI) assassiné lâchement par les Nazis français du KKK le 6 avril 1994 [(‘CYPRIEN NTARYAMIRA (BURUNDI) miserably killed by the French Nazis of the KKK on 06 April 1994’) Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/golle_o/status/455337040465244160.

²³ When clicking on the number of retweets received by a message, which displays who retweeted that message, a maximum of 25 accounts are shown. 325 accounts (max. 25 accounts x 13 tweets) were therefore analyzed for 2017 and 175 (max. 25 accounts x 7 tweets) for 2016. The ethno-political attributes of the accounts retweeting in 2015 (27 accounts in total) and 2014 (16 accounts in total) were determined with difficulty. Only 2 accounts could be labelled as close to the government and 2 as opponents in 2015. In 2016 and 2017, the accounts' attributes were much easier to detect because of their open statements.

that explains the reasons why such a message is retweeted,²⁴ which was not the case for the retweets under scrutiny here. The ethnic attributes of these accounts were not always evident. Few of them referred to Hutu affiliation in their profile pictures or descriptions; one account (Ngabo Salvator [StopLies_1]) stated it was Tutsi. When retweeting, these accounts seemed to follow political lines. Given the high number of accounts identified as potential fake or bots, however, one cannot rule out that these were part of a 'cyber troop' tasked with manipulating public opinion online through computational propaganda (Bradshaw & Howard 2018: 4).

3.2. Likes

The same approach used to analyze retweets was adopted to identify the tweets that were liked the most: the analysis targeted those messages that presented at least half of the highest number of likes received by a tweet in the correspondent year.²⁵ Except for one tweet in 2016, the most liked tweets were also the most retweeted, and came from accounts close to the government. An exception is nonetheless represented by a tweet posted in 2016 by Pacifique Nininahazwe, a central figure of the Burundian opposition in Belgium. Such tweet reported Ntaryamira's words about human rights and ethnic conflict, in what was likely to be an allusion to the 2015 crisis in the country.

Pacifique Nininahazwe [pnininahazwe]. (06 April 2016). «Personne n'a le droit de piétiner les droits humains, aucune ethnie n'est à exterminer !» SE C. Ntaryamira #Burundi [(‘‘No one has the right to trample on human rights, no ethnicity should be exterminated!’’ HE C. Ntaryamira #Burundi’) Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/pnininahazwe/status/717753756318883841>

It is worth noting that Nininahazwe never tweeted about the commemoration of Ntaryamira before 2016. This message seems to come in reaction to the scores of tweets coming from accounts close to the government that were remembering Ntaryamira and asking for justice – something that they did not do to the same extent before the outbreak of the 2015 crisis

²⁴ Most times, such commentary is added to refute the content of the message retweeted. This strategy can be seen as a reply to the message retweeted that aims to ensure more visibility to a potential debate between the first and the second account (see Figure 8 as an example).

²⁵ This was not applicable to the year 2015, when the highest number of likes received was 1. Given the low number of tweets liked in 2015 (10) and 2014 (15), all of them were taken into consideration in the analysis, in order to observe potential differences in the content liked before and after the outbreak of the crisis.

(as Figure 2 shows).²⁶ Nininahazwe's message would therefore join the stream of claims raised in 2016 against the government, seen as not really interested in having justice for Ntaryamira given the delay with which it was asking for justice.²⁷ According to such claims, the government's attitude would have been a cover for the violations of human rights it was committing,²⁸ as paradoxical as demanding justice for Ntaryamira while pursuing the members of the party he contributed to found.²⁹ By mentioning violations of human rights and extermination of ethnicities in his accusation against the Government of Burundi, Nininahazwe was insinuating that this was what the government effectively embarked on. Ethnicity in this tweet would be used to unveil the real intentions of the opposed group. This is one of the three ways in which ethnicity was used in the conversations (see section 4.1).

