

Social Media and Xenophobia: Theory and Evidence from Russia

(with Leonardo Bursztyn, Ruben Enikolopov, and Maria Petrova)

Abstract: We study the effect of social media on xenophobic attitudes. Theoretically, we argue that social media increase the share of individuals that hold xenophobic opinions, but not necessarily the share of those that express these opinions. In fact, more individuals choose to hide these opinions, suggesting an increase in social cost, or stigma. Empirically, we confirm these predictions using a nationwide survey experiment, where we exploit quasi-exogenous variation in social media penetration in Russia. We further show that social media led to more hate crimes in cities with higher pre-existing level of nationalist sentiment, so this change in opinions had real consequences. The effect is stronger for crimes with multiple perpetrators, suggesting that social media also facilitated coordination of crimes.