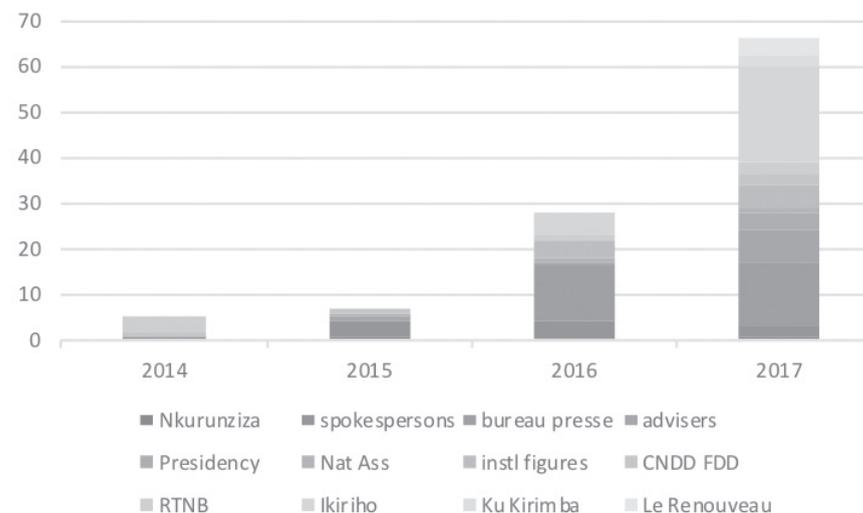
²⁶ 5 tweets came from accounts close to the government in 2014, 7 in 2015, 28 in 2016 and 66 in 2017. Such accounts include: Nkurunziza; his spokespersons Jean-Claude Karerwa Ndenzako [KarerwaNdenzako] and Alain Nzeyimana [AlainNzeyimana]; members of the communication unit ('bureau presse' in Figure 2: Willy Nyamitwe [willynyamitwe], Jean-Claude Nshimirimana [Claudenshim]), Espérance Ndayizeye [esperancenday], Doriane Munezero [MunezeroDoriane], Nubwacu Yves-Lionel [LionelYves], Landry Sibomana [landrysibo], and Olivier Mukunzi [olimuk]; CNDD FDD representatives (Sindayihebura Rénovat [sinrenovat], Evelyine Butoyi [ButoyiEvelyne], and Nancy Ninette Mutoni); Burundi's Presidency and Second Vice-Presidency [Burundi2VP]; Burundi's National Assembly [nshingamateka]; institutional figures such as Ambassadors Shingiro [AShingiro] and Abayeho [GAbayeho] and Joseph Butore; CNDD FDD [Cndd Fdd]; state and pro-government media such as the RTNB [RTNBurundi], Ikiriho, Ku Kirimba, and Le Renouveau [LeRenouveauBdi]).

²⁷ Jean de la croix [butdelacroix59]. (06 April 2016). @boguar2 @willynyamitwe @QCbdi it's shame on Bdi gvt to ask 4 Ntaryamira's justice. What have u done in 22y[ea]rs 2 make it happen? Lazy gvt!!!! [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/butdelacroix59/status/717823277717004289>.

²⁸ Rutuku john [Rutukujohn]. (05 April 2016). #Burundi [Au] lieu de donner explications claires sur les graves violations des DH, le r[ég]ime se perd d[an]s les massacres de 72 et mort Ntaryamira [('#Burundi Instead of giving clear explanations of the serious human rights violations, the regime gets lost into the 1972 massacres and Ntaryamira's death') Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/Rutukujohn/status/717605380822540288>.

²⁹ Aline Damien [gahungumuhororo]. (06 April 2016). Ngo dusubize ntaryamira bariko bica aba FRODEBU biwe? Ndagukunda nka kwankira umwana biba kwa nyamitwe gusa #Burundi [('Give us Ntaryamira back while you are killing his FRODEBU partners? "I like you but I hate your child" only exists with Nyamitwe') Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/gahungumuhororo/status/717659475440697344>.

Figure 2: number of tweets produced by accounts close to the government



Source: Dataset.

As with the retweets, likes followed the (ethno-)political lines of the same community. This might go without saying because a like, by its nature, expresses a more immediate and evident support than a retweet. It is interesting to notice, however, that two of the accounts that liked Nininahazwe's tweet (Aline Barihenda [alinebarihenda] and MANIRAKIZA Audace [manirakizaauda2]) belonged to an 'opposite' community: their timelines are filled with tweets that give publicity or express support for the government's activities while condemning the opponents. However, the type and intensity of activity of these two accounts (they mainly retweet, at a very high intensity and during specific periods of time), together with the anonymity of their profile pictures and description, suggest these are fake accounts. This would imply they liked Nininahazwe's tweet in an automated way, which would support the claim that many of the accounts that interacted the most with the tweets mentioning Ntaryamira might have been part of a cyber troop operating automatically.

3.3. Replies

The same approach used for the analysis of retweets and likes was then applied to the replies (with a focus on the tweets that received at least half of the highest number of replies received by a message in the corresponding

year).³⁰ Again, the tweets that received most replies came from accounts close to the government: the Presidency,³¹ a couple of Communication Advisers,³² Umuvuga Kuri, Nkurunziza's spokesperson Karerwa Ndenzako and Jean de Dieu Mutabazi [JMutabaz], President of the RADEBU party, close to CNDD FDD.³³ An interesting difference was nonetheless observed between the 2016 and 2017 replies. In 2016, out of the 38 replies that were made to the tweets under scrutiny, the majority (26) were voices of dissent and attacked the government for different issues: the lack of investigations on the assassination of Ntaryamira; the delay in asking for justice; the contemporary killings; its ignorance of juridical procedures and bodies. Some replies aimed at discarding any possible responsibility of Rwanda or the Rwandan Patriotic Front in the death of Ntaryamira; one tweet was an insult (addressed to the presidential couple, who would have been faking the commemoration). In 2017, on the other hand, only 5 out of the 36 replies could be interpreted as dissenting: 4 of them conveyed a personal attack against the account they were replying to,³⁴ and one tweet underlined Nkurunziza's delay in the commemoration of Ntaryamira.

These replies seemed to follow lines that were political and not ethnic: they reacted to political messages with political arguments. It is nevertheless interesting to observe the replies to the tweet by Umuvuga Kuri (previously mentioned in this paper) insinuating that opposition to Nkurunziza's bid for a third term in power was motivated by ethnic and not political reasons. Only one account counter-argued (in 2017, more than one year after the first tweet was written) that Umuvuga Kuri and their family did not want to overcome ethnicism, which was regrettable.

MAZA [MAZA56531263]. (13 July 2017). *Gerageza urenze ahogatoyi! Après Arusha nivyo abagiyeyo bari bumvikanye! Kurengera amoko! Ariko banyina Arusha niyo muterekwa mwe na so wanyu* [(‘Try to go a bit beyond. After Arusha, it is what they agreed upon. Overcome ethnicism! But Arusha is what you hate, you and your paternal uncle’) Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/MAZA56531263/status/885645617321713664>

³⁰ In 2015 and 2014, the highest number of replies received by a tweet was 1; 3 tweets were replied to in 2015 and 5 in 2014. As for the retweets, it makes little sense to compare 2017 and 2016, when 69 and 114 messages respectively received a reply, with 2015 and 2014.

³¹ Pres. Nkurunziza and Ku Kirimba.

³² Landry Sibomana and Nancy Ninette Mutoni.

³³ Mutabazi is also President of Burundi's Observatory for the Prevention and Eradication of Genocide since December 2017.

³⁴ Two messages questioned Nkurunziza's authority, one tweet sent him an insult, and another post reacted incredulously to a request for justice coming from a member of the community associated with Ntaryamira (Mugabwindekwa Robert [MugRobert]).

MAZA [MAZA56531263]. (13 July 2017). *Nkaho rero urumva ko wayaze utanze ivyiyumviro bikomeye vyo gushigikira PN? Mbe urazi ko werekanye ubwenge bugarukira k'ubuhutu bwawe gusa?* [(‘And do you think you are speaking, when you bring up strong arguments to support PN? Do you know that you are unveiling the intelligence that is limited to your Hutu ethnicity?’) Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/MAZA56531263/status/885645120967770112>

The rest of the replies expressed strong support for Umuvuga Kuri's stance.

Leonard Ndolimana [ndolimanaleonar]. (13 October 2016). *ongera ubakuruguturamatwi bavyumve. Abatovyumva nabo bazovyumva kungufu.* [(‘Remove the dirt from their ears so they can understand. If they don't understand, they will by force’) Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/ndolimanaleonar/status/786629185313923072>

Replies therefore seemed to adapt to the connotation of the first tweet: if it was political, political arguments were advanced; if it was ethnic, ethnic references appeared. No ethnic references were introduced in replies to political tweets. It is however difficult to generalize this to the broader dataset because only 1 out of the 8 tweets that received most replies contained an ethnic reference. Additional research would be needed in order to understand if this was part of a broader attitude on Twitter (which would require an analysis of tweets of political content only). For the purposes of the present paper, additional insights on the ways in which ethnicity surfaced on Twitter was allowed for by the discursive analysis of conversations.

4. Conversations

In the analysis of the conversations taking place around the figure of Ntaryamira, focus was on retweets and replies. Among such tweets, the messages that triggered at least one additional reply, leading to what is here called a conversation, were extracted for analysis.³⁵ 50 conversations in total were analyzed: 3 in 2014, 1 in 2015, 38 in 2016, and 8 in 2017.³⁶

The aim of this analysis was twofold. On the one hand, the magnitude of ethnicity and its role in the conversations was analyzed. On the other hand, the type of communication taking place within and/or between the communities emerged around Ntaryamira was observed.

³⁵ A conversation comprised at least three tweets.

³⁶ One conversation (at the link <https://twitter.com/iDrainTheSwamp/status/855289251931410432>, consulted on 06 August 2018) was not considered in this analysis because related to a different topic (Islamic terror and arms trade in the US).

4.1. Ethnicity in the conversations

To identify and analyze the position occupied by ethnicity in the conversations, four elements were systematically pointed out: references to past (ethnic) violence, references/appeals to ethnic belonging, links between past and present (ethnic) violence, and anticipations of violence.

References to past (ethnic) violence appeared more often in 2016 and 2017 than before: one reference was found in 2014, one in 2015, 14 in 2016, and 6 in 2017.

Jan ruhere [JanRuhere]. (19 March 2016). @ndikumwenayo Facts:Rwandans killed our 1st democratically elected prime minister,helped in 1972,Ndadaye,93-94,Killed Badians DRC,Ntaryamira [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/JanRuhere/status/711268425058783232>

References to ethnic affiliation were also more frequent in 2016 and 2017: one reference was found in 2014, 10 in 2016, and 5 in 2017. Ethnic references did not always spell out the name of the ethnic group: names and dates that represent important symbols for ethnic collective memory (such as Ndadaye, Ngendandumwe, 1972, etc.) were also considered as ethnic references in the present analysis.³⁷

iBurundi [iburundi]. (05 April 2017). #Burundi—Another version of a song by imbonerakure demonizing Tutsi ! @CnddFdd [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/iburundi/status/849867207991586816>

Links between present and past (ethnic) violence were not many: 3 links were found in 2017, 3 in 2016, and 1 in 2014.

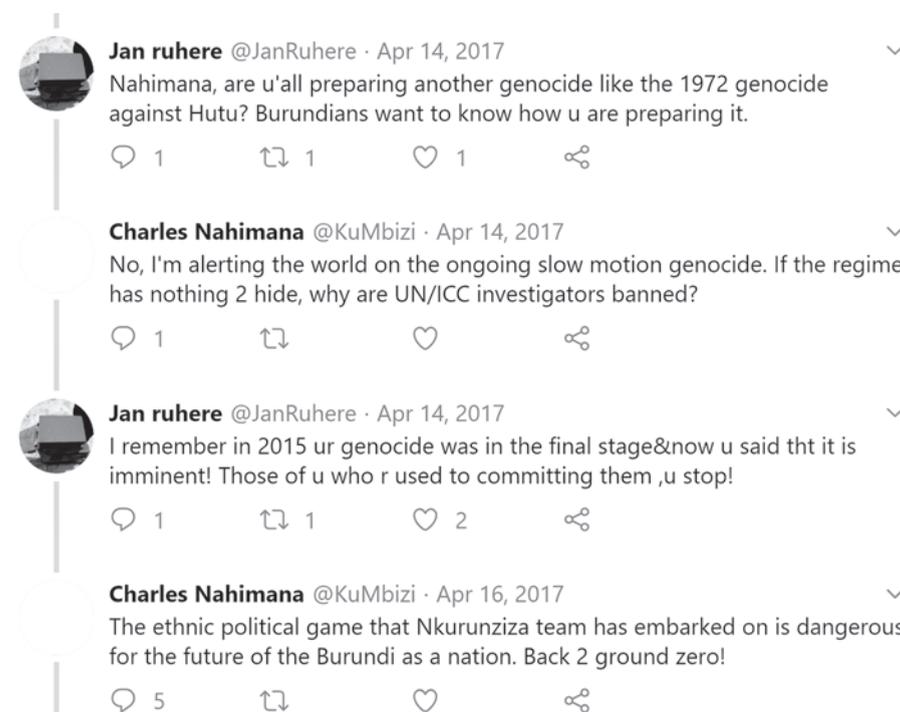
No to DRC Partition [isiatenda2]. (3 May 2016). @Joaobap57934294 Consult Burundi constitution and History to understand the situation.Why Ndadaye & Ntaryamira killed were they extremists? [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/isiatenda2/status/727459013047291904>

Finally, 3 anticipations of violence were found in 2016 and 1 in 2017. This finding is interesting because anticipations of violence are supposed to occur before outbreaks of violence (Hermez 2012: 331), therefore they should have appeared more often in the tweets produced before 2015. The fact that in 2016 and 2017 some tweeters insinuated that the worst had yet to come (and that it was about to come) might speak of the intensity of the violence. On the other hand, this might as well have been a discursive strategy aimed to demolish the political arguments of the adversary. Reciprocal

³⁷ In tweets in which they were associated with episodes of violence motivated by ethnic reasons. This happened more frequently after the outbreak of the 2015 crisis (Paviotti 2018: 99-101).

accusations that a genocide is being prepared represent a recurring narrative in the (ethnic) history of Burundi, with the Tutsi concerned by the 'Hutu danger' and the Hutu fearing a remaking of the 'Simbananiye plan'.³⁸ Such a narrative was also retrieved and used on Twitter as political discourse against the 'opposite' community.

Figure 3: anticipation of violence in the conversation



Source: <https://mobile.twitter.com/JanRuhere/status/853478440271523841> (consulted on 01 March 2019).

After identifying these elements within the conversations, attention was paid to the ways in which they came about in the conversations: at what point of the conversation did they appear, and for what purposes?

Three types of conversations were identified according to the modalities in which ethnic references were employed. The first type includes conversations that started with a tweet containing a reference to ethnicity. Four such conversations were found: 1 in 2014, 1 in 2016, and 2 in 2017. These

³⁸ The 'Simbananiye plan', named after its alleged author Arthémon Simbananiye, was a plan of extermination of the Hutu ethnic group that was denounced by the Minister of Information Martin Ndayahoze in 1968.

conversations could not but assume an ethnic connotation, since the topic of discussion was launched at its very inception.

Figure 4: ethnicity at the inception of the conversation

Mushimire Olivier @OliverMushimire · Apr 2, 2016
So true #Burundi CnddFdd and its Gvt deny the genocide against Tutsi in 1994 and want to re-write history! It's fine

birikumutima bodouin @birikumutima1
Replying to @OliverMushimire
1)@OliverMushimire, negationism? Everything can be questioned some even question if God exist, why not Rwandan history? Loudacris!
@Amahorol

birikumutima bodouin @birikumutima1 · Apr 11, 2016
@OliverMushimire, go back 2school & take yr history class. Conflts in Burundi weren't born in 90's ask how Ndadaye&his aides died @Amahorol

Mushimire Olivier @OliverMushimire · Apr 11, 2016
@birikumutima1 @Amahorol Everything can be questioned, would you start by Ndadaye? You know nothing abt him. Let him RIP. CnddFdd's a shame!

birikumutima bodouin @birikumutima1 · Apr 12, 2016
@OliverMushimire in quest 4democracy 1can question everything. Bt yr problem is selective amnesia. Begin by the beginning&question @Amahorol

Mushimire Olivier @OliverMushimire · Apr 12, 2016
@birikumutima1 Allow me to do my duty of commemoration and you CAN'T question that, 'cause denial is the denier's problem. Ciao @Amahorol

birikumutima bodouin @birikumutima1 · Apr 12, 2016
@OliverMushimire who is denying who what? Look, It also happened in April 1972, can others commemorate? Answer the question Mrcool @Amahorol

Source: <https://mobile.twitter.com/OliverMushimire/status/720139799554863104> (consulted on 01 March 2019).

A second type of use of ethnic references was made through allusions to ethnicity, which every now and then surfaced throughout the conversation. Four such conversations were found: 3 in 2016 and 1 in 2017. The accounts that were somehow called to respond to such references also replied with allusions to ethnicity.

Figure 5: ethnicity throughout the conversation

Jan ruhere @JanRuhere · Mar 19, 2016
@ndikumwenayo Steve if u r a Bdian,interference in Bdians issues prolongs'em&affects u.look:Iraq,Libya,Syria,DRC @Nyamuremerwa @KifleMike

Steve NDIKUMWENAYO @ndikumwenayo · Mar 19, 2016
@JanRuhere It is your idol #Nkurunziza who caused this by:
1. Violating democratic principles
2. Killing those who opposed that
#Burundi

Jan ruhere @JanRuhere · Mar 19, 2016
@ndikumwenayo Facts:Rwandans killed our 1st democratically elected prime minister,helped in 1972,Ndadaye,93-94,Killed Bdians DRC,Ntaryamira

Steve NDIKUMWENAYO @ndikumwenayo
Replying to @JanRuhere
@JanRuhere
1. Ton idol #Nkuru ivyo yari abizi igihe yafata aka gafoto?
2. None Kagame niwe yatwara Rwanda 72&93?

Translate Tweet



Source: <https://mobile.twitter.com/ndikumwenayo/status/711272620382167040> (consulted on 01 March 2019).

The third type of use was the most widespread and employed ethnicity as an aggressive (political) counter argument. Ten such conversations were found: 8 in 2016 and 2 in 2017. This use seemed aimed at shutting down the conversation. At times this objective was reached, at times the exchange continued with a high level of verbal violence and reciprocal accusations. Ethnic references in these conversations either appeared in the second tweet of the thread, as in Figure 6, or at its end, in a sort of decisive, final attack (Figure 7).³⁹

Figure 6: ethnicity as aggressive counter argument

Albert Rudatsimburwa @albcontact · Mar 11, 2016

#Burundi are Eminent members of IC pressuring #Nkurunziza to change his killing rollout? A zest?

U.S. Special Envoy @US_SEGL 13h
Those who have repeatedly blocked independent monitors are in a weak position to complain about 'unsubstantiated rumors.' (1/2)

U.S. Special Envoy @US_SEGL 13h
The full complement of AU monitors is needed in Burundi now. (2/2)

U.S. Special Envoy @US_SEGL 1d
Good conversation between Team @US_SEGL and CNARED leadership about urgency of talks and importance of inclusivity.

U.S. Special Envoy @US_SEGL 13h
Those who have repeatedly blocked independent monitors are in a weak position to complain about 'unsubstantiated rumors.' (1/2)

U.S. Special Envoy @US_SEGL 2d
On International Women's Day, my thoughts are w/ the women of Burundi who face threats from

U.S. Special Envoy @US_SEGL 1d
Good conversation between Team @US_SEGL and CNARED leadership

3 4 1

Peter N @PeterNyandwi · Mar 11, 2016

@albcontact look at what this extremist tutsi who's full of hatred is tweeting? Don't mistake burundi with Congo. You'll never succeed

2

Arms @rutera3456 · Mar 11, 2016

@PeterNyandwi @albcontact # By the way u are showing u are true colours of genocide ideology u habouring#never again# world knows u.

Source: <https://mobile.twitter.com/PeterNyandwi/status/708236978186231808> (consulted on 01 March 2019).

³⁹ It is precisely the position of the ethnic reference within the conversation that makes such reference more aggressive. Within political debate, ethnic references were always used as political arguments.

Figure 7: ethnicity as final attack

Jean de dieu mutabaz @JMutabaz · Apr 6, 2016

#Burundi :#Rwanda :Le président Paul Kagame ne parvient pas à prouver son innocence dans le crash du 06/04/1994 qui a emporté C.NTARYAMIRA.

14 20 6

Clarentha @K03643613 · Apr 7, 2016

@jmutabaz Tu veux remplacer Gélase Ndabirabe dans ses gélaseries?Pauvre homme! ikawa yakunaniye ntigenda itakwirahiye!

1

Léonard Mahuragiza @mahuragiza · Apr 7, 2016

@K03643613 @JMutabaz Inutile de s'apitoyer le sort de Ntaryamira, puisque vous combattez avec toute votre énergie à sa philosophie

2

Léonard Mahuragiza @mahuragiza

@K03643613 @JMutabaz En plus tu fais des déclarations tendancieuses pour essayer de maquiller ta haine envers les Tutsi.

Translate Tweet

8:36 AM · Apr 7, 2016 · Twitter Web App

Source: <https://mobile.twitter.com/mahuragiza/status/717964306948694016> (consulted on 01 March 2019).

Nowhere better than in these threads can conflict be seen as 'a violent text, a violent attempt to tell a story' (Pottier 2002: 130), where each side strives to make its truth prevail. Within such violent text, ethnic references were used in an attack aimed at unearthing the adversary's real intentions, and to defy them.

4.2. Communication within and between communities

The final stage of the analysis sought to observe if the communication remained within the same community, with tweets following each other in an expression of support, or if exchanges occurred, as in a confrontation, between members of the different communities that emerged around Ntaryamira.

Figure 8: conversation within same community

Edward Mutabazi @Ishekatazi511 · Apr 6, 2016
Ha ha ha @Manirakiza @Mukwananzi @MudaheranwaRegi

Nancy Ninette MUTONI @nancymutoni
Il y a 22 ans, 2 présidents furent assassinés au #Rwanda. Le #Burundi commémore feu Président Ntaryamira.



2 1

John Paul Mukwananzi @Mukwananzi · Apr 6, 2016
@Ishekatabazi511 @Manirakiza
Ntaryamira as a cover for the assassination of Bihozagara! #Burundians are experts at the art of distraction!

1 2

John B Manirakiza @Manirakiza
Replying to @Mukwananzi
@Mukwananzi @Ishekatabazi511 they are scrupulously incapable of realizing how hypocritical it looks. Tragic!

2:27 PM · Apr 6, 2016 · Twitter for iPhone

1 Retweet 1 Like

Out of 50 conversations, 6 took place among members of the same community expressing support for each other (5 in 2016 and 1 in 2017). Five conversations started and ended within the same community; one conversation (in Figure 8) started with a tweet that was produced by the community associated with Ntaryamira and was then 'brought' – through a retweet – into an opposed community, with the aim of dismissing and degrading its political content.

In the 6 conversations that occurred among members of the same community, two main topics could be identified. Besides one conversation that simply aimed to commemorate Ntaryamira, 4 conversations developed around requests for justice and complaints about impunity, associated with accusations against Kagame, while one accused the Government of Burundi of covering the assassination of Rwandan diplomat Bihozagara⁴⁰ with the commemoration of Ntaryamira (in Figure 8). Ethnicity did not play a central role in these 6 conversations, which mainly focused on political issues.

The rest of the exchanges took place between different communities and with different intensities of verbal violence. The topics that triggered confrontations related to both past and contemporary events. Several conversations discussed the responsibilities of different actors in the attack in which Ntaryamira died, and in the death of many (Hutu) in Burundi and the DR Congo. As regards contemporary events, quite a few conversations developed around accusations against the Government of Burundi (see section 3.3); some conversations started as discussions around Bihozagara's death and ended up in an exchange of accusations involving the governments of Burundi and Rwanda; a couple of conversations questioned the role of ethnicity in the 2015 crisis. One conversation hinged upon 'ethnicity' and started with a tweet accusing colonizers of having fabricated ethnicities in Burundi as in a laboratory. It is however difficult to identify one subject for every conversation: long conversations especially started with one topic, touched upon several subjects, and ended on still different ones. In these conversations, ethnicity emerged in three main ways as described in section 4.1.

⁴⁰ Jacques Bihozagara was a former Rwandan minister and ambassador to Belgium that was arrested in Burundi for activities of espionage and died in jail in March 2016 under unclear circumstances (BBC 2016).

Conclusion: Twitter's political battlefield as a channel for top-down propaganda?

Thanks to different discursive strategies, a process of ethnicization affected the memory of President Ntaryamira on Twitter between 2014 and 2017. Focusing on interactions taking place within such a process of ethnicization, this analysis aimed at better understanding its dynamics.

Analysis of retweets, likes, and replies showed that interactions with tweets mentioning Ntaryamira significantly increased after the outbreak of the 2015 crisis. Twitter users retweeted and liked more than adding replies; retweets and likes were used by accounts close to the government on a (few) tweets that came from the same milieus. Most of these tweets provided information about participants to the commemoration of the death of Ntaryamira in Bujumbura, which seemed to answer a logic of political legitimization. Retweets could also foster a strategy of ethnicization of the 2015 political crisis, as in the case of the most retweeted message in 2016, which gave ethnic connotations to the (political) debate related to Nkurunziza's third term.

Analysis of the interactions with the tweets seems to suggest that the communication remained within the same ethno-political community, which is the community that appropriated the memory of Ntaryamira. The use made of retweets, likes, and replies seems to reflect the characteristics of a groupthink behaviour described by Mourao (2015: 1109), where members of a cohesive group follow influential members and seek unanimity of opinions. However, this may be the result of 'cyber troops' as well (Bradshaw & Howard 2018: 4).

A significant difference was observed between the replies in 2016 and 2017: while in 2016 the majority of them (26 out of 38 under scrutiny) expressed dissent, in 2017 only few (5 out of 36 under scrutiny) countered the messages spread by political entrepreneurs, without proposing any political argument (except for one reply) but insulting the tweeter. Would this be a sign that the groupthink behaviour reached its aims? The number of tweets observed is too low to make such conclusion. Additional research would be needed to determine if this is a sign that the intensity of political debate is decreasing, indicating a decline in the correlated ethno-political tensions; if the focus of the political debate switched to other arguments; or if this should be interpreted as the result of strengthened media monitoring by state authorities (which would match well with the possible presence of cyber troops), aiming to repress dissent and to homogenize political thought.

The analysis of the conversations, on the other hand, showed that most of them were confrontations between communities (only 6 out of 50 occurred within the same community and expressed internal support), where each side aimed to win its fight, as in a communication war (Vircoulon 2018: 8). Ethnicity was mainly used as a political argument in such conversations:

most times, it was brought into a political conversation to demolish opponents' arguments by unveiling their real message, or intentions.

Communication therefore did cross ethnic and political lines, but with the sole result of reinforcing one's own beliefs. No attempts at dialogue were made with opposite communities: attacks against the others only aimed to reinforce the attackers' own community identity. Replies between different-minded individuals reinforced both in-group and out-group affiliation (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan 2013: 1280), fortifying the boundary between the communities. In this sense, Twitter served as a channel for top-down propaganda because no opposed views were taken into consideration or discussed but they were simply refuted, also through ethnic arguments. The communication did not take place in a middle ground where communities exposed their arguments and confronted each other. Each sender remained within the limits of his own community, from which he attacked the Other(s), as a combatant throwing a grenade in a battlefield. After the attack, the fighter took cover behind the walls of their own community, where they eventually felt safer among political and ethnic peers.

